

# Don Giovanni at the Crossroads of Pleasure and Virtue

Lydia Goehr and Daniel Herwitz, eds. 2006. *The Don Giovanni Moment: Essays on the Legacy of an Opera*. Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts. New York: Columbia University Press.

Reviewed by Edmund J. Goehring

In a project, like *The Don Giovanni Moment*, that deals with the reception history of a canonical work, several kinds of questions can vie for attention. The volume's subtitle highlights a general interest in a historical question: the "legacy" it chooses to explore is largely one presented in nineteenth-century imaginative and, to a lesser extent, philosophical works. (The main exception is Ingrid Rowland's discussion of religious ritual and the Don Juan legend before Mozart, "Don Giovanni: 'And what communion hath light with darkness?'"") For some essays, the topic of history yields to one of criticism. Despite the introduction's contention that it attends less to *Don Giovanni* itself than to "the works written in the opera's shadow" (xvii), many contributors keep at least one eye fixed on the object casting that shadow. Finally, parts of the volume pose more abstract questions, where the issue becomes "how far this opera as a work of embodied myth redefines the relationship between art and morality" (xvii). This kind of question, not quite historiographical or analytical, seeks out "main themes," which in this case comprise "power, seduction, [and] judgment" (xvii). An inclination to philosophize (or to interpret philosophy as that discipline involved with abstract themes) informs the collection at various levels. The first half of its title, for example, pays homage to Kierkegaard's famous interpretation, advanced in *Either/Or* ([1843] 1987), that describes Mozart's libertine not as an ethical being but as the musical embodiment of the sensuous; Don Giovanni's choice (or impulse) to follow the path of pleasure instead of virtue is reflected in an existence made up of a series of discrete moments. When, further, we survey the primary figures discussed in addition to Kierkegaard—Goethe, Hoffmann, Pushkin, Mörike, Wagner, Shaw, and Adorno—it is clear that the tale the volume wants to tell is that of *Don Giovanni* among the elders of German metaphysics.

These three kinds of questions are not inherently incompatible, for they can all spring from the historian's, the critic's, and the philosopher's pursuit

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of a product of thought—in this case, an artwork. It is not therefore the collection's interdisciplinary approach per se but perhaps the way it frames questions that can produce contestable and reductive claims. A materialist rather than dynamic sense of music history and its objects appears from the initial sentences of *The Don Giovanni Moment*: “In the history of opera, there is perhaps no moment of greater consequence than that of the opening of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Though written almost entirely in the buoyant joviality of the major mode, the opera's first D-minor chord strikes terror as it moves hauntingly toward an irrevocable cadence” (xv). The second of these sentences, among other things, presumes a direct correspondence between a series of musical sounds and the thing those sounds are said to represent. Yet the major mode does not possess (or always convey) “joviality” (as a melody like “Taps” demonstrates). Musical communication takes place not through a single element like melody or mode but through the interaction of a complex of elements.

Meanwhile, the first sentence, instead of reducing musical meaning to a single element, places inordinate weight on a single musico-historical event. Its premise, one taken up in all of the essays, is that the Don Juan legend deserves sustained critical inquiry. The assumption might seem self-evident, except that, prior to Mozart, little of Don Juan lore offered much promise in the way of intellectual challenge or aesthetic appeal. Despite the influence of Tirso's and Molière's plays, Don Juan tales mostly wandered about in a vagrant, subliterate world of ballet, comic opera, and improvised comedy where spectacle mattered more than plot. The one self-conscious eighteenth-century attempt to give the legend literary merit was Carlo Goldoni's *Don Giovanni Tenorio* (1736). His rationalized adaptation failed to gain traction, mostly because it discards anything that would produce laughter or terror. Goldoni's hero moves out of the shadows of myth figuratively and even literally, for he is struck down by lightning in broad daylight. Nor does he meet death with fists raised in defiance but with head bowed in despair. Almost every other pre-Mozartean version of the legend unfolds in blithe indifference to Goldoni's stern obedience to verisimilitude and coherence. Thus Giovanni Bertati's *Il capriccio drammatico*, the second act of which provides the main source for Da Ponte's libretto, never explains how Donna Elvira discovers the identity of the murderer, and Donna Anna simply vanishes from his tale without explanation.

Mozart's opera owes a heavy debt to these simpler forms of comedy. Even so, Mozart's music, largely through adapting an archaic Baroque language and pacing, lends the tale a gravity, a monumentalism, that it did not have before. This achievement is as much technical as affective. Mozart's music awes but also organizes. Scenes are not simply thrown randomly together with terrifying music mixed in every now and then: to draw on Kierkegaard's

categories, the tale is episodic, but episodic with a purpose, where Don Giovanni's accidental existence stands in tension with his foreordained damnation. Even Da Ponte's text (in which Mozart surely had a hand) shows more regard for coherence than is usually acknowledged. Such is the opera's attention to organization that the plot will follow up even on passing comments or incidents. Immediately after "Or sai chi l'onore," for example, Don Ottavio vows to determine the truth about Don Giovanni, either to undeceive Donna Anna if she is wrong or to avenge her if she is right ("Disingannar la voglio, e vendicarla," 1.14). He gets the proof he needs after witnessing the events of the great second-act sextet: "After such enormous excesses, we cannot doubt but that Don Giovanni is the impious murderer of Donna Anna's father" (Dopo eccessi sì enormi / Dubitar non possiam, che D. Giovanni / Non sia l'empio uccisore / Del padre di Donn' Anna, 2.10). The common way of understanding Da Ponte's adaptation of Bertati—that it expands one act into two—can lead to the misconception that the new material simply treads dramatic water until the awaited end, when in fact Da Ponte's libretto contributes to the opera's formal coherence and creates a moral complexity absent from its predecessors.

If Mozart's *Don Giovanni* moved the legend up onto land, later versions generally descended back to the tale's primordial meres and swamps. The claim that the "moment" of *Don Giovanni*'s premiere canonized the legend thus gives an incomplete picture of its nineteenth-century patrimony. If any single version could claim canonical status, it would be Molière's, and yet even his play was transmitted largely through spinoffs that showed little fidelity to the original. Mozart's version was not immune from such devolution. Early nineteenth-century adaptations frequently appeared in mutant form with some of Molière's less dignified episodes (with, for example, the hermit and landlord). Or worse. A correspondent describing a 1798 production in Frankfurt reported that the damnation scene concluded with the libertine's being tossed into the mouth of a dragon. The critic did not find the modification ennobling; instead, he was reminded of a puppet play.<sup>1</sup> Speaking of puppet plays, one from the early nineteenth century drops in a scene in which the comic servant, reluctant to accompany his newly fugitive master from Naples to Castile, is persuaded to follow along with the promise that Castilian mountains are made of macaroni, its lakes of butter, and that it rains cheese. Upon arriving there, the gullible servant takes a bite out of a palace, only, in semi-Quixotic fashion, to lose some teeth. (*Al dente*, indeed.)<sup>2</sup>

Early criticism also tended to associate Mozart's opera with this rough-and-tumble crowd. Writing in 1803, the minor critic and playwright Ignaz Arnold renders the verdict that Mozart's opera is not an artwork at all but instead a collection of individual masterpieces all "wildly tossed together"

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(wild durcheinander geworfen, 1803:288). He is perplexed “how Mozart could join the grand with the trivial, the greatest terror with the most tasteless jokes” (wie Mozart so viel Großes mit Kleinen, den größten Schreck mit dem fadeften Spase zusammenstellen konnte, 1803:288–9). Cast aside the banal episodes, and the dignified ones could pass muster. Dispense with the sublime scenes, and the opera becomes a harmless bagatelle or a Viennese *Lokalstück*. Stefan Kunze gives a fine modern gloss on the workings of *Don Giovanni*'s grotesquerie: “there arises this paradox, that the less *seria* elements were excluded, the more the plot could be conceived of as farce” (Es ergibt sich das Paradoxon, daß Elemente der *Seria* hier um so weniger ausgeschlossen waren, je mehr die Handlung als Posse aufgefaßt werden konnte, 1972:55).

Thus, the nineteenth-century reception of *Don Giovanni* can be mapped out along Dahlhaus's twin poles: the one of low comedy down under, and, far to the north, the one that accorded the opera literary merit as a text demanding contemplation and interpretation. In mostly surveying the second of these poles, however, *The Don Giovanni Moment* rightly avoids conflating what is canonical with what props up the status quo. What the eighteenth century largely saw as a tired tale becomes in the nineteenth a rallying point for rebels, idealists, and other species of free thinker. For example, in “‘Hidden Secrets of the Self’: E. T. A. Hoffmann's Reading of *Don Giovanni*,” Richard Eldridge points out how Hoffmann's short story of 1813 draws the portrait of a restless hero frustrated with society's constraints and hating mediocrity above all else. Such restlessness often took a psychic toll on nineteenth-century incarnations of Don Juan. The anomie of Mozart's libertine, manifest in a vaulting exuberance or bottomless indifference, often turns into melancholy. Thus Boris Gasparov (“Don Juan in Nicholas's Russia (Pushkin's *The Stone Guest*)”) follows Don Giovanni's loss of his original “refined aristocratic artlessness” and its replacement with a dehumanizing fatalism in Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* (1833), whose eponymous character, like the stone guest, returns from the dead. In the Pushkin, however, the defiant individual becomes a petty bureaucrat and is no match for the bronze rider, who is none other than Peter the Great. The relentless tides of historical destiny swallow up Pushkin's unexceptional individual.

By the time one gets to Wagner, the opera's original tension between the elevated and the vulgar has been transformed, mostly via Kierkegaard, into one between the ethical and the aesthetic. “Influence” can now refer less to direct borrowings or quotations between works than to common philosophical problems worked out in art, as shown in Lydia Goehr's essay “The Curse and Promise of the Absolutely Musical: *Tristan und Isolde* and *Don Giovanni*.” Trying to give treacherous pronouncements about absolute

music in vocal works a wide berth, she relates *Don Giovanni* to *Tristan* via an “action of the absolutely musical” (139, the original italicizes the entire phrase): both *Don Giovanni* and *Tristan* have an absolutely musical “subject matter, form, and expression” (145). Behind this argument is a distinction between sounds, which are empirical, and expression, which she links with metaphysics. Goehr’s purpose is to give a systematic, philosophical grounding to Wagner’s desire to move music out of what he saw as the particularity and therefore isolation of its own medium into something of wider or, better, absolute significance. (Goehr states her argument in a more aphoristic form by paraphrasing Virginia Woolf’s remark that, “in *Tristan*, music reaches a point not yet reached by sound,” 140.) It is not clear whether it is helpful to take such a dualistic approach by locating meaning in metaphysics, but for Goehr, the move to metaphysics allows access to aesthetic questions raised by both operas. Each work evinces an awareness that an “erotic drive” can promote a dangerous “self-enclosed aesthetic experience” (150). Goehr finds this peril articulated through moments that interrupt a character’s aesthetic reverie, such as the revivification of the Commendatore or the sudden daylight glare signaling the appearance of King Marke and his entourage in *Tristan*’s second act.

Goehr’s observation that the ethical punctures the aesthetic is useful for understanding the structure of Mozart’s opera. When Leporello’s catalog turns to his master’s “passion predominante,” *ombra* music intrudes for the only time in the number (example 1). Certainly Leporello is unkindly reminding Donna Elvira that, once upon a time, she was such a “giovin principiante,” but the “moment” echoes beyond Leporello’s moral ken to become a voice of the opera itself, at once harking back to the overture and anticipating the Commendatore’s return. Another crack opens up at the end of “Là ci darem la mano,” where a serpentine chromatic figure insinuates itself into the otherwise naive pastoral setting of drones and a rustic dance (example 2). And then there is the chromatic embellishment closing off the end of “Ah taci, ingiusto core,” which traces the arrival of evening, literally and figuratively (example 3—the libretto indicates that night is gradually descending: “Si fa notte a poco a poco”). Melody and harmony are of course prime determinants of *Don Giovanni*’s form, but the opera also shapes its proceedings with tone and color. A reviewer in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* took exception to Arnold’s monograph, mentioned near the beginning of this review, for failing to perceive the unity that reigns over “the wild cloud of contrasting scenes” (das wilde Wogen kontrastirender Scenen, 1803:693). Perhaps he was referring to just this tone, this *tinta*.

An essay like Goehr’s shows the insight that can be gleaned from comparative analysis, even when a great distance separates texts. The

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**Example 1:** “Catalog Aria” (reduction). “His main passion is the young beginner.”

131  
Leporello  
lis- ta sua pas- sion pre- do- mi- nan- te

134  
L.  
è la gio- vin prin- ci- pian- te

134  
Pno.

**Example 2:** “Là ci darem la mano” (strings).

56  
Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

approach can set into relief the choices made in a specific work and reorient our perspective on its meaning. Brian Soucek’s essay, “Giovanni auf Naxos,” relating *Don Giovanni* to Strauss’s *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912) takes a similar route, with one significant change in strategy: he explicitly locates thematic connections *outside* of intention. For him, whether Strauss even

Example 3: “Ah taci, ingiusto core” (strings).

The musical score for Example 3 consists of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. All staves are in 6/8 time and have a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). Each part begins with a measure of rest, followed by a melodic line. The Violin I and II parts have a dashed line above the final note, while the Viola and Violoncello parts have a solid line below the final note. The score is marked with 'cresc.' and 'p'.

knew Mozart’s opera is hermeneutically irrelevant (194). This marks an instance of the third kind of question that *The Don Giovanni Moment* pursues, and it is somewhat troublesome to conceive of works of art not as utterances but as structures where themes operate independently, almost transcendently, from the context of the work itself. But even if one grants the method, Soucek’s particular reduction of matter to form presents criteria for inclusion that are too generous. Thus, Hofmannsthal’s “certain analogy” that Soucek finds in these two operas encompasses their mixing of styles, their treatment of the theme of fidelity, and the fact that they have been revised (the last of which is not, strictly speaking, a property of a work at all). That Strauss’s opera exhibits a self-consciousness not found in Mozart’s is a promising yet imprecisely drawn distinction. *Don Giovanni* is more self-referential, more metatheatrical, than Soucek acknowledges, and many other eighteenth-century works also present theater *as* theater, among them Goldoni’s *Il teatro comico* (1750), Mozart’s *Schauspieldirektor* (1786), and Bertati’s *Don Giovanni*.

If an essay like Soucek’s largely ignores the author, Daniel Herwitz (“Kierkegaard Writes His Opera”) takes the more oblique route of reading an author, in this case Kierkegaard, “*against himself*” (126, emphasis added). “A” (Kierkegaard’s *nom de plume* in volume 1 of *Either/Or*) confesses that he feels “like a young girl in love with Mozart” (120). Herwitz, lashing himself to the mast to resist the opera’s “seductive aura” (119), chooses to read *Either/Or* as a *traité à clef*, where “A” is indistinguishable from the historical Kierkegaard. Just as *Don Giovanni* seduces “A,” so, too, had Kierkegaard seduced, and abandoned, his real-life fiancée, Regine Olsen. At the heart of

Kierkegaard's deed is impotence: Johannes (the "author" of *The Diary of a Seducer*) "is Kierkegaard rather than the Don, because it is the figure of a man bereft of the capacity to enjoy the sex he so skillfully plans (the figure of a frigid man)" (129).

Herwitz's reading exerts a certain imaginative, even seductive, allure and shows a knack for coaxing biography out of a philosophical text. And yet logical and rhetorical weaknesses make it difficult to accept many of his arguments. One problem concerns question-framing. Herwitz seems preoccupied above all with whether Kierkegaard and *Don Giovanni*, including "Mozart's music *itself*" (133), are sexist. This is not a very interesting question, since either answer (yes or no) will not take one far into either work. Although Herwitz denounces Kierkegaard for using "essentializing philosophical language" (120), much of his own argument relies on reification. In making seduction a masculine force, for example, Herwitz overlooks how, ever since Eve, this perilous talent has usually been associated with women. When Aeneas is with Dido, Carthage's towers do not get built, and Aeneas himself veers from his own divinely ordained mission. Explaining such a conceptual shift would have been enlightening, but Herwitz has already dug in his heels. Making evidence fit pre-existing conclusions also leads to misreadings of the opera, or at least a whitewashing of significant detail. The opera's "women are uniformly passive" (120), which makes one wonder about Elvira's wish to "carve out" Don Giovanni's heart in "Ah chi mi dice mai" ("Gli vo' cavar il cor," 1.5), not to mention Donna Anna's determination to unveil her seducer even if it means her death ("Non sperar se non m'uccidi / Ch'io ti lasci fuggir mai," 1.1). In both cases, these words reflect more than vain posturing. Donna Elvira, in particular, is so effective in frustrating Don Giovanni's pleasure-seeking that he wonders whether the devil himself is not intervening ("Mi par ch'oggi il demonio si diverta / D'opporsi a' miei piacevoli progressi," 1.11). Herwitz plausibly draws Zerlina into this thematic web of seduction and power, but in arguing that "Zerlina's powers of seduction are clearly outmatched by the Don's" (120), he sees seduction as a quantity, not a quality. Putting the matter this way divorces the power of seduction from its use: whereas Zerlina focuses on one object in order to bring about peace, Don Giovanni's diffuse pursuit of all women produces social chaos. It is as if Mozart presents competing instances of seduction, from ones that shatter and destroy to ones that, at least in "Batti, Batti," act like a remedy ("un balsamo"). (A subtle discussion of Zerlina and the erotic is offered in Berthold Hoeckner's essay, "Homage to Adorno's 'Homage to Zerlina.')" On page 124 we are told that "The male listener is feminized, yet also brought to identify so strongly with the Don himself that he ends up feeling more male than ever." We cannot avoid being



seduced by the opera, it seems, for listeners become passive, unthinking vessels who equate the representation of an action (say, a seduction) with approval of the action.

Herwitz's essay is of special interest because it encompasses many of the priorities of a certain kind of present-day criticism: theme over work, readings over authors, history over fiction. Part of this sensibility also involves a resistance to seeing moral neutrality or ambiguity in the aesthetic. It seems that Herwitz wants to make the aesthetic taboo, to loosen its grip upon our experience of the work; otherwise, the aesthetic (in this case, Mozart's music) would make a distasteful action (the entire run of Don Giovanni's life) seem palatable. One way that Herwitz tries to weaken the hold of the aesthetic is to deny that Mozart's music can be heard "purely" (133), that is, divorced from its text and circumstances. Yet almost all music (and art) undergoes transformations: Josquin Masses were turned into instrumental works, or, reversing the process, the nineteenth century used ensembles from Mozart operas (including *Don Giovanni*) as contrafacta in, of all things, the Mass. Practices like adaptation, transcription, or concert performances of individual numbers attest to music's aesthetic value, to the ability for a work to be lifted out of the circumstances of its creation and still have meaning. Herwitz's critical approach often relies on instability, where a work can be read against its author, and readers, not authors, determine meaning. It is therefore curious to observe the aesthetic experience itself and even music, the most nondiscursive of the arts, taking on such stable, univocal meanings.

When Herwitz condemns Kierkegaard for yielding to "the philosophical urge to find answers all at once" (135), he surely misinterprets (reads "against") a thinker whose *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) bears the Shakespearian epigraph "better well-hanged than ill-wed" as a caution against systematic (that is, Hegelian) philosophizing. But this misreading nonetheless gets at a central, legitimate aim of *Don Giovanni* criticism—to identify an intelligible moral vision in a work of such bewildering moral ambiguity. The stumbling block is not Don Giovanni, precisely, but Don Giovanni in relation to the other characters. Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht ("Authority and Judgment in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Wagner's *Ring*") address the matter as it applies to Mozart and Wagner by drawing the useful distinction between "directive authority" (roughly, justice as the advantage of the stronger) and "cognitive authority" (justice as something grounded in reason and knowledge), with Don Giovanni and the Commendatore brandishing the former, most of the other characters scraping by with the latter. But the essay sometimes flattens out the moral complexity of Mozart's opera with heavy moralizing of its own:

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[The six characters remaining at the end] issue their verdicts because they have been conditioned in particular ways by the surrounding society; and if they are taken to have cognitive authority, it is not because of their daring in probing matters for themselves, but because they have acceded to convention, and the conventional wisdom has turned out to have the upper hand. The concurrence of their judgments is no touchstone of truth; it is an expression of their shared conventionality, reinforced by timidity. (164)

It is reasonable to see in the words and music of the “antichissima canzona” something conventional and maybe forced. But Kitcher and Schacht take a sentimental view about humans in relation to society, as if there exists somewhere a person who has never been conditioned by society, or as if social conventions are external to what it means to be human. They also forget who it is the survivors curse: a man who, randomly, breaks up marriages, seduces, assaults, threatens with murder, lives in disguise, scorns the dead, alters course upon detecting a woman’s scent, has “un barbaro appetito,” and enjoys terrifying his superstitious servant: “un mostro, fellow, nido d’inganni” (monster, criminal, nest of deceit, 1.5), as Donna Elvira plausibly dubs him. Don Giovanni is not Socrates or a biblical prophet, or even Werther or Rousseau.

Nor must a character’s fecklessness inevitably reflect insincerity or cowardice. Donna Elvira may be crazed, but she is also noble, or so say Donna Anna and Don Ottavio in “Non ti fidar.” To call the person who voices “Dalla sua pace” a “wimp” (Herwitz, 121) or “a pale figure of empty conventionality” (Eldridge, 43) is perhaps to have too easily succumbed to the modern view of the autonomous self and certainly is not to have heard show-stopping performances of the aria. For more straightforward portrayals of the “ancillary” characters, Mozart could have availed himself of any number of sources. Tirso’s Donna Anna type has more interest in external reputation than justice, and Goldoni’s Zerlina equivalent, Elisa (a stand-in for a real-life lover who jilted Goldoni), is more craven and manipulative than even Don Juan, so much so that the play closes with an epithet directed against her: “Chi crederebbe che sì rio costume / Serpendo andasse fra le selve ancora?” (Who would believe that such dreadful customs would still insinuate themselves in the countryside? 5.9). When placed against these models, Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* does not function well as an exposé of vapid moralizing, and it will not do to poison our sympathies for Don Giovanni’s adversaries simply because they are flawed or because they lack poise. To do so turns the opera’s pathos into burlesque.

One can see that many essays in *The Don Giovanni Moment* find themselves at the Kierkegaardian crossroads of the aesthetic and the ethical. Once

there, some opt for one of the two paths. Others reject the choice altogether: along with Goehr, there is Adorno, who, as Nikolaus Bacht relates in "Adorno and the Don," wants to have his pleasure *and* his freedom (236). Also flatly refusing to join what Mozart has sundered is an essay that holds near-canonical status, the reprint of Bernard Williams's "Don Juan as an Idea." It occupies an unusual place in the collection because it disagrees with many views offered there. Proceeding from the wisdom that Mozart's character cannot bear all available meanings given to the Don Juan figure at large, Williams dismisses numerous popular interpretations: that Mozart's Don Giovanni is a misogynist; a latent homosexual; a melancholic; or, moving away from clinical diagnoses, simply bored. As for Kierkegaard, Williams follows him a long way but eventually parts company when it comes to the opera's supposed Christian ethos. Don Giovanni is not satanic, says Williams, but instead determined not to be intimidated; the Commendatore's reappearance marks a natural, not supernatural, "consequence of Giovanni's recklessness" (114), by which he means that his offense holds no special cosmic significance; and the behavior of the opera's characters does not step dutifully in line with categories of virtue and vice. This last topic echoes the thesis advanced in *Shame and Necessity* (1993), a learned and inspired demonstration of how the Homeric world lies outside the boundaries of Platonic and Kantian moral categories.

A lot of Williams's argument makes good sense of *Don Giovanni*, especially of the damnation scene and its postlude. Whereas lamentations from other Don Juan tales could go on for verses cataloguing regret, Mozart's Don Giovanni leaves the world in physical, not spiritual travail. (Only Molière's ending is as laconic, as unrevealing, as Mozart's.) Nineteenth-century productions had a hard time sustaining this ambiguity and often tried to make the *lamento* scene more confessional. Friedrich Rochlitz's popular German translation of Da Ponte's libretto has the libertine ask the Almighty for forgiveness ("Erbarme dich, Allmächtiger"). Not only does this interpolation turn Don Giovanni back into Tirso's late-repentant; it also tries to generate sympathy for the libertine, to make the opera more conventionally tragic by evoking pity. In reminding us of Don Giovanni's essential inscrutability and transgressiveness, Williams draws out of the opera's ending a discomfiting conclusion: the erotic requires regulation, it is true, but this restraint exacts a heavy price. We are back at the crossroads, again, but now with the sobering awareness that the virtuous life is not necessarily a happy one.

For all of the light that Williams sheds on the opera, his removal of the supernatural and chthonic from its moral vision leaves significant areas of the opera in the dark. Williams reads in the parting references to Proserpina and Pluto an instinctive but telling sign that the opera's deities belong to the

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natural world, yet the use of these names is unrevealing, since words like “Lucifer” or “Satan” would have been censored, and pagan names commonly appeared in Catholic theater of the time (like Jesuit plays). Donna Elvira, Donna Anna, and Don Ottavio are all motivated (one might say driven) by the idea that heaven is on their side, that certain actions or behavior—marriage for Elvira, filial obligations for Anna, friendship for Ottavio (which he calls a “sacro manto”)—emanate from a divine order of things. Of course, the point of the opera might well be to show how laughably or poignantly misplaced this confidence is, but that is all the more reason not to write off their language merely as the clichés of elevated characters. I wonder, too, about Williams’s point that Don Giovanni stands out among the *dramatis personae* for the unconditional way in which he leads his life (116). It is true that he pursues a different *object* from the others (or none at all), but Donna Elvira, in particular, dogs him with a singlemindedness that also disregards self-preservation, for she is willing to humiliate herself to expose Don Giovanni’s perfidy (“Ho perduta la prudenza” she exclaims toward the end of the quartet “Non ti fidar”). Her unrelenting authenticity (authenticity rather than sincerity, because surface reputation does not figure into her calculations) becomes almost Rousseauvian and stands as an antipode to Don Giovanni’s utter impenetrability.

It is even more difficult to sustain the argument that the Commendatore represents the *natural* consequences of Don Giovanni’s audacity. Mozart could certainly have drawn on a naturalistic solution had he wanted one: lightning brings down Goldoni’s libertine; in Stephanie’s *Macbeth* (1772), which was subtitled “Das neue steinerne Gastmahl” and which replaced a banned Viennese Don Juan tale, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth die in a burning castle—the flames of hell now becoming a material, secular torment. (That Mozart rejected more Enlightened, rational solutions suggests that the opera’s famed subversiveness may reside not in its forecast of things to come but in its embrace of an older Baroque, visual culture.) Eliminating the supernatural in the opera mutes Don Giovanni’s audacity. He rebels not only against society but against mortality itself. In mocking the dead and, most of all, living an episodic existence, Don Juan implicitly tries to halt the passage of time. Paradoxically, it is the immortal Commendatore who feels the burden of time, for he announces the libertine’s doom with the cold declaration that “there is no more time” (Ah tempo più non v’è, 2.15). Time comes into conflict with eternity in other prominent Don Juan plays. “Plenty of time for that” (¡Tan largo me lo fiáis!) is the refrain for Tirso’s Burlador, who will discover, to his everlasting regret, that he does not have all of the time in the world. (Time also makes a cameo appearance in Molière’s last act.) One of the fascinations with Mozart’s opera is how its loose episodic

organization operates in tandem with the inexorability of Don Giovanni's damnation, that we know from the beginning that Don Giovanni will be (or already is) damned.

And what of comedy, which, as mentioned at the beginning, is intimately bound up with the genesis and character of Mozart's *opera buffa*? *The Don Giovanni Moment* gives little sense of it, mostly because of the volume's emphasis on the German reception of the opera. At times, however, some essays conflate the topic of reception history with that of interpretation in ways that obscure Mozart's opera. Thus, in her otherwise fine study on the centrality of artistic taste in Shaw's *Man and Superman*, Agnes Heller remarks that Mozart (as opposed to Shaw) never presents his protagonist "as a comic" ("Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in Shaw's Comedy," 181). No matter how one construes the word "comic," such a view does not square with the libretto. Much of its first act lays out a series of romantic setbacks that sometimes leave Don Giovanni exasperated rather than confidently triumphant. This is Don Giovanni as the object of comedy. For Don Giovanni as the instigator of comedy, there is, among other things, the trio "Ah taci, ingiusto core," where he strikes up an impromptu commedia dell'arte scenario.

Neglecting the opera's comedy gives a partial reading not only of the opera itself or its overall nineteenth-century reception but even of the German metaphysical tradition that occupies so much of this collection. Above all there is Kierkegaard himself, who finds comedy "implicit in the contradiction between the hero and the arena in which he moves" (Kierkegaard [1843] 1987, 1:92). (Imagining a seducer is one thing, but doing the actual math for those 1003 trysts in Spain is quite another.) Likewise, taking on death directly or in the abstract is not the same thing as forcing your servant to invite a statue to dinner. Here, Don Giovanni's chivalry takes on a cartoonish quality. Although this side of Kierkegaard's thought is unfortunately absent in *The Don Giovanni Moment*, a couple of essays in the collection uncover a richer, more complex reception of *Don Giovanni*. Ernst Osterkamp ("Don Juan and Faust: On the Interaction between Two Literary Myths"), for example, notes how Goethe related *Faust*'s "very serious jokes" (21) to Mozart's *opera buffa*.<sup>3</sup> And then there is one of the gems of the volume, Thomas S. Grey's "The Gothic Libertine: The Shadow of Don Giovanni in Romantic Music and Culture," which follows the legend through low as well as high culture, with powers of synthesis that extend to musical characterization. (For a collection devoted to a musical work, it is noteworthy that only Grey's and Hoeckner's essays contain musical examples. Grey's also adds a couple of illustrations, including one really ghoulish Ricordi poster.) Here, for example, is how Grey describes the opening of Liszt's *Réminiscences de "Don Juan"* (1841), which begins with the Commendatore's caution that

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### Example 4: Liszt, *Réminiscences de "Don Juan."*

The image displays a musical score for Liszt's *Réminiscences de "Don Juan."* in G-flat major, 2/4 time. The score is divided into four systems, each with a piano part. The first system (measures 731-736) begins with a piano (*sf*) dynamic and features a melodic line in the right hand with eighth-note patterns and a bass line with quarter notes. A fermata is placed over measure 736. The second system (measures 737-741) is marked *Andante* and features a *fff* dynamic. The right hand has a melodic line with a fermata over measure 741, while the left hand plays a triplet of eighth notes. The third system (measures 742-744) continues the melodic and bass lines with eighth-note patterns. The fourth system (measures 745-748) is marked *accelerando* and features a complex texture with sixteenth-note patterns in both hands, including a triplet in the right hand.

Don Giovanni's laughter will end before dawn: "Don Giovanni steps back into our presence (as Liszt's auditors) through those same infernal fires into which he disappeared at the opera's end, a Gothic revenant called back from his purgatorial half-life to reenact his pleasures and crimes in pantomime for the wondering audience of a later era, the miraculous waxwork figure of a famous 'historical' character" (77). About Liszt's reworking I would only add that, in concluding the piece so that the "Champagne Aria" emerges out of the Commendatore's warning (example 4), Liszt gives the victory to Don Giovanni, whose laughter, we are to understand, will extend indefinitely beyond dawn.

Like much exemplary historiography, Grey's essay registers and then explains phenomena that probably seem odd by modern standards. For

example, those persuaded by Kierkegaard's argument that Zerlina is a deliberately inconsequential character will wonder why Chopin's and Liszt's transcriptions give such prominence to "Là ci darem la mano." Because this is a seduction that we actually get to witness, explains Grey; in it we see at work Don Giovanni's supernatural, mesmeric arts, conveyed through the surface innocence of Mozart's sensuous music. Still more fascinating are the permutations of Don Juan outside of canonical literature, in the popular culture. Down here, the "wit, cunning, and aristocratic breeding" (78) of Mozart's Don Giovanni did not entirely disintegrate into Teutonic melancholy; instead, these qualities found their way into, of all things, vampire tales. Other strange things happened to "Count" Giovanni in the popular arena. The tendency was to dissipate the ecstasy of Don Juan through burlesque or domestication, or, in a combination of the two, through assigning him a trouser role, thus coolly exacting a "woman's revenge" on "the predatory male" (82). Grey does not, however, treat the English and French burlesque tradition in isolation from the German metaphysical one. For whether one redeems Don Giovanni or marries him off, the result is much the same: annihilation. The main difference seems to be whether the libertine goes willingly or with a fight. Eulogizing late romantic Don Juans from Lenau to Shaw, Wagner to Richard Strauss, Grey explains how they "manage to skirt damnation, but feeling a sense of cultural 'lateness,' perhaps, they voluntarily, even cheerfully, embrace their extinction" (102).

Observing the essays as a whole, one marvels at how *Don Giovanni* ranges over the thought and culture of the nineteenth century and its aftermath, of the myriad ways—philosophical, literary, biographical—in which Mozart's opera fired the imagination and shaped the experience of artists and thinkers. Because a tale is compelling to the extent that it resists paraphrase, one will not find all of the opera's complexities resolved in its pages. At its most successful, *The Don Giovanni Moment* does something better: historiographically it widens our perspective on the opera's legacy; conceptually it keeps alive the opera's tension between the aesthetic and the moral. One applauds the editors for following the opera largely through other works of art (and even the main philosophers covered here, Kierkegaard and Adorno, approach the opera in quasi-literary, nonsystematic forms), for it is other works of art that render the most vivid response to Mozart's interpretation of the Don Juan myth and his opera's ability to beguile, terrify, and give pleasure.

Notes

1. Eighth letter, May 12, 1798 in *Allerley über theatralische Gegenstände mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Bühne zu Frankfurt am Main. In Briefen*, 2:108–9.

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2. The scenario is reprinted in Leydi and Leydi 1958:290–319.
3. Osterkamp also discovers two fascinating nineteenth-century transformations of Don Juan. One is that he becomes a virtuoso, where the technical craft of performance overcomes any scruples about the morality of the act. Osterkamp does not mention this, but I would argue that a preference for *techne* over *arete* is precisely what is advanced in “Ah taci, ingiusto core” when Don Giovanni praises himself in an aside thus: “Più fertile talento / Del mio non non si dà” (A more fecund talent than mine? No, there is none). The other revelation is that nineteenth-century Fausts tended to turn themselves into Don Juans. One source of the Don Juan legend was anti-Machiavellian Jesuit literature, which transformed the austere political tyrant into a hedonist. This process reverses itself in the nineteenth century, where Faust the intellectual devolves into the hedonist, and Don Juan the sensualist becomes an intellect.

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