

Don Giovanni

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart • Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte

Study Guide to the Opera

Don Giovanni production photo by Cory Weaver, Lyric Opera of Kansas City



Mozart Re-imagines the Don Juan Legend

by Jill Leahy

Following the wildly successful production of *Le nozze di Figaro* in 1786 in Vienna, Mozart was asked to compose an opera for Prague. Some scholars think he was asked to expand on the one-act opera, *Don Giovanni Tenorio, or The Stone Guest*, originally composed by Giuseppe Gazzaniga with a libretto by Giovanni Bertati. Mozart turned once again to Lorenzo da Ponte to collaborate on this commission, and together they agreed on creating a production that incorporated both humor and drama in the story. Most accounts concur that da Ponte improved Bertati's libretto and drew on other plays, most probably Molière's *Dom Juan*. About half the libretto, between the Act 1 quartet and the graveyard scene, is from the original work by Giovanni Bertati.

There are many stories describing what was happening in Mozart's life at the time he was composing this opera, but most assert that he worked on the Overture right up to the night before its first performance. Written as a *dramma giocoso* in two acts, *Don Giovanni* premiered at the Prague Italian opera at the Teatro di Praga on October 29, 1787 and was conducted by Mozart himself. First performed under its full title, *Il Dissoluto Punito ossia il Don Giovanni Dramma giocoso* (Translation: *The Rake Punished, or Don Juan*), it is now generally known as *Don Giovanni*. And, according to one author (Henry Simon), Gioacchino Rossini, Charles Gounod, and Richard Wagner all considered *Don Giovanni* to be the greatest opera ever written.

The legend of Don Juan has been told in plays, ballets, operas, literature (with a famous poem by Lord Byron), and even a musical tone poem by the German composer Richard Strauss. But today, Operabase lists Mozart's *Don Giovanni* as the 9th most popular opera in the world based on frequency of performances worldwide.

<http://operabase.com/top.cgi?lang=en&>

Don Giovanni Synopsis

Setting: America, 1950s

ACT I. At night, in the street outside the Commendatore's house, Leporello bemoans his fate working for the dissolute Don Giovanni ("**Notte e giorno faticar**"). Suddenly Giovanni runs into the street pursued by Donna Anna, the Commendatore's daughter, who accuses him of trying to attack her. The Commendatore rushes to his daughter's aid and is killed by Giovanni. Anna asks her fiancé, Don Ottavio, to avenge her father's death ("**Ma qual mai s'offre, o dei**").

At a café the next morning, Giovanni and Leporello encounter one of Giovanni's former conquests, Donna Elvira, who is still angry at Giovanni's betrayal. Leporello tries to discourage her from pursuing Giovanni by showing her his catalogue with the name of every woman Giovanni has seduced ("**Madamina, il catalogo è questo**").

Meanwhile, Masetto and Zerlina celebrate their upcoming wedding with friends. Don Giovanni asks Leporello to get rid of the groom. Alone with Zerlina, Giovanni persuades her to come away with him ("**Là ci darem la mano**"). Before they can leave, Elvira interrupts them and leads Zerlina away. Momentarily thwarted, Giovanni greets the mourning Anna and Ottavio, only to be embarrassed by the persistent Elvira, who denounces him as a seducer ("**Non ti fidar, o misera**"). Trying to dismiss her as a madwoman, he ushers Elvira off. Anna, in horror, recognizes him as her father's murderer and calls on Ottavio to avenge her honor.

Later that afternoon, Giovanni looks forward to an evening of partying he has arranged in Zerlina's honor ("**Finch'han dal vino**"). Zerlina begs the furious Masetto to forgive her ("**Presto, presto, pria ch'ei venga**"). Anna, Ottavio, and Elvira arrive in disguise, swearing vengeance, and Giovanni tells Leporello to invite them in ("**Venite pur avanti**"). Inside Giovanni's nightclub, Leporello distracts Masetto while Giovanni dances with Zerlina, trying to drag her into an adjoining room. When Zerlina cries for help, Anna, Elvira ("**Ecco il birbo che t'ha offesa**"), and Ottavio unmask and confront Giovanni, who escapes.

Intermission

ACT II. ("**Sola, sola, in buio loco**") Under Elvira's balcony, Leporello exchanges clothes with Giovanni to woo the lady in his master's stead. Leporello and Elvira go off, leaving Giovanni free to serenade Elvira's maid. When Masetto arrives with his friends to punish Giovanni, the disguised Don tricks Masetto and beats him up. Zerlina tenderly consoles him.

Elvira follows the disguised Leporello into a dimly lit church. Leporello tries to escape, but is discovered by Anna, Ottavio, Zerlina, and Masetto ("**Mille torbidi pensieri**"). Mistaking servant for master, they join in denouncing the supposed Don. Frightened, Leporello reveals his identity and manages to escape. Ottavio asks Zerlina and Masetto to comfort the distraught Anna and go to the authorities for help. Left alone, Elvira thinks about her love for Giovanni in spite of everything.

Leporello finds Giovanni in a cemetery, where a statue of the slain Commendatore warns Giovanni of his doom. The Don forces the terrified Leporello to invite the statue to dinner only to be surprised by the Commendatore himself ("**O statua gentilissima**").

Ottavio urges Anna to stop grieving and accept his love. She implores him to wait until her father is avenged. Late that night in the empty club, Giovanni orders Leporello to serve supper ("**Già la mensa è preparata**"). Elvira arrives and attempts to persuade Giovanni to reform his ways ("**L'ultima prova dell'amor mio**"), but he sends her away.

In a final confrontation with the Commendatore, Giovanni is finally forced to pay for his crimes ("**Don Giovanni, a cenar teco**").



Don Juan and the statue of the Commander, Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard, circa 1830-1835.

Characters

Don Giovanni

[dohn joh-VAH-nee] *bass-baritone*
A young nightclub owner and great seducer of women, he kills the angry Commendatore after seducing his daughter, Donna Anna.

Leporello

[leh-poh-REHL-loh] *bass*
Don Giovanni's uphappy servant, who must keep watch during the Don's conquests. Leporello warns Donna Elvira of Giovanni's sketchy ways.

Donna Anna

[DOH-nah AH-nah] *soprano*
The Commendatore's daughter, who seeks revenge for her father's murder.

Donna Elvira

[DOH-nah ell-VEE-rah] *soprano*
A young woman, previously seduced by Don Giovanni, only to be abandoned by him three days later.

Don Ottavio

[dohn oh-TAH-vee-oh] *tenor*
Adoring fiancé of Donna Anna, he seeks to avenge the Commendatore's murder.

Zerlina

[tser-LEE-nah] *soprano*
Betrothed to Masetto. Don Giovanni tries to seduce her before her wedding.

Commendatore

[koh-mehn-dah-TOR-eh] *bass*
Father of Donna Anna who fights Don Giovanni out of anger for seducing his daughter. Don Giovanni kills him.

Masetto

[mah-ZEH-toh] *bass*
Betrothed to Zerlina.

FILM NOIR

Stylish 1940s and 1950s Hollywood crime dramas known for their black-and-white visual style, cynical attitudes, and sexual motivations.

A Prolific Composer

by Jill Leahy

Born on January 27, 1756 in Salzburg, Austria, his full given names were Johannes Chrysostomos Wolfgang Theophilus. Today, most call him Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, with Amadeus being the Latin version of the Greek Theophilus.

His life story is told often, and with each telling facts and fiction are intertwined. [See *Amadeus*, a 1984 period drama film directed by Miloš Forman and written by Peter Shaffer.] Nevertheless, he remains one of the most well-known and beloved composers of classical music. There's no question he was a child prodigy with exceptional musical ability. His father, Leopold, ensured that he traveled to the major musical cities and venues where he could be introduced to many important people of his day, with the intention that Mozart would acquire wealthy patrons who would generously reward his talents.

Most Mozart biographers agree that he excelled in virtually every genre and type of musical composition. He composed more than 600 works and, during his final years in Vienna, he created many of his best-known operas, symphonies, and concertos. He probably would be considered a multi-tasker in today's jargon, because he often had several projects going at the same time. While he had success during his life, political circumstances (the Austro-Turkish war) affected the aristocracy's ability to pay musicians, forcing Mozart to travel outside Vienna for work. And even though his fortunes improved in 1791, his health unfortunately took a bad turn while he was anxiously trying to finish a commissioned work, the *Requiem Mass in D minor*. Mozart died at the age of 35 on December 5, 1791. The *Requiem* was later finished by his student Franz Xaver Süssmayr.



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756–1791)
Painting by Barbara Krafft

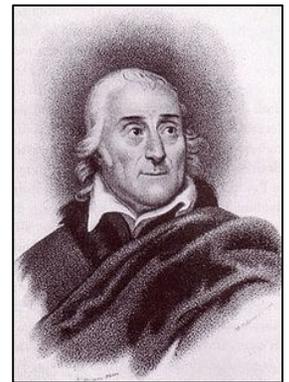
The Librettist of Venice

by Jill Leahy

What a storied life Lorenzo da Ponte led! Friends with Casanova, Salieri, Mozart. A priest, a poet, a philanderer, and the first professor of Italian Literature at Columbia College (now Columbia University).

In 1749, Emmanuele Conegliano was born in a Jewish ghetto near Venice. When he was 14, his widowed father remarried a Catholic, which required the family to convert. As was the custom, Emmanuele adopted the name of the Bishop who baptized him—Lorenzo da Ponte. As a young man, he discovered the beauty of poetry and books; he trained for the priesthood and for teaching. He was ordained, but soon found himself in trouble because of his liberal political views and his affairs with married women. For 15 years, he lived in exile in Venice. Eventually, he made his way to Vienna and met composers Antonio Salieri and Mozart, with whom he collaborated on *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), and *Così fan tutte* (1790).

After Mozart's death, Lorenzo da Ponte moved to Paris and then to London. There, he worked on operas with other composers, including Cimarosa. After declaring bankruptcy, da Ponte left London for America to elude creditors. In New York he opened a bookstore and gave Italian language and literature lessons to private students. In addition to his other writing, he left a legacy of 28 librettos written for 11 composers.



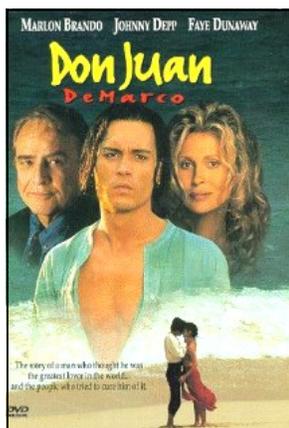
Lorenzo da Ponte (1749–1838)

Don Juan in Modern Times

by Jill Leahy



Don Juan (1926) is a Warner Brothers film. It was the first feature-length film with synchronized sound effects and musical soundtrack, with no spoken dialogue. Premiered in New York City on August 6, 1926, starring John Barrymore as the hand-kissing womanizer. It has the most kisses in film history, with Barrymore kissing 191 different women in the film.



Don Juan DeMarco is a 1995 American romantic comedy-drama film starring Johnny Depp as John Arnold DeMarco, a man who believes he's Don Juan, the greatest lover in the world. Wearing a cape and mask, he approaches and romances women until he gets into trouble with the police, who send him for psychiatric treatment with Marlon Brando's character, Dr. Jack Mickler, to cure him of his apparent delusion. During the psychiatric sessions, Don Juan DeMarco has an unexpectedly inspirational effect on the psychiatric staff. Even Dr. Mickler himself seems to fall under the spell of the legend and the doctor works to rekindle the romance in his stale marriage with Faye Dunaway.



Io, Don Giovanni is a 2009 movie based on the life of Italian librettist Lorenzo da Ponte, who collaborated with Mozart on *Don Giovanni*.

Did you know that . . .

Don Giovanni was widely sung in Germany as a *Singspiel* during Mozart's lifetime, becoming, after *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*), the Mozart opera most performed at that time.

Mozart was dissatisfied with the scream given by Zerlina when Don Giovanni was making improper advances to her in Act 1, Scene 6. So, during the rehearsal for the scene, Mozart sneaked up behind her and, at the right moment, gave her a hard pinch! Zerlina gave a more realistic scream and Mozart said he was finally satisfied.

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