

"In the Hands of Noblemen": Enlightenment Values and Collective Morality in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Classical music has always given me great comfort. From listening to my father's Beethoven tapes as a child to blasting the Bach cello suites while driving home from a busy day, I have long appreciated this music's sensory beauty. But it wasn't until taking Music 110: The Music of Mozart that I realized the social and political significance of classical music. Taking this class turned what I had previously thought to be a genre of pretty melodies and powerful dynamics into a genre of radical political statements and philosophical rebellions. Studying Mozart especially exposed me to the interconnectedness of intellectual history, art, and social change. So although the task of analyzing social class in opera would have puzzled me beforehand, this class allowed me to explore the complexity and controversy of Mozart's operas in ways I could have never imagined. Writing this paper opened my eyes to Mozart's and Da Ponte's genius in using a traditionally elitist art form to pose daring social commentary. I hope the following analysis will encourage more people to appreciate the classical music not just for its beauty but for its ideological power.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: This paper was written for my Mozart Honors Class. We spent several weeks discussing, analyzing and watching Mozart's and Lorenzo da Ponte's opera buffa: The Marriage of Figaro and Don Giovanni. Both operas were written on the eve of the French revolution and are full of allusions to questions of class differences. How do these appear in the opera? And how does Mozart represent them in the music? Lauren has succeeded in writ-

ing an original paper on this topic, discussing not only the obvious points, but pointing out how moral behavior is not necessarily linked to social class. Her close reading moves past the obvious points and she manages to observe in her discussion fine points of how this is reflected in the music..

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Many people know Mozart as a musical revolutionary; he changed forever the form, style, and narrative of Western music. Yet Mozart not only revolutionized Western music itself but also the purpose which it serves, transforming what had previously been either religious expression or mere entertainment into a medium through which he expressed forward-thinking social, political, and existential issues.

His work is very much a product of the political climate of his time; by the late eighteenth century, revolutionary ideas of reforming society had been circulating for years and the absolute power of the monarchy and aristocracy was being seriously called into question. In their comprehensive statement about social class that is *Don Giovanni*, Mozart and his librettist Lorenzo da Ponte criticize old-world social hierarchy and advocate for the enlightenment values of collective morality and egalitarianism. The structure of the text groups characters together by common problems rather than by social class, demonstrating that morality is not determined by status but by how one chooses to act when faced with ethical decisions. By drawing such similarities between characters of different classes, Mozart and Da Ponte not only expose the illegitimacy of the class system for placing one group of people over another but also demonstrate the importance of collective morality to living a just life.

Europe underwent intense ideological change in the 18th century. Progress in natural science and philosophy brought about by the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment completely transformed the basic principles on which European society operated. In pre-revolutionary Europe, royalty and the nobility possessed the majority of societal wealth and harbored immense power over a highly stratified society. These social distinctions were generally seen as arising from natural differences of talent and were also often enforced by legal codes or powerful institutions

(Black). But the philosophers of the Enlightenment challenged the proposition that birth and natural ability justify such an unequal balance of power between classes. Key Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Rousseau advocated for social and political structures that would benefit the majority of citizens, not just a select few. As these ideas spread into the educated classes, philosophical circles and secret societies began to arise in all major European cities and the ideas of the Enlightenment began to seep into art and literature.

As evident in their collaborative works, both Da Ponte and Mozart became involved with Enlightenment ideals. Da Ponte began his writing career by composing political satire criticizing the doctrines of the church (Stephoe). A member of the Freemasons, Mozart was heavily in contact with these ideals and immersed in a society attempting to function not on the rules of an institution but on the basis of common good, a principle known as collective mortality (Till 119). These egalitarian ideals form the base of the themes of *Don Giovanni* as the opera calls into question both the value of the aristocracy and the damaging moral effects that unearned power and wealth have on society as a whole.

The libretto of *Don Giovanni* was adapted from the Spanish folktale character Don Juan, a noble swindler whose immoral deeds eventually led to his demise. At the time of composition, such a story was seen as entertainment for the lower class; intellectuals thought tales like this beneath them and rationalist thinkers disregarded it for its elements of mysticism and hellfire damnation (Stephoe 115). Mozart's decision to adapt an opera from such a tale, as well as to premier the opera in the comparatively unsophisticated city of Prague, speaks to the anti-elitist, egalitarian nature of the work.

The central figure of the opera is, of course, Don Giovanni, a libertine of the nobility whose immoral behavior drives the plot. As a character, Giovanni represents the epitome of human greed and vice. He treats women as disposable toys he collects; he even keeps a list of his "beauties" from "every home, every village, every town" in Europe (Act 1, Scene 2, p. 18). Despite being the main character and namesake of the opera, he shows no development throughout the piece and gives no substantive insight or reflections as to his motivations or purpose. Da Ponte especially stresses the shallowness of his character by contrasting Don Giovanni's aria "Fin ch'han dal vino" with Don Ottavio's preceding aria "Dalla sua Pace" (K. 540A). In "Dalla sua Pace," Don Ottavio,

another local nobleman, reflects deeply on his love and devotion to his fiancée Donna Anna, confessing, “My peace depends on hers, that which pleases her is life to me.” (Act 1, Scene 3, p. 38). Mozart reflects this genuine feeling as well as the variation in Da Ponte’s words in the song structure of the aria, as the music transitions from an uplifting “A” section to a modulating, minor sounding “B” section and then back again to the resolve of A. The musical variation reflects the conflict of pain and joy that comes with the profound emotion Don Ottavio is feeling. This starkly contrasts the unvarying, shallow nature with which Da Ponte and Mozart construct Don Giovanni’s aria. Ordering that they throw a banquet party so he can seduce Zerlina, a local servant girl, Don Giovanni sings of his careless desire for wine and women. He demands of Leporello, “If you find some girl in the square, try to bring her with you too” and boasts that “tomorrow morning my list should be increased by half a score” (Act 1, Scene 4, pp. 43-44). Mozart mirrors Giovanni’s superficial desires for pleasure with the jovial and repetitive nature of the aria, the whole piece essentially revolving around the same rapid and resolving descending phrase rather than varying and modulating as in Don Ottavio’s aria. While this contrast does highlight the immoral and non-substantive nature of Don Giovanni, it is important to note that Don Ottavio is of the same social class as Don Giovanni. By contrasting two men of the same class, Mozart and Da Ponte make a point not only to separate morality from the nobility but to separate morality from being exclusive to any social class at all. Rather than endorse one class or another, the author and composer advocate that true, genuine feeling and human emotion contribute to a more real and moral life.

Da Ponte and Mozart also highlight how Don Giovanni’s immoral actions affect and influence every character in the opera. Da Ponte demonstrates this in his foiling of Don Giovanni and his servant, Leporello. Leporello exists throughout the entire opera as a shadow of Don Giovanni, a moral foil with the same self-interest but an elevated sense of caution. From the beginning, Leporello longs to be of Giovanni’s status, singing in the opening scene, “I want to be a gentleman, I don’t want to serve any longer” (Act 1, Scene 1, p. 3). Leporello is present when Giovanni kills the Commodore, providing the reflection we never hear from Don Giovanni. As Don Giovanni tries to seize Donna Anna, Leporello reflects, “What a racket! . . . What screams! I can see that the libertine will be my undoing” (Act 1, Scene 1, p.5). Although aware of

Don Giovanni's immorality, Leporello continues to serve him out of a selfish desire for status and approval. He easily falls into the "fun" of Giovanni's schemes and is even drawn to the Don by promises of money. In this sense, he is very much like Don Giovanni; both characters, to the extent to which their respective classes allow, let individualistic desires determine their decisions. Da Ponte highlights the similar nature of the two characters through mirroring both their plot lines and their dialogue. In the recitatif preceding "Fin ch'han dal vino," Leporello's dialogue mimics Don Giovanni's responses. As Leporello begins telling of his plan to help Giovanni seduce a peasant woman, the Don replies repeatedly with "Bravo!" (40); then, as Don Giovanni begins to complete the rest of the plan, Leporello replies with the same expression and with similar timing. In small exchanges such as this, Da Ponte mirrors the intentions and drives of the characters in order to demonstrate both the overarching influence of Don Giovanni's immorality and the ability of immorality to permeate all social classes. The two finally diverge in the ending scene, when Leporello shows fear and humility at the appearance of the statue while Don Giovanni refuses to repent and thus is ultimately brought to his demise. Through these respective resolutions, De Ponte shows the consequences of pride and hubris implanted in the nobility by the façade of their elevated status.

Don Giovanni's relationship with the other characters in the opera also demonstrate the effects of selfish misconduct upon the collective morality of society. Unlike Mozart's preceding opera *Le Nozze di Figaro*, in which characters of different classes work to achieve common goals, the characters in *Don Giovanni* remain separated in their desires. Rather than demonstrate a classless society through collective action as in *Figaro*, Da Ponte demonstrates unity between classes through their collective suffering all caused by Don Giovanni. Da Ponte demonstrates Donna Elvira, Donna Anna and Don Ottavio's similar goals by mirroring their dialogue. In one such instance, when the three aristocrats are entering Giovanni's party, they even pray together, Donna Anna and Don Ottavio asking the heavens to "protect the fervor of my heart" and Donna Elvira asking the heavens to "avenge my betrayed love" (Act 1, Scene 4, p. 50). Giovanni's immorality has affected them all and caused in them passionate desires for restoration of justice. For Zerlina and Masetto, the peasant couple with whom Giovanni meddles for the sake of his sexual interest in Zerlina, Giovanni's tricks cause disputes between the two and almost

ruin their engagement. His immorality even influences Zerlina, as she originally falls victim to the trap of his seduction, admitting while being seduced that “soon I’ll no longer resist” (Act 1, Scene 3, p. 27). She is then drawn into confession by her Masetto, convincing him she is innocent of the act even if she is guilty of intention. For her aria “Batti, batti, o bel Masetto,” Mozart again uses variation and modulation to demonstrate her inner conflict and regret regarding the immoral decisions Giovanni influenced her to make. Although merely a peasant, she has the conscience and morals to see her wrongdoing and apologize to the person she has hurt. Through Zerlina’s arc, Da Ponte juxtaposes morality in a lower class character with the lack thereof in Don Giovanni, again showing that morality is not exclusive to one class. The unity of characters of all classes over the crimes of Giovanni is especially evident in the ending scenes to both Act 1 and to the opera itself. In both instances, the victims sing in quintet—revealing at the end of Act 1 that “we already know everything” (Act 1, Scene 5, p. 60) of Giovanni’s crimes and concluding at the end of the opera that one’s end “[i]s always like their life” (121), as was the case for Don Giovanni. By grouping characters by their victimization by Giovanni, the opera also demonstrates how the immense immorality of Don Giovanni corrupts the rest of society, leading to a chaos that can only be fixed through Giovanni’s demise.

The incredible work that is *Don Giovanni* represents a changing order in European society in both the background of its development and in the characters and resolutions of the story itself. Through their art, Mozart and Da Ponte advocate for a more egalitarian and moral society, one in which character is not determined or assumed by social class but by the intention of one’s actions.

Works Cited

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