

## From Sellars to the Stage

### A Critical Analysis of Harlem's *Don Giovanni*

by Angela Moran

Peter Sellars is renowned for directing unconventional theatre productions and 'known for innovative re-interpretations of classic works'.<sup>1</sup> With a background in theatre training from Harvard University, his work on the dramaturgy of opera is based on theatrical rather than musical know-how. Sellars first came to prominence with a reworking of Wagner, bringing a personal interest in marionette theatre to a student production of *The Ring Cycle*. His Gordon-Craig-like experiment of casting Brünnhilde and Siegfried as puppets was a critical failure, being 'rejected by [...] the Harvard theatre establishment'.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, Sellars continued to subvert and question the high art of opera in more influential ways after he had graduated from university. His niche is in drawing relationships between conventional operatic works and contemporary life. This stems from his background in theatre studies, which makes him particularly sensitive to symbols and performance styles that can complicate the plot. 'Making great classics relevant has been so widespread that it has spilled over to opera as well'.<sup>3</sup>

In 1990 this penchant resulted in a production of Mozart and da Ponte's *Don Giovanni* set in the South Bronx ghetto with a drugs baron protagonist. Sellars uses the metaphor of addiction to account for Don Giovanni's actions, recasting him as a hopeless delinquent, which stands in contrast to the controlled and suave lover that is usually

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Critical Voices 3', <http://www.criticalvoices.ie/speakers/display.asp?ArtistID=28> [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2007].

<sup>2</sup> David Littlejohn, *The Ultimate Art: Essays Around and About Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 131.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Croyden, 'Croyden's Corner: Shakespeare á la Mode', <http://www.nytheatre-wire.com/BAM.htm> [accessed 3 November 2009].

manifest.<sup>4</sup> Sellars's Giovanni already exists outside the boundaries of society so can only use force to get his way. The director uses *Don Giovanni* to satisfy a personal agenda, yet he ensures ghetto stereotypes are not a gimmick but enhance the operatic narrative: drug abuse explains Giovanni's actions and his relationship with Leporello, for example; and guns become an allegory for sexual violence.

After considering the aims of the director in conjunction with the original operatic work, this essay discusses six instances of the production in which Sellars's staging demonstrates the intent of the composer. I argue that, although his premise may be scandalous, the theatre director is sensitive to musical clues that clarify the story. Sellars sheds light on da Ponte's ambiguous narrative in the first scene with his filmed overture and opening action; and matches the tonality and orchestration of Mozart's Champagne Aria and Act One Finale to show the main character losing control. His Cemetery and Banquet scenes and Act Two Finale draw on techniques of early Greek theatre to corroborate Mozart's musical indication. The opera is less about a dissolute Don Giovanni punished than it is about the society for which he is a scapegoat. Essentially Sellars expands the complexity of the female trio, and reworks two finales so that they engage with the score and curtail the opera buffa elements. In so doing, the director maintains the serious moral tale that Mozart wished to promote in *Don Giovanni*.

## I. Mozart and Sellars versus da Ponte and *Don Juan*

Peter Sellars's first professional opera, Handel's *Orlando*, achieved notoriety in 1982 due to a staging at the Kennedy Space Centre, with an astronaut Orlando, and a final act set on the moon. The director's attempts to recapture the spirit of the work, rather than to replace completely the original set of references with his 'wacky' interpretation, proved a sign of things to come and undermined any impression that here was a one-hit wonder conceptual theatre director. Sellars claims a primary interest in cultural activism, where

---

<sup>4</sup> *Don Giovanni* has been presented as such by the Vienna State Opera and the Zurich Opera House. Mozart, *Don Giovanni*. Alfred Travers, Paul Czinner. Vienna State Opera. 1955 (Deutsche Grammophon, DVD-VIDEO NTSC 000440 073 0199 9, 2001). Mozart, *Don Giovanni*. Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Zurich Opera House. 2002 (ArtHaus Musik DVD, NTSC 100 329, 2002).

his education in staging provides the medium with which to explore moral issues. He remained unperturbed when his production of the *Magic Flute* was the first opera ever to have been booed at the Glyndebourne Festival in 1990 and dismissed as having displayed a 'shallow, barbaric, and silly interpretation, and pathetic theatrical and musical incompetence'.<sup>5</sup> Sellars answered the critics by taking on all three Mozart and da Ponte works as part of the 'PepsiCo Summer Fayre' in the same year. Each opera was allotted infamous twentieth-century urban American settings in an enterprise which owed a lot to Sellars's belief that theatre is merely a forum for discussion. Whether people enjoy the stage version or not is largely beside the point:

*opera is the metaphor, if you want to do a realistic thing pick another form [...] it lives in your imagination: it's simultaneously very realistic and at the same time utterly metaphysical, utterly taking place in this dream world where things that could be suddenly 'are', and things that 'are' could be transformed.*<sup>6</sup>

This credo explains why the poor reception of his *Magic Flute* did not deter Sellars from embarking on further Mozart productions and, indeed, he has since enjoyed notoriety with his reworking of the da Ponte operas. Little is sensational about the fact that the director, as auteur, took liberties with *Don Giovanni*, however, where timeless issues of violence, gender, and class have appeared relevant to a variety of different audiences. *Don Giovanni*, the second of three operas produced by the Mozart and da Ponte partnership, premiered in Prague in 1787. Concerns about sex and infidelity provide the link between all Mozart and da Ponte operas, but, whilst seduction and obsession are of thematic interest, *Don Giovanni* is distinct from the other two works in having revenge as the prominent theme and union between all characters. This is the opera in which Mozart had the most input in terms of moulding the action, but the legend of Don Juan had been used for almost two centuries before his and da Ponte's reworking. The first surviving version, *El Burlador de Sevilla (The Trickster of Seville)*, was

---

<sup>5</sup> Herb Greer, 'The *Magic Flute* – Glyndebourne, England – Opera Reviews', [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1282/is\\_n17\\_v42/ai\\_8809176](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1282/is_n17_v42/ai_8809176) [accessed 3 November 2009].

<sup>6</sup> Mozart, *Don Giovanni*. Peter Sellars. 1990 (PolyGram Video VHS, ASIN: 6302413362, 1991).

published in Barcelona in the early seventeenth century by Spanish Monk Gabriel Tellez, under the pseudonym, Tirso de Molina. This sparked other incarnations by Italian, French and German playwrights and composers, as well as a ballet by Gluck in 1761. It was Mozart's opera, rather than the original texts however, that established and isolated Don Juan in the canon of modern European literary heroes. The legend continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with works such as those by Lord Byron and George Bernard Shaw.<sup>7</sup>

Perceptions of *Don Giovanni* have also been affected by the altered characterisation of Don Juan in literature both prior to and post 1787. Da Ponte's libretto owes a great deal to the one-act opera by Giuseppe Gazzaniga and Giovanni Bertati, *Don Giovanni, o sia Il Convitato di Pietra (Don Giovanni or the Stone Guest)*. Although Mozart's music benefits from the elongation, da Ponte's adoption of Bertati's structure makes for a slow moving second act in *Don Giovanni*, with proceedings that simply echo those of the first half (Leporello is disheartened; Don Giovanni attempts a seduction; and the other main characters seek revenge). Mozart's style is completely different to the opera buffa writing of Gazzaniga however and his music compensates for the primitive structure of da Ponte's inanimate libretto. This perhaps explains why Peter Sellars's concern for the music takes priority over his lax obedience to original stage directions and libretto in this filmed version of *Don Giovanni*.

Composer and librettist were somewhat at odds in terms of their own readings of the story. Mozart classified the opera as a 'drama giocoso', combining both serious and comic elements, but its status has been hotly contested. The opera by Bertati and Gazzaniga (premiered some eight months before Mozart and da Ponte's) was pure buffa and portrayed Don Giovanni as a lovable rogue. However, Mozart wished to curb the comic writing of his partner, and debates continue to rage about whether their *Don Giovanni* is a comic or tragic opera; 'Did Wolfgang Amadé Mozart and his librettist Lorenzo da Ponte intend *Don Giovanni* as a comic opera with a shock ending? Or is the

---

<sup>7</sup> Lord Byron wrote a satirical poem *Don Juan* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004) between 1818–24. George Bernard Shaw produced his comic theatre piece *Man and Superman* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004) in 1905.

opera a serious drama with occasional comic elements?’<sup>8</sup>

Mozart held firm to his personal opinions and was not playing devil’s advocate to da Ponte in order to create a multi-faceted musical drama. Turbulences in the composer’s private life during the opera’s production, including the death of his father, rationalises his attempts to limit any comic elements in the story. Not only this, but Mozart deeply respected women and had written about faithful love in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*) (1781). He would continue to extol monogamous relationships in *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*) (1791). Life imitated art for da Ponte, who became renowned for his sexual and financial adventures and had himself caused scandal by carrying on love affairs in various European cities. Regardless of Mozart’s and da Ponte’s viewpoints, *Don Giovanni* blurs seria and buffa elements as an accurate reflection of its time: seria elements prevailed in the eighteenth century, but audiences called for light-hearted works with naturalistic and comic subject matters. Mozart undermines his tragic *Don Giovanni* with the jocular final sextet after the protagonist’s demise, although the story leaves a bitter taste in being devoid of a contented pair of lovers and customary love duet.

The opera’s ambiguous status widens the possibilities for stagings and places an extra reliance on the director’s reading. Peter Sellars goes some way to balancing the conflict, but, just as Donna Elvira dares the opera audience to mock her abandonment, so too his film audience laughs at their own peril. Whilst some have evidently found it humorous to see a leather-clad, gangland Don Giovanni leading a group of hoodlums, rather than an aristocratic compulsive womaniser, drug-abuse and violence is commonly associated with promiscuity in the most underprivileged districts of contemporary Western society. Sellars did not want to present *Don Giovanni* as a comic opera, judging by the alteration to his original staging of the ‘Catalogue Aria’. The director removed projected pictures of Giovanni’s conquered women on the back wall for the recorded version because the live opera audience had found this humorous, ‘each time Leporello

---

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Summers, ‘Mozart’s Don Giovanni’,

<http://www.houstongrandopera.org/ExportedSite/Whats%20New/Golden%20Meaning.htm> [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2007].

clicks his fingers, the slide would change...this drew laughs both years I saw this'.<sup>9</sup>

The filmed opera retains something of this idea, as the stage is faded out so that only Donna Elvira's and Leporello's faces remain visible. The blacked-out theatre is pertinent for this dark society and also aids our comprehension of Elvira and Giovanni's previous intimacy, especially when Leporello goes to kiss her and demonstrates solidarity with his master. Yet there is no physical notion of a catalogue whatsoever. As the stage darkens and becomes invisible, Leporello sings, 'Take a look. His little black book. Every girl he's had is in this black book' (according to Sellars's customised subtitles at least, which are not a direct English translation of the libretto's 'Guardate questo non picciol libro: è tutto pieno dei nomi di sue belle' in this instance). This simultaneity implies that, having been duped by Don Giovanni themselves, he and Elvira are both in the 'black book'. Minimal stage imagery also matches the simplification of Leporello's stereotypically male categorisation of Giovanni's women by size, shape and class, 'country girls; city girls; barmaids and princesses' ('V'han fra queste contadine, cameriere e cittadine, v'han contesse, baronesse'), rather than describing the intense complicated involvements we know to exist with these liaisons because of Donna Elvira. In any case, the fact that Sellars changed his original idea to control the audience response implies that, despite his apparent bravado in being immune to the reactions of his critics, when it comes to *Don Giovanni*, Sellars at least shares some of the fear that 'even Mozart, before Prague raved over it, wondered how its mixture of terror, pity and comedy would be received'.<sup>10</sup> Such apprehension did not stymie the director in further customising the opera however.

## II. Peter Sellars's Alterations and Innovations

Peter Sellars takes on the role of director and translator in this filmed version and we receive the opera exactly how he sees it. Although da Ponte's sung libretto remains

---

<sup>9</sup> R.E. Lupp, 'At last, Peter Sellars' *Don Giovanni*', <http://www.amazon.com/Mozart-Giovanni-Lorraine-Hunt-Lieberson-Symphoniker> [accessed 7th May 2007].

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Hopkins, *Great Composers* (London: Marshall Cavendish, 1989), 52.

unchanged, what is heard differs from what is read, as Sellars's subtitles were modernised and located in New York. Aside from removing the catalogue from the 'Catalogue Aria', Sellars's translation leads us to believe that Leporello sings about 'white women' ('nella bianca'), 'big mothers' ('la grande maestosa') and 'little sisters' ('la piccina'), with the most notable line being Giovanni's described partiality for the '12-year-olds' ('ma passion predominante è la giovin principiante').

Notwithstanding the different reading of the opera by post-modern audiences as opposed to the original listeners, it is unlikely that Sellars is attempting authenticity by referring to the perceived maturity of a twelve year old girl in the eighteenth century. Despite maintaining the essential message of the number—Giovanni likes to educate the 'young beginner' in love-making—Sellars's sensational language and effort to match the aria to his visual setting through twentieth-century African-America jargon resonates in perhaps discomfiting ways with a modern audience sensitised by tabloid headlines to stories of child abuse and paedophilia. Although twentieth-century censorship laws impart more freedom on Sellars than Mozart and da Ponte would have enjoyed, the fashionable setting of *Don Giovanni* means that such messages take on different connotations. Sellars shows that there is little regard for childhood in the ruthless world of the New York projects.

It is, however, terminology typically associated with an indigent African-American community that fits the casting of identical twins Eugene and Herbert Perry, as Don Giovanni and Leporello, respectively. This does little to extend Lawrence Schenbeck's argument that the opera is as much concerned with a drama around the picaresque character Leporello as with the saga of Don Giovanni.<sup>11</sup> Rather, Sellars makes their connection significant and places 'a strange new twist on the relationship between master and man'.<sup>12</sup> His casting of Leporello takes away the individuality of Giovanni, supporting Søren Kierkegaard, who believes that Giovanni is opposite to the monogamous Faust, in representing an idea, rather than an operatic personality, 'the issue

---

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Schenbeck, 'Leporello, *Don Giovanni*, and the Picaresque', *The Opera Quarterly*, 11/2 (1995): 3–16.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Porter, 'Mozart on the Modern Stage', *Early Music*, 20/1 (Feb 1992): 132–138 (137).

here is not desire in a particular individual but desire as a principle'.<sup>13</sup> Don Giovanni is not only robbed of physical distinctiveness, but also loses any power over Leporello, who is equally as strong in a society where violence is the only means to an end. Giovanni is dependent on his menial dogsbody for drugs, although, conversely, it is (only) the incentive of drugs which keeps Leporello with Giovanni, so the two are on an equal-footing.

In many ways Sellars pays homage to Mozart in robbing Giovanni of his individuality. Deprived of his own musical style, the protagonist is the easiest character to ignore as a player in society. Mozart writes no signatory style, theme, or aria for Giovanni, giving nothing away in terms of his age, status, and origins, just as his choice of lover is democratic. Giovanni is immature in relationships, but experienced in love; he can dance to all three levels of courtly dance; and is well-travelled. The musical suppression is a clever tactic that confirms his status as an elusive philanderer. However it also makes him permanently defensive. Giovanni's lack of music, when coupled with his indistinct appearance in this production, makes for a weak operatic subject. Donna Anna is the first to sing in the opening, so Giovanni adopts the music of other characters in order to respond from the outset. Indeed, so little is learnt about Don Giovanni in the opera that a review of its premiere in a Prague newspaper demoted him as the eponymous character in favour of the Commendatore, and maintained only the *Stone Guest* title of Gazzaniga and Bertati's work.<sup>14</sup> Mozart shirks the typical view of Don Giovanni as a legendary womaniser, because only in a *dramma giocoso* is the hero designed to be aloof. Giovanni may be a Casanova, but he stands in contrast to the historical model in that he has no social conscience, just as Peter Sellars's drug-dealing thief harbours no moral obligation.

To a certain extent Sellars replaces the Mozart and da Ponte class issues with racial differences, although not simply by his casting of the Perry twins. Zerlina (Ai Lan Zhu) is Chinese, and Masetto (Elmore James) is African-American, which complicates any simplistic assumption that two black actors have been cast as the 'baddies' of the piece. Class issues were bound up with sexual violence well before Mozart and da Ponte,

---

<sup>13</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ed. Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 85.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Osborne, *The Opera Lover's Companion* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 274.



and Sellars does not entirely dispatch with the subject matter, but uses costume to imply differing statuses. The formal evening-wear of Donna Anna (Dominique Labelle) and the Commendatore (James Patterson) contrasts with the leather jacket and jeans donned by Giovanni and Leporello. Donna Elvira (Lorraine Hunt) is dressed suggestively and represents the aura of eroticism that is rife in all three Mozart-da Ponte operas. This costume also implies her need for Giovanni as a husband in order to provide a sense of respectability.

Elvira's drug-addiction in this production makes her a good match for Giovanni, and explains her dogged hunt for him, which, being in the name of survival makes her as egotistic as the libertine. Donna Anna also shoots up with heroin before tackling the coloraturas in her second-act aria. Class distinctions are blurred by everyone suffering the same addictions in this emphatically fragmented society. Don Ottavio (Carroll Freeman) is an NYPD officer in uniform when we first see him. This allows Sellars to clear up the ambiguous libretto and provide his own reading. It seems that Anna does not love Ottavio, but she calls on him (along with his companion in the case of the opening scene) in his professional capacity after her father has been murdered. The contemptuous expression on her face upon later being called his 'fiancée' endorses this impression.

Any distinction in the style of costume is not matched in their colours however, which are invariably monochrome. Characters wear either black or white, but any straightforward implications are renounced by their single splashes of colour. The costumes for the women represent their states of play with Don Giovanni. In the finale of Act One, for example, Donna Anna wears grey, Donna Elvira is in black, and Zerlina is dressed in a white and blue top with a black skirt. The vagueness of Giovanni's attack on Donna Anna is reflected in her halfway colour between pure and white, or fallen and black, whilst Elvira's dress indicates her mourning the loss of a husband. Zerlina, on the other hand, wears colours most commonly associated with the Virgin Mary, despite a black skirt showing that she is not completely innocent and untainted by society. The idea of introducing a Madonna character in *Don Giovanni* was picked up by Deborah Warner in 1995.<sup>15</sup> Her Glyndebourne production features a statue of the Mother of God being

---

<sup>15</sup> Mozart, *Don Giovanni*. Deborah Warner. Glyndebourne Festival. 1995 (Warner Music Vision DVD,

wooed by Giovanni in the final banquet scene, which epitomises his perfect ‘ever virgin’ woman, who can neither run away from, nor after, him. It also explains Giovanni’s downfall as primarily caused by his blasphemy. He is beyond redemption in this instance, unlike Leporello, who is left kneeling by the statue for salvation. Sellars makes a similar connection and indicates an appropriate alter-ego of Zerlina, with whom Don Giovanni never enjoys sexual success.

Despite the blurring of class boundaries in Sellars’s version, Zerlina’s peasant status differentiates her from the other female characters. There is an element of the familiar medieval pastoral tradition; the knight pursuing the shepherdess set the archetype for the class interaction of rich man and poor woman. This would have been a common genre in aristocratic court performances, ‘to the men of the ruling group, all women appear as prostitutes’.<sup>16</sup> Although Don Giovanni’s age and status is deliberately vague, there is the impression that his seduction of Zerlina is somewhat more acceptable because it is engaging with a practice that is centuries old. Her woollen cardigan and utilitarian skirt in Sellars’s filmed version of the opera indicate a simple disposition. At the start of the ‘Champagne Aria’, Don Giovanni hints at an aristocratic status, wielding his wealth by ordering Leporello, ‘these country girls turn me on [...] Go find girls in the street, drag them down here’ (‘Troppo mi premono [...] Se trovi in piazza qualche ragazza, teco ancor quella cerca menar’). However, Mozart defies the social conventions outlined in Andreas Capellanus’s middle age *Art of Courtly Love*—which explained that the stubbornness of peasant women justified taking them by force—by allowing Zerlina to be the only female character we see Giovanni charm, and, on the contrary, having the aristocratic Donna Anna as the more likely victim of rape.<sup>17</sup>

Mozart further departs from this stereotyped view of the male author by writing a duet for Giovanni and Zerlina that is not violent, but has a fluid, legato, stepwise melody. This is the only illustration of the libertine’s much-anticipated skill in winning women. The music for ‘La ci darem la mano’ is simple and rooted in Giovanni’s seduction key, A

---

0630–14015–2, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Volume I (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 372.

<sup>17</sup> Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, ed. John Jay Parry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

major, with a melody based around the typical rising fourth love interval, that relies on syncopation to illustrate Zerlina's confusion and excitement. Giovanni promises to make Zerlina his bride, which adds credence to Elvira's claim that she is the abandoned *wife* of Giovanni. Mozart personifies the accompanying flute and bassoon, rather than using the woodwind to double the strings. Zerlina and Giovanni share a melody and we see her increasing conviction through the music. As such, Giovanni's attempts to grab and push Zerlina in this scene do not seem dangerous, but they hint at his violent capabilities. The action is stationary. Giovanni and Zerlina are seated and the music indicates all necessary movement. After individual stanzas, they sing together in unison thirds whilst physically getting closer so that, in the final stages, it is Zerlina who leads the action and they share a passionate kiss.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Bars 45–59 of Scene I, Number 7, 'Là ci darem la mano', Wolfgang Plath and Wolfgang Rehm, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Serie II Bühnenwerke: Il Dissoluto Punito Ossia Il Don Giovanni* (Kassel: BärenreiterVerlag, 1968), 114–115.

115

52

Fl.

Ob.

Fag.

V.I.

V.II.

Va.

Z.

D. B.

Vc. e. B.

ri-sto-rar le pe-ne... d'un in-no-cen-te a-mor. An-diam, an-diam, mio be-ne-, a

ri-sto-rar le pe-ne... d'un in-no-cen-te a-mor. An-diam, an-diam, mio be-ne-, a

The operatic work is not necessarily a fait accompli once the composer is satisfied with the score. Rather the input of performers and non-musical practicalities create revisions and multiple versions or signatures. Roger Parker argues that it is fruitless to assemble an operatic ‘hypertext’.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, between the premiere of *Don Giovanni* in 1787 and its performance in Mozart’s home town the following year three new vocal numbers had been added. An extra aria for Donna Elvira, ‘Mi tradi quell alma ingrata’, advanced the idea that she rather than Donna Anna is the female lead, and was essentially an inclusion to appease the singer Cavalieri, who was playing the role. Also, the less virtuosic ‘Della sua pace’ replaced Don Ottavio’s original ‘Il mio tesoro’ aria, as a more manageable vocal number for the player Morello. An additional second act duet for Leporello and Zerlina, ‘Per queste tue manine’, appears to have been less manipulated by the actors than the other two Vienna compositions. However, considering Mozart’s reduction of comic elements and discrepancy with a buffa categorisation, it is difficult to believe that he wrote this number simply to ‘amuse the public’.<sup>20</sup>

Peter Sellars does not subscribe to this school of thought and uses the duet to

<sup>19</sup> Roger Parker, *Remaking the Song: Operatic Visions and Revisions from Handel to Berio* (London: University of California Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Synopsis of *Don Giovanni*: An Opera by W.A. Mozart’, <http://www.musicwithease.com/don-giovanni-synopsis.html> [accessed 3 November 2009].

confirm that Zerlina is far from humorous, silly, or naïve. By inevitably incorporating elements from one revision or another, opera directors contradict Parker to some extent, but Sellars's hypertext is particularly noteworthy. He combines full Prague and Vienna versions of *Don Giovanni* in this filmed production, including the later Leporello and Zerlina duet, which is a rarity in contemporary stage performances and video or audio recordings. Sellars ensures this number is indispensable and employs it to advance a characterisation of the strong Zerlina implied during the Act One finale. With this number, he also furthers the idea that a Leporello drama simultaneously takes place during the opera. The duet appears in the narrative after Leporello has been discovered posing as Don Giovanni. Believing he has got away with the charade relatively unscathed, he maintains the pretence in this production and struts around the stage with the confidence of his master. Leporello continues to assert the idea that he and Giovanni share more than a visual likeness when an aggressive Zerlina reappears and he attempts to charm his way out of the situation, 'Listen, honey' ('Senti, carina mia').

However Sellars's staging of this number says more about our understanding of Zerlina than it does about this hopeless seducer. Mozart prevents any déjà vu as Leporello's flattery does not incite the same response from Zerlina as Don Giovanni's has. 'Per queste tu manine' provides the brusque antithesis to 'La ci darem le mano'. After an initial recourse to her fiancé engenders no response, 'Masetto, where did you go?' ('Masetto olà!'), Zerlina uses her own resources. Leporello's power decreases and he returns to his typical, hard done by self, 'God this isn't fair' ('Barbari, ingiusti Dei!'), as Zerlina's strength comes to the fore. Having tied Leporello to a chair, she enacts the swordfight that is missing from the first scene in this production between Giovanni and the Commendatore. Zerlina is tactile and the use of a carving knife makes her more physically threatening than the male characters that hide behind bravado and guns. The kitchen utensil also implies an impulsive attack and is more stereotypically a female weapon, as opposed to a phallic sword, although Zerlina's plan is neither rash nor hysterical. In stark contrast to Leporello's sneer, 'You want to carve me up?' ('Dunque cavarmi vuoi'), she emphasises that his emotional receptors, 'head', 'heart', and 'eyes' are more important than his life. Losing these would be a greater punishment and would guard against future false romances. Zerlina is also established as the means by which

Leporello can receive a Christian salvation, ‘if your eye should cause you to sin, tear it out; it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell’.<sup>21</sup>

The final tableau of a triumphant Zerlina wielding her knife above Leporello’s head at the musical climax, singing ‘This is how to deal with men’ (‘Così, così cogl’uomini, così, così si fa’) rewrites definitively her uncomplicated buffa characterisation. As Sellars’s DVD sleeve notes point out, following this exhibition of power, she turns on her role as the obedient woman and enters the house seeking Masetto.<sup>22</sup> In having resisted Don Giovanni, Zerlina is the success story that Donna Anna is not, and by shirking Leporello, she does not fall into the trap set for Donna Elvira in the second act. Zerlina is master of her own treatment by Don Giovanni (Donna Anna having been attacked in the dark, and Donna Elvira abandoned by her husband), and this aria, rather than her fear of Masetto’s wrath, reassures us that she remains no fool for the next seduction line. However, strength in this female character appears to be inconsistent with the start of the opera and Sellars’s unashamedly sexist introduction.

### **III.1 This is a Man’s World**

Sellars uses the overture to set up a dysfunctional society. The music is played over scenes of a desolate frozen waste land with neglected buildings, which have been filmed on location. There is an amount of pathetic fallacy as the first sign of life matches the music modulation to a major tonality. It stops snowing and the sun shines, whereas in the sad minor key of the opening all was icy and deserted. Even so it remains an uncomfortable situation, where scavenger dogs search for scraps to survive; cars are smashed; and the only two times we see women they are either locked indoors looking out of a window, or being shouted at by men. The city is a male construct and, as such, Sellars sets it up as Don Giovanni’s world, within which the protagonist represents social issues rather than a single autonomous character. This is clarified by his identical twin Leporello.

---

<sup>21</sup> Mark 9:47.

<sup>22</sup> Mozart, *Don Giovanni*. Peter Sellars. 1990 (Decca DVD, 071 4119, 2005).

Rather than watching the orchestra and imagining the action taking place behind the curtain with Don Giovanni and Donna Anna, the overture prepares us for the unusual backdrop of the opera to follow. The film-set contrasts with the indoor stage once the narrative begins, but Sellars is not after realism, and an opera loses notions of authenticity if filmed entirely on location. The Sellars film does not begin like a stage version of an opera however. At no time do we see an orchestra pit or hear an audience. Leporello even sings his opening aria to the back wall amusing himself and seemingly unaware of having to project his voice to a live listener. Bizarre anachronistic scenery pervades Sellars's work, although in *Don Giovanni* he endeavours to match his stage to the outside images of the overture, adorning it with graffiti, metal shutters, and rusty stairs. The characters escape from the action through a glass door on the back wall, which suits the unsettling society. Because the exit is made of glass panels which are cracked, the characters can often still be seen and are vulnerable to anything taking place centre-stage. The broken glass in the door indicates a fragmented, dangerous society. It also provides an apt reference to the glass ceiling metaphor, especially once the strength of the female characters becomes apparent.<sup>23</sup>

### **III.2 He Loves Her; He Loves Her Not? The First Scene**

The opera enjoys most controversy amongst a modern audience with its attitude towards violence, particularly with regard to the fate that befalls Donna Anna during the overture, 'There is always an enigma with Don—what really happened in Donna Anna's bedroom?'<sup>24</sup> Mozart and da Ponte leave the opening event vague. Presumably the violent death (that of the Commendatore) in the opening scene would have been an idiosyncrasy for the eighteenth-century opera audience, without adding a preliminary attack or rape. Thus, much of the staging is left up to the interpretation of the director. The subtitle of

---

<sup>23</sup> The glass ceiling is a familiar metaphor for the feminist movement and the upper limit that can be put on the careers of women. See, for example, Sally Tomlinson, *Negotiating the Glass Ceiling: Careers of Senior Women in the Academic World* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Anna Shlimovich, 'Customer Review', <http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/discussions/start-thread.html/> [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2007].

*Don Giovanni*, 'The Dissolute Man Punished', was always intended to be tongue-in-cheek, and musicological textbooks have cemented the impression of Giovanni as an affable scoundrel. However, scholarship arising from the 'New Musicology', which sought to uncover the suppressed voice in Western Classical music, inevitably provoked revised cultural interpretations of opera, and particularly its stereotypical characterisation of women.<sup>25</sup>

Sellars is eager for the audience to identify with the piece, but the tremendous power of the director in asserting his own feelings on the audience is evident, and no doubt remains about Donna Anna's rape in this version. She has a scratch mark on her chest, and there is an assault taking place as she and Giovanni appear. The word 'rape' even features in the modernised subtitles. There is no support for the idea that Anna simply succumbed to the charms of Don Giovanni before the first act. According to Sellars's translation, Giovanni's first words to her (and hence in the opera) are 'Shut up, bitch!' (Donna folle! Indarno gridi!'). However, Anna is a strong character, and fights Giovanni, never looking weak or broken, and she takes charge in the music. Giovanni is not masked, as the libretto instructs, so Anna knows who he is from the outset, although of course there are two men that look this way. This awareness further downplays the class issue: the opera implies that Giovanni is of the same social status as Donna Anna and Don Ottavio as they initially implore his help in catching the Commendatore's murderer. However, the appeal is rather insincere in Sellars's version, with the dramatic irony of the audience knowing that Anna is conscious of Giovanni's crime when making her plea to him.

The graphic opening attack is not necessarily a bid by Sellars to sensationalise the story for his updated, hard-hitting film version. Although the libretto remains inexplicit, Mozart provides clues about what actually happens to Donna Anna before the curtain opens in Scene One in the music of her later aria when she describes the event to Don Ottavio. Given that the outcome in matters of sexual violence is only decided by believing the participants' versions, it is interesting that Mozart allows Donna Anna, rather than Don Giovanni, to tell the story in any case. For Donna Anna's recitative 'Era già alquanto', Mozart shows a trauma in the music that is quite incongruous to her words.

---

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Catherine Clément, *Opera or the Undoing of Women* (London: Virago, 1989); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991); Ruth Solie, *Musicology and Difference* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993).



The music modulates into E flat minor to launch into Anna's explanation, a strange key in the eighteenth-century, especially as it immediately follows a C minor harmony.

Anna makes it clear that this is a piece about her serious attack, as Sellars has us believe that she sings, 'Now you know who my rapist is' ('Or sai chi l'onore') rather than 'Now you know who killed my father'. In Mozart's society, women belonged to their fathers and then to their husbands. Donna Anna has a real political stake in telling the 'truth' in that she risks becoming worthless or lost. As Dr Johnson proclaimed, 'the chastity of women [is] of the utmost importance, as all property depends on it'.<sup>26</sup> Sellars picks up on the clues for his staging in Mozart's music. There is a deceptive cadence when Anna sings 'I managed to break away from him' ('da lui mi sciolsi'), which implies that she is not telling an accurate account of events. So too the final cadence is imperfect because hers is not the complete version.

It is not necessarily this aria alone that assures the audience of Sellars's historical accuracy. Mozart implies the harm inflicted on Donna Anna in the same scene—albeit when she is off-stage—during a grapple between Don Giovanni and her father. Sellars's Giovanni does not fight the Commendatore, but shoots him without a struggle. The Commendatore is taller than Giovanni, and blocks him at his every turn to escape, so it seems that the final option for Giovanni is to draw his gun and corroborate an allegiance to ghetto-life. This action is incongruous to Mozart's musical depiction. The fight between Giovanni and the Commendatore is the only instrumental music in the opera, and fast string scales quite purposefully cry out to be matched with fast-moving visual action. A duel is literally shown in the music if we consider the score as *Augenmusik*. The lines move up and down, depicting and duplicating a swordfight. Mozart's music enacts Giovanni penetrating the Commendatore with his sword. Considering the context of the piece, Mozart implies a metaphorical rape of the man, effeminised by his old age, as if to compensate for the rape of Donna Anna which da Ponte would not have been allowed to stage.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, Including a Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, 2 Vols (Boston: Carter, Hendee and Co., 1832), Vol. 2, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Bars 160–177 from Scene I, Number 1, in *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Serie II Bühnenwerke*, 41–42.

160

Fl. *a 2*

Ob. *a 2*

Fag. *f*

Cor. (in Fa) *p*

V. I *p*

V. II *p*

Va. *p*

B. G. *f* (Combattono.)

Vc. e B. *f*

Mi - se - ro, at - ten - di, se vuoi mo - rir.

42

169

Fl.

Ob.

Fag.

Cor. (in Fa)

V. I

V. II

Va.

Vc. e B.

173

Andante

Fl. *sf sf sf*

Ob. *sf sf sf*

Fag. *sf sf sf*

Cor. (in Fa) *sf sf sf*

V. I *sf sf sf*

V. II *sf sf sf*

Va. *sf sf sf*

B. G. *sf sf sf*

C. *sf sf sf*

L. *sf sf sf*

Vc. e B. *sf sf sf*

IL COMMENDATORE (mortalmente ferito)

Don GIOVANNI [a parte] sotto voce

Ah... già

Ah... soc - cor - sol... son tra -

LEPORELLO [a parte] sotto voce

Quasi mi -

pizzicato

The attack is shrouded in ambiguity, such that the original intention has lost its importance, but Mozart does give a nudge in the direction of Sellars's interpretation, and questions must be asked as to why he chose to portray the fight music in this way. The common idea, summed up by Lawrence Lipking, is that the true moral of the story denounces murder not rape, but Mozart combines the attacks and, as such, undermines such a simplification as, 'raping a daughter is permissible, so long as one does not also kill her father'.<sup>28</sup> Sellars's murder scene involves little more than Giovanni and the Commendatore strolling back and forth in parallel lines before the fatal shot is fired. Nevertheless, a gun is appropriate for the twentieth-century setting, and supports telltale signs in Mozart's music by functioning as a metaphor for Giovanni's sexual power, which becomes particularly evident in the Act One Finale.

By robbing Giovanni and Leporello of their own identities and depicting a somewhat insignificant Commendatore, Sellars implies a main concern with the proceedings of the women, rather than with the action—or inaction—of the men. The trio of women are in fact largely dispensable in terms of clarifying the story. It is a trio of men (Don Giovanni, Leporello, and the Commendatore) that ignite the inevitable downfall at the beginning of the opera, and reappear at the end in a finale that dramatically parallels the opening scene. Sellars seems radical by emphasising the women's solidarity, but again he owes much to the indications in Mozart's music, turning Zerlina's 'Batti, batti' aria into a situation of domestic violence, for example.

Much like Donna Anna, Zerlina tells a different story in her text to that heard in the music. The power may be Zerlina's in this instance, but Sellars introduces an innovative, controversial interpretation that perpetuates the stereotype of the impoverished battered woman. Again this is not for devilment, but rather it provokes thought about the problem of abuse in a modern setting. It engages the audience with contemporary social issues, as well as those of Mozart's age, as the aria refers to 'a then-recent scandal in which a Venetian doctor stripped a gentlewoman and flagellated her

---

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Lipking, 'Donna Abbandonata', in *The Don Giovanni Book: Myths of Seduction and Betrayal*, ed. Jonathan Miller (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 36–47 (46).

publicly on the Fondamenta dell Tona, singing a vulgar song'.<sup>29</sup> Masetto is heard beating Zerlina off-stage before she sings, to reiterate the unsettling environment where danger is presented by both friends and strangers. This is, of course, the disingenuous world in which Don Giovanni befriends Masetto before trying to seduce Zerlina. Giovanni defends Zerlina on this occasion, albeit through a reliance on his weapon, and pulls his gun on Masetto, who in turn gets more violent with her. Mozart and da Ponte leave us to assume it is Giovanni's higher status that tempts Zerlina, but Sellars gives her more credit than that. Zerlina wants Giovanni because he is more refined than her fiancée and the lesser of two evils. For the audience of course, the scene affirms Giovanni's violence by paralleling moments when he has been threatening towards Donna Anna and Donna Elvira.

The eminence of the female characters affects the debate about whether the opera resides in a seria or buffa category. The women's differing positions in society shows Giovanni's lack of scruples, but Mozart's music often iterates their class differences, rather than where the operatic work belongs. The nineteenth-century view would have placed the aristocratic, opera seria character, Donna Anna, as the main female. More recently, the abandoned woman, Donna Elvira, has been seen as the driving force, despite being a mezzo character with more buffa elements in her music. This fits her position as straddling high and low class, but indicates a more recent shift in the opera's reputation away from the serious to the comic end of the spectrum. This is a movement quite at odds to Sellars's production. The peasant Zerlina is a pure buffa character on paper, but then comic elements are suited to her character. Zerlina is about to be married and never succumbs to Giovanni, so is apparently at liberty to be happy. The typically simple music of opera buffa reflects Zerlina's perspective. Elvira has been left broken hearted, but with the benefit of hindsight, can afford a little scepticism; whereas Anna is in the throws of her attack at the start of the opera, and, as such, must lie to her betrothed whom she does not love, in order to save her honour. The music is more successful in reflecting each woman's situation, rather than classifying the opera as a whole, and Sellars's focus on the female characters is justifiable.

---

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Kerman, 'Reading Don Giovanni', 113.

With Ariadne and Amina, Electra and Lucia, Western opera is littered with stereotyped hysterical women, who came into their own with the rise of the stage libertine. Such characters are marked out by extreme musical gestures, such as trills, and widely ranging melody lines. Of the three female characters, abandoned Donna Elvira comes closest to this operatic madwoman archetype, yet Mozart still allows Elvira to tell her story. Her melody leaps around, but implies a strong, rather than a crazy woman. This music is also reminiscent of the opening duel between Giovanni and the Commendatore.<sup>30</sup>

67

Clar. (in Si)  
Fag.  
Cor. (in Mi)  
V. I  
V. II  
Va.  
D.B.  
Vc. e B.

30

cresc. fp fp fp fp fp fp f

cresc. fp fp fp fp fp fp f

cresc. fp fp fp fp fp fp f

cresc. fp fp fp fp fp fp f

cresc. fp fp fp fp fp fp f

cresc. fp fp fp fp fp fp f

cor, vo' far - ne or-ren - do scempio, gli vo' ca-va - re il cor, gli vo' ca - va - re il

fp fp fp fp fp fp f f

Elvira's lyrics are violent, 'I'll kill him and cut out his heart' ('vo'farne orrendo scempio, gli vo' cavare il cor'), matched by an appropriate jagged melodic line. Giovanni writes her off as mad, but, as she is the only evidence of his past, he is unwise to dismiss her, as James Conlon says, 'Madness [...] reveals at least as much about the labeller as the labelled'.<sup>31</sup> Sellars reiterates Elvira's lonely status by casting her as a prostitute figure. He does not use her merely to glamorise the opera however, but this addition

<sup>30</sup> Bars 30–36 of Scene V, Number 3, 'Ah chi mi dice mai', in *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Serie II Bühnenwerke*, 67.

<sup>31</sup> James Conlon, 'The Place of Passion: Reflections on *Fatal Attraction*', in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 401–411 (408).

explains her difficulties with falling in love.

Catherine Clément alludes to musicologists such as Henri Barrault and Pierre Jean Jouve who blame the women surrounding Giovanni for his treatment of them.<sup>32</sup> Peter Sellars rewrites such characterisation, albeit by honouring their musical strength as created by Mozart. More often than not, women are badly treated in operas, but are profoundly strong in Mozart's works. Unmediated passion is typically associated with the weak-willed operatic woman and places her beyond social reasoning. Conversely then, Don Giovanni is feminised by his desires and hysterical actions. Conlon believes that passion is always opposite to action.<sup>33</sup> *Don Giovanni* subverts the gender stereotype, because female characters choose to *act*, propelled by their personal antipathy, in order to bring about Giovanni's demise. It is the women's stories that provide Giovanni with his biography of seduction.

Sellars adopts Mozart's regard for women in his staging, but heightens the camaraderie of the sisterhood, because of his personal outlook on the feminist movement, 'two of the things that are so liberating right now are that women are artists, and we know their names'.<sup>34</sup> However, his attempts to cross opera and film boundaries in 1990 by emphasising female characters in the *Don Giovanni* story may have exacerbated a poor reception of the production so soon after what Susan Faludi labels the 'scarlet-letter year' of 1987 for the backlash against women's independence in cinema.<sup>35</sup> She bases her judgement on an American society reflected in the four top-grossing films of the year, in which women are either voiceless (*Three Men and a Baby* and *Beverly Hills Cop II*) or in which they are punished (*The Untouchables* and *Fatal Attraction*). In any case, a certain balance is restored in this filmed opera because the growth in strength of the female trio during Sellars's first act is directly proportional to the male protagonist's demise.

---

<sup>32</sup> Catherine Clément, *Opera or the Undoing of Women*, 32–38.

<sup>33</sup> Conlon, 'The Place of Passion: Reflections on *Fatal Attraction*', 407.

<sup>34</sup> 'The Question of God. Other Voices, Peter Sellars',

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/voices/sellars.html> [accessed 3 November 2009].

<sup>35</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 116.

### III.3 The ‘Champagne Aria’

Peter Sellars’s Don Giovanni loots the beverages for his party in the Act One Finale, espousing the idea that he is a desperate criminal, rather than a popular womaniser. In contrast to the women, and indeed all main characters in Mozart’s other operas who tell their own stories and gain a historical dimension, Giovanni has no self-reflective aria, and gets less than eighty seconds to himself in the ‘Champagne Aria’. Mozart’s music is aggressive, with dynamics and recurring sforzandi, which do not sit well with the textbook reading of Giovanni as a jovial charmer. There is an incessant tonic-dominant alternation in B flat major, which is accepted as the metaphor for sexual intercourse and aggression by the feminist musicology.<sup>36</sup> According to Joseph Kerman, the frequent accents indicate that, ‘This unmotivated anger (unmotivated by the dramatic action) is anger associated with, about, at, or in sex’.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Susan McClary discusses the masculine cadential control that results in tonal music’s tendency toward V–I harmonies in *Feminine Endings*, 157.

<sup>37</sup> Kerman, ‘Reading Don Giovanni’, 119.

80 *fmo*

Fl. *p* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

Ob. *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

Clar. (in Sib) *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

Fag. *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

Cor. (in Sib alto) *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

V.I. *p* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

V.II. *p* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

Va. *p* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

D.G. *p* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

Vc. e B. *p* *fp* *fp* *fp* *fp*

Ah la mia li - sta d' u - na de - ci - na de - vi aumen - tar. Se trovi in piaz - za qual - che ra - gaz - za,

---

80

Fl. *fp* *fp* *fp* *f* *fmo* *tr.*

Ob. *fp* *fp* *fp* *f*

Clar. (in Sib) *fp* *fp* *fp* *f*

Fag. *fp* *fp* *fp* *f*

Cor. (in Sib alto) *fp* *fp* *fp* *f*

V.I. *fp* *fp* *fp* *f* *p* *tr.*

V.II. *fp* *fp* *fp* *f* *p*

Va. *fp* *fp* *fp* *f* *p*

D.G. *fp* *fp* *fp* *f* *tr.* *p*

Vc. e B. *fp* *fp* *fp* *f* *p*

te - co an - cor quel - la cer - ca me - nar. Ah la mia li - sta do - man mat - ti - na



101  
1mo

Fl.  
Ob.  
Clar.  
(in Sib)  
Fag.  
Cor.  
(in Sib  
alto)

V. I  
V. II  
Va.  
D. G.  
Ve. e B.

du - na de - ci - na de - viau-men-tar. Sen-zaal-cun or-dine la dan-za si - a, chil mi-nu-et - to,

III

Fl.  
Ob.  
Clar.  
(in Sib)  
Fag.  
Cor.  
(in Sib  
alto)

V. I  
V. II  
Va.  
D. G.  
Ve. e B.

chi la fol - li - a, chi l'a-le-man-na fa - rai bal - lar. Ah la mia li - sta

Kerman acknowledges that the aria is a violent moment, where, when listening to the music speeded up, one can practically hear a character going out of control and ‘abruptly break down into explosions of uncontained fury’.<sup>38</sup> Sellars makes this visually obvious as Giovanni smashes champagne bottles before injecting drugs, so that we see him losing control. The idea that Giovanni is a social menace rather than an acceptable

<sup>38</sup> Kerman, ‘Reading Don Giovanni’, 119.

tyrant has only been considered within the past twenty years in operatic adaptations. However, Sellars is the first director to have staged this scene in a way that changes the interpretation of Giovanni and accurately matches the musical semiotics. Regardless of the onstage drug-use, theft, and violence, representation of the dark and sinister element to the character of Don Giovanni achieved controversy in 1990.

### **III.4 Punishing the Individual in the Act One Finale**

Don Ottavio, Donna Anna, and Donna Elvira are central in the first finale, and their dancing is appropriate for gang culture. It is stylised, tribal, and dramatic, with violent gestures and unison finger clicks. Masetto dances his own dance, whirling around in anger and frustration as dictated by the changing musical dynamics. Mozart combines three separate orchestras to represent the differing classes of reveller in attendance at Don Giovanni's democratic ball. Apart from Zerlina's engagement with the middle-class 'Contre-Dance', with which she transcends her background through an involvement with Giovanni, the other characters conform to 'their' music, so that Masetto dances to the lower-class 'Deutsche Tanz', and Don Ottavio and Donna Anna dance to an aristocratic ballroom minuet. Leporello is not seen dancing, and Donna Elvira joins Ottavio and Anna, but Sellars otherwise endorses Mozart's idea.

The Giovanni and Leporello casting explains why Donna Elvira so easily mistakes their identities in the second half, but it is in this first finale that their double-act is fully employed. Leporello leads the 'viva la liberta' section, after Giovanni has stripped down to his pants, presumably to show his own liberty, but also emphasising his animalistic nature without the civilising effect of trousers. The 'freedom' espoused in this scene is that of pleasure which, for Giovanni, is wine and women. The other guests are oblivious to his actions, so Giovanni is allowed to become excessively predatory and threatening as he pelvic thrusts around Zerlina. The humour in seeing Giovanni dancing in his underwear effectively merges the comic style, which da Ponte wanted to emphasise in this scene, with the serious attack that Mozart wanted to depict. It is also in the manner of the Italian Commedia dell'arte, popular in the eighteenth century, where performances were concerned with adultery, jealousy and love, 'with borrowings from Plautus and

Terence'.<sup>39</sup> The typical Italian theatrical technique of using slapstick to satirise is particularly relevant to Don Giovanni and his Zerlina project, as typically 'shameless young people attempt to get their wills through a series of outlandish maskings and tricks'.<sup>40</sup> Mozart writes a scream for Zerlina in order to suggest potential sexual violence, at which stage the music quickly turns minor and agitated. The scene switches from an awkward party with popular eighteenth-century courtroom music to the enactment of off-stage rape.

Sellers creates a metaphor from the reference to doors in the libretto (which he does not translate in the subtitles) to represent the action that is occurring behind the scenes as Zerlina is attacked by Giovanni. Donna Elvira, Donna Anna and Don Ottavio attempt to break down the metal door at the back of the stage to rescue Zerlina, whilst Giovanni tries to break down her virginity. His exploit has been noted and remains unsuccessful, so Giovanni penetrates the door himself, appearing with a gun pointed at Leporello. Don Ottavio pulls his own metaphorical weapon to oppose him, before disarming Giovanni, who loses all power at this separation. Sellers creates a sexually suggestive scene where the characters gain strength by wielding their 'male' weapons at Giovanni. Giovanni is now a failed seducer signified by the loss of his gun. Donna Anna and Donna Elvira come down to his level, pointing guns at Giovanni, to speak the language of violence made familiar from their own mistreatment by him. Zerlina conspicuously has no weapon, as the only woman yet to be conquered by Giovanni. However it is she who takes control of the group and becomes the most powerful presence on screen amongst his enemies, indicating further disregard for any class differences. Donna Anna never cowers to Giovanni during her vicious attack at the opening, just as Zerlina stands up to him in this instance and leads the characters pursuing revenge.

Although the music remains optimistic, Don Giovanni is left at the close of the act as a pathetic lonely figure lying in his underwear, and is eventually deserted even by Leporello. In most stagings, Don Giovanni escapes the crowd, which explains why the

---

<sup>39</sup> Winifred Smith, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Study of Italian Popular Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), 1–20.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–20.

second act is a prolongation of the first. However, the action is strangely inverted in Sellars's production, which confirms his disregard for the idea that a responsible *individual* is called to account. Having the characters leave Don Giovanni, rather than punish him once captured, emphasises that he completes a society where no-one is in the position to condemn another. Sellars explains the dubious link between da Ponte's first and second acts by calling on the sixteenth-century counter-Reformation idea where divine intervention is the only thing that can prevent evil. The cover of the DVD shows a still frame of Giovanni as a weak, pilloried individual. This gives the audience some indication of the incarnation of Don Giovanni to be expected in the production.<sup>41</sup> Fires appear at the end of Act One, which return in the Second Act Finale, as an extension of the first half, within which Giovanni's inevitable descent begins.

### **III.5 Deus Ex Machina: The Cemetery Scene and Banquet**

Mozart shared an in-joke with his audience in the second finale by using themes from three popular Vienna operas of the day, including a quote from his own *Le Nozze de Figaro* (*Marriage of Figaro*). Sellars too creates a comic image as hoodlums Giovanni and Leporello listen to Mozart's music from an onstage beat-box. The opera demands a visual soundtrack here, with Giovanni requesting 'Let's have some music' ('Voi suonate, amici cari'). Sellars does not alter the 'harmonie' wind band, which would have been the usual festival accompaniment for Mozart's contemporary audience, but marries it with a stereo. It makes for a ridiculous coupling, but then Sellars's production is idealistic and he injects his own humour as Mozart permits, whilst emphasising the senseless world of contradictions that Giovanni inhabits. The abnormal picture is made complete by Giovanni's feasting on McDonalds, whilst remaining faithful to da Ponte by referring to milkshake as 'wine', and having chicken nuggets become 'pheasant'. By including a fast-food dinner, Sellars iterates that his is a modern version of *Don Giovanni*, along the lines

---

<sup>41</sup> This depiction is unlike that on the DVD cover for the Salzburg Marionette Theatre adaptation (ZDF DVD, ASIN B00009OTEC, 2003), which shows Giovanni at his banquet; or that for James Conlon's Opera Cologne version (1991: ArtHaus Music DVD, B00004TYYP, 2000), which presents Giovanni as host at the party.

of directors who have updated Shakespeare: Baz Luhrmann for example maintained traditional language in his *Romeo and Juliet* (1996), but 'Longsword' became the brand name for a gun. In this instance, we can laugh at the skewed perspective Giovanni has on his success and lifestyle. However, by underlining the deluded fantasist, Sellars provides an apt and ominous link into the Cemetery Scene.

As the opera takes a turn for the ethereal with the return of the dead Commendatore, we are brought down to earth with a jolt, as what follows Mozart's in-jokes rank amongst the darkest music he ever wrote, with deep trombones and monotonic singing lines. Mozart had always been unique with his compositions, and created his ideal orchestra in 1782 by combining early symphonic forces with flutes, clarinets, bassoons, trumpets and timpani. Despite sounding unusual in Classical orchestration, trombones had been indicative of celestial powers since the Renaissance, and had featured in the finale of Gluck's ballet. Mozart does not exploit the opera in order to experiment with his own instrumentation, but has an appropriate use of brass here, for the first time in the opera, to suggest associations with the underworld. The trombones anticipate nineteenth-century Romanticism, which is suitable considering they appear in a scene that embraces the Romantic obsession with the depths of the human soul.

The Commendatore emerges from below the ground at the back of the stage, only ascending so far as to make us privy to his green face. It is customarily the statue of the Commendatore that returns. Mozart and da Ponte left an imprecise timescale of events in the opera. Sellars may present his own opinion by indicating a bust so old as to have become weathered and covered in moss. Then again, as we only see a head and shoulders, it is more likely that the 'statue' has come from a murky underworld, which supports this idea that Giovanni is not the only wrongdoer in society. The Commendatore does not comply with the celestial presence most commonly expected and Peter Sellars departs from Mozart, whose bass monophonic singing implies a holy liturgy recitation, like the character of Christ in Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. However, the camera pans upwards to show a hanging crucifix, aligned with a coffin above the head of Don Giovanni, which emphasises the idea of a final judgement coming from God.

In Tirso de Molina's play and the ballet by Gluck, Don Giovanni's (or Don Juan's) ultimate demise comes not during the banquet to which the Commendatore is

invited, but when *he* is a guest in the Commendatore's cemetery. Don Giovanni does not have his own property in Sellars's version, and his dining room is a pavement. Thus, in dispensing with stage directions, Sellars picks up on the representations of earlier stories. The hanging cross may indicate that we are in a necropolis outside a church, with the Commendatore's grassy appearance indicating a zombie rising up from the grave. Then again, the crucifix has been a recurring motif throughout the film: images of a 'Faith Church' are shown during the overture; and Donna Elvira's punk image is completed by her single cross earring, so the appearance does not necessarily imply an ultimate reckoning in this instance. Plus the crucifix hanging overhead is in evidence whenever the camera pans out to film the stage in long-shot (such as during Zerlina's engagement party), and appears often enough for the cinema audience to presume its presence is a constant on stage. It seems that Sellars uses the whole opera to reflect his personal belief in musical performance and faith going hand in hand, 'since art needs to touch the transcendent to be meaningful'.<sup>42</sup>

This scene is ideal for epitomising Sellars's view of art as providing a bridge between the human and the divine. The Commendatore sings to Don Giovanni, but remains inanimate at the back of the stage, whilst Sellars introduces a small blonde girl to physically bring Giovanni down to his knees. The appearance of a celestial child continues the idea of Christianity and its irrevocable judgment of sinners, 'Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it'.<sup>43</sup> However, by the time the silent girl has literally brought Don Giovanni down to the level of a child, there is no hope of him entering heaven, because of his refusal to repent. Giovanni's defiance indicates powerlessness rather than bravery as he remains transfixed by this unsexed human. In any case, the child is a personification of innocence, perhaps representing Donna Anna, or all of the women mistreated by Don Giovanni. Leporello describes Giovanni's mocking of 'young girls' in the 'Catalogue Aria', so it is fitting that he is brought to reckoning by a female child, in the name of her self-preservation and to

---

<sup>42</sup> 'The Question of God. Other Voices, Peter Sellars'.

<sup>43</sup> Mark 10:14.

undermine the idea that 'Heaven favours the patriarch'.<sup>44</sup> This sentiment has already been disputed by Sellars's characterisation of the female trio. The director reminds us of the finale in the first act when Giovanni again strips to his underwear. This association may not have been Sellars's original intent because in his earlier stage version of the opera, Giovanni became completely naked at this point, which may have been inappropriate for a video recording, 'the conclusion was much more shocking on stage than in the video when the Don strips to follow the little girl to hell'.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless it is a relevant link, as his demise started in the first act, and Mozart and da Ponte refer to the opening with a dramatic parallel of the scene with Don Giovanni and the Commendatore. In any case, Giovanni's appearance does not have the same liberating affect this time, but rather implies that he can not hide behind earthly clothes. He also becomes distinguishable from Leporello once and for all. For Peter Sellars, hell is down a manhole, where we see naked spirits calling Giovanni, who presumably also has to be undressed in order to join them.

On the other hand, this image of the young girl forces us to reread the whole scene, and clarifies the dubious role of the Commendatore. Her presence switches us from a Christian hell to the Greek underworld. The 'statue' of the Commendatore becomes King Pluto, who seized his wife Persephone without her parents' permission, in a dramatic parallel of the situation with Don Giovanni and Donna Anna. The blonde girl is Persephone, leading Giovanni off to her husband's world, where she is imprisoned for half of the year. This has implications for the entire opera. What seemed like an unsettling and empathetic snowy climate as established in the overture, becomes a clear signal of winter, the season in which Persephone resides in Hades. Greek theatre has pervaded the director's work, 'Sellars sees theatre in the tradition of the Greeks'.<sup>46</sup> After his Mozart trio, he took on the Aeschylus tragedy *The Persians* (1993) to provide a commentary on the Persian Gulf War. He also reworked Euripides's *Children of Herakles* (2003) with refugees in order to show the plight of the displaced in war-torn lands. With Sellars's staging it is also easy to pick up the Oedipus complex in Mozart at

---

<sup>44</sup> Lipking, 'Donna Abbandonata', 46.

<sup>45</sup> Lupp, 'At last, Peter Sellars' *Don Giovanni*'.

<sup>46</sup> 'Peter Sellars', [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_70160437/Peter\\_Sellars.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_70160437/Peter_Sellars.html) [accessed 24th March 2007].

this point, as noted in Peter Gay's argument, that the Commendatore represents Leopold Mozart, who dominated Wolfgang from an early age and died while *Don Giovanni* was being written, 'Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was Leopold Mozart's obedient son [...] Nevertheless, fairly early it must have become obvious to both that the son was the father's superior'.<sup>47</sup> However, the strength of the women characters emphasised throughout undermines this idea, 'women's new autonomy smashed the Oedipal paradigm'.<sup>48</sup>

### III.6 Punishing Society in the Act Two Finale

Leporello is isolated in the final sextet. As the music returns to a major tonality, the remaining five characters spring up from the place beneath the stage that Giovanni has fallen into. As such, they are situated half below and half above ground level; dressed in exactly the same shapeless white clothes; and moving together. Andrew Porter describes Sellars's remarkable methods and affirms this choreography as being typical of the director, whose signatory style ranges between, 'naturalism, gestures of the Oriental theatre, and then, especially in ensembles, suddenly formal patterning of the musical and emotional structure'.<sup>49</sup> However, Sellars has not replaced the message of the opera with his own interest. Indeed, Don Shewey believes that the remaining characters' uniformity shows that, although Giovanni has gone, they are still in their own purgatory, as he is not the only one to have led an imperfect life.<sup>50</sup> That their fate as sinners is yet to be decided seems a plausible explanation, considering Sellars's bid to have implicated all of the characters in pursuing corrupt lives throughout the opera. They even join hands in prayer at the end, as if invoking their own divine intervention, after learning the fate of their

---

<sup>47</sup> Peter Gay, 'The Father's Revenge', in *The Don Giovanni Book: Myths of Seduction and Betrayal*, 70–80 (72).

<sup>48</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'Tradition and the Female Talent', in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 183–207 (187).

<sup>49</sup> Porter, 'Mozart on the Modern Stage', 137.

<sup>50</sup> Dan Shewey, 'Awake and Sing: Peter Sellars' Mozart Operas at Pepsico Summerfare', [http://www.donshewey.com/theater\\_reviews/mozart\\_operas.html](http://www.donshewey.com/theater_reviews/mozart_operas.html) [accessed 3 November 2009].



scapegoat Don Giovanni. Sellars merges scenes of the outside world from the overture with the stage set at the opera's close, indicating that life will continue in much the same way with or without Giovanni. If any character comes out as triumphant it is Leporello, whose face provides the final image over the picture of a burning fire. Then again, of course, it is an identical face to that of Giovanni, whose own appearance surrounded by fire at the end of the first act was indicative of his smouldering downfall from that point onwards.

Sellars's decision to involve a chorus in the staging of the final scene relies on his knowledge of Greek theatre but he is aided by the libretto. Despite the updated subtitles, Sellars has remained fairly true to Mozart, but some forty bars are omitted from the finale, and transitional music has been recomposed. Had Sellars left the sextet in its original form, there would be no confusion as to where he draws his ideas from at this stage. There is a direct reference to the Greek world amongst the deleted lines. Zerlina, Masetto, and Leporello sing, 'Resti dunque quel birbon con Proserpina e Pluto' in a clear homophonic delivery. Rather than self-interest by Sellars therefore, the idea of the Greek tragedy is inherent to the *Don Giovanni* libretto and supported by other critics. Andràs Batta refers to the God of love and sexual desire that links Don Giovanni with the Greek tradition, 'The god Eros rules his subjects'.<sup>51</sup> With the additional girl character and final uniform chorus, Sellars underlines the parallel with Greek tragedy and compensates for his editing of the libretto.

It seems that the main purpose of cutting the music here is to prevent information about the individuals' own plans of action being relayed, so that we continue to see and hear the pentad as a single performing body. Sellars dispenses with Don Ottavio and Donna Anna's duet; Donna Elvira's intention to join a convent; as well as Zerlina's and Masetto's proclamation of marriage; and Leporello's declaration to find a new master. In so doing, he affirms the idea of the chorus in a Greek tragedy, which are often used to comment on a plot of which they play no part. He also enforces his personal disinterest in the state of the individual and psychoanalysis: 'one of the hardest things to deal with about the twentieth-century—and I'm very relieved that it's finished—is that it was so

---

<sup>51</sup> Andràs Batta, *Opera: Composers Works Performers* (Budapest: Köneman, 2005), 376.

absorbed in psychology and the self'.<sup>52</sup> This explains why his *Don Giovanni* is more concerned with the Leporello partnership, rather than with the psyche of Giovanni, and adds credence to Shewey's idea that all characters are equal. Indeed a concept of shared community is what primarily draws the theatre director Sellars to this musical genre: 'That's what's so liberating about opera, because nobody can do it alone'.<sup>53</sup>

However, deleting the status of the individual by having all characters bound for hell is rather crude. After all, there is nothing in the opera that shows the characters as anything other than victims of Don Giovanni. Giovanni's exaggerated eroticism mocks love and he continues to overshadow their destinies, so that the characters are left with their own spiritual burdens after his demise. When Giovanni is at their mercy at the end of the first act, they demonstrate answerability to their own consciences for wrongdoings. He is allowed to escape because none of them is in a position to cast the first stone. Don Giovanni is manipulative and dishonest, in need of punishment either for his sexual violence, abuse to women, bullying Leporello, or patricide. That Sellars is not concerned with individual repentance and mortality but with the debts of a society of which all are part, provides an interesting take, but does not necessarily fit with the original message of Mozart and da Ponte.

## IV Epilogue

The world of Harlem street-crime as presented by Sellars is incredibly complex. Yet taking an opera out of its context can oversimplify and dehumanise its characters. To critique Peter Sellars's film in isolation does little justice to the director's style, nor does it enhance the opera *Don Giovanni* for the reader. My analysis examines the full operatic work in the context of Sellars's staging in order to underline the complexity of human emotion and interaction that is implicit in Mozart's score. I have aimed to show, to borrow the words of Andrew Porter, that Sellars's 'stagings seem to me to embody the

---

<sup>52</sup> 'The Question of God. Other Voices, Peter Sellars'.

<sup>53</sup> 'The Question of God. Other Voices, Peter Sellars'.

most passionately vivid responses to the operas that I have ever encountered'.<sup>54</sup> Don Juan's legend has been altered since its original conception. The opera demands reinvention because it is ambiguous even in its original form, where the music is sometimes at odds with the libretto. Beneath the superficial modernity of Sellars's interpretation lies a faithful awareness of the earliest version of the music—one that shares its outlook with Mozart, observes the earliest form of theatre, and adheres to the conventional practice of Greek drama. Sellars also presents an accurate reflection of his own time through the issues in the Don Juan story, especially regarding the treatment of women. Opera allows women a voice in their arias, so that they are active, as demanded by the music, rather than passive and hushed, as can be the case in mainstream film productions.<sup>55</sup> A film interpretation of an opera inhabits something of a nomadic land. The familiarity of *Don Giovanni* with opera-goers, many of whom are puritanical in the view of opera, stood as an obstacle to Peter Sellars's innovative staging, which was resisted in equal measure by the popular American film market of 1990. However, the decision taken by the Metropolitan Opera, New York in 2007 to broadcast their matinees live in cinemas across the world suggests this is now an acceptable practice, and the Royal Opera, Glyndebourne, and La Scala quickly followed suit. Sellars's *Don Giovanni*, therefore, no longer qualifies as a radical version by virtue of being an opera on film.

Nevertheless, the experience of a filmed opera is different to that of a staged event. By not sharing the live space with the audience, characters are distant and easier to analyse as themes, whilst the camera instructs us where to look. Sellars's focus makes the audience rethink the enduring issues in *Don Giovanni*. Mozart and da Ponte's vagueness seems to endorse continuous reinterpretation through their unconcern for the one correct *Don Giovanni*, and the opera lends itself to various settings and renditions. Indeed themes contributing to Sellars's superficial sensationalism have been taken up in other

---

<sup>54</sup> Porter, 'Mozart on the Modern Stage', 135.

<sup>55</sup> Indeed Faludi's 'scarlet-letter year' for the independence of women in cinema was not unique to 1987. Westerns and war films centred on the white male hero and set in lands without women proved popular in the 1950s following their liberation in the workplace. The media also controlled 1970s feminism with shows such as *Wonderwoman* and *Charlie's Angels*, which defined female characters in terms of their sexuality.

interpretations. For instance, the Kneehigh Theatre production *Don John* (2008) tells the story from the women's perspective, silences the protagonist, and afflicts him with a hopeless drug addiction. The accompanying programme says less about the company than it does about their sponsored 'Young Mothers Project', as the main premise was to 'reclaim the story for the female characters'.<sup>56</sup> Artistic director Emma Rice also resorts to Sellars's original Catalogue Aria staging, by projecting pictures of Giovanni's 'mille e tre' on the back wall.

Sellars's filmed *Don Giovanni* is a serious interpretation that is not completely devoid of comic moments. As such, it heeds Mozart's music, but acknowledges the composer and librettist's conflict. Rather than creating a forum for discussion however, Sellars's opera raises and considers contemporary social problems, but 'like it or leave it, he responds to Mozart's operas as intensely as any director of our day'.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Emma Rice, 'Stories Are Sneaky Minxes' in Kneehigh Theatre *Don John* programme.

<sup>57</sup> Porter, 'Mozart on the Modern Stage', 137.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.  
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.  
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.