

## Classical Era: Opera

Three distinct genres:

1. Opera seria, continuing from the Baroque period used the same kind of (often literally the same!) librettos depicting historical or, less often, mythological events; arias continued to be in *da capo* form, now increasingly merged with sonata form; arias became much longer, so there were fewer; recitative continued to be both simple (*secco*) and accompanied; 3 acts; in Italian
2. Opera buffa, also continuing from the Baroque period, but more a product of the Classical than Opera seria; began as a type of “intermezzo” (an entertainment in between the acts of an Opera seria); characters were typically contemporary and often depicted the lower classes or a mixture of lower and upper classes (with the lower classes usually dominating in some way; frequently with a serving girl outwitting her master—class and gender being two important and continuing topics in Opera buffa); arias continued for some time to be in *da capo* form, but gradually changed into more through-composed forms under the influence of increased ensembles (or concerted movements for more than one singer: these were largely absent in Opera seria, except for a few duets); ensembles were used to close the acts and incorporated the crisis in the action, moving the plot forward; ultimately the distinction in Opera seria between the action of the recitative versus the aria as a pause in the action for the expression of deep emotion was completely (or just about completely) abandoned in favor of a dramatic structure in which all the music (recitative, aria and ensemble) carried the action forward; recitative typically *secco* only; 2 acts (growing out of the expansion of the intermezzo through the 2 intermissions of Opera seria); in Italian
3. Singspiel, a type of music drama that sprang up in various European countries by mid-century in competition with Opera buffa; used spoken dialogue combined with musical numbers (Ballad Opera in England; Opera Comique in France); in the vernacular (thus: Singspiel [a “singing play”] in German); absorbed and adapted the ensembles and forward trajectory of Opera buffa while still admitting musical numbers that stopped the flow of action for emotional exploration; Singspiel based on texts that depicted country life or magic; Ballad Opera began as political satire but increasingly turned to sentimental drama; Opera comique began depicting country life but became increasingly political (Revolutionary drama); this in turn had an impact on Singspiel; Beethoven’s one opera, *Fidelio*, is a Singspiel based on a French Revolutionary opera; typically 2 acts

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

A prodigy: first public performances on keyboard at the age of 6; early compositions for keyboard and orchestra date from around the same time (but heavily indebted to his father Leopold)

His earliest symphonies (definitely attributable) dating from before 1767 are in the “concerto” 3-movement form without minuet-trio; symphonies from 1768 (dating from his trip to Vienna) take on the four-movement form

Mozart began writing opera/music drama at the age of 11:

1767: *Apollo et Hyacinthus* (a Latin school drama)

1768: *La finta semplice* (opera buffa)

*Bastien und Bastienne* (Singspiel)

1770: *Mitridate* (opera seria) for Milan, placed him squarely in the international circuit

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With the following two works in 1781, Mozart reached the top of his profession

1781: *Idomeneo* (opera seria)

*Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (Singspiel)

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Trio of operas with librettos by Lorenzo Da Ponte represent a merging of the buffa and seria styles

1786: *Le nozze di Figaro*

1787: *Don Giovanni*

1790: *Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti*

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Last operas:

1791: *Die Zauberflöte* (Singspiel)

*La clemenza di Tito* (opera seria)

## **Don Giovanni**

“a dramatic testimony to powerful class and gender oppositions fuming in Enlightenment Europe”

Cast list: (note: Don=Sir and Donna=Lady)

Don Giovanni (an aristocrat who is a scoundrel)

Donna Anna (an aristocratic lady seduced by Don Giovanni)

Don Ottavio (an aristocrat who is Donna Anna’s fiance)

Donna Elvira (an aristocratic lady previously seduced by Don Giovanni)

Commendatore (Donna Anna’s father)

Leporello (Don Giovanni’s servant)

Zerlina (a peasant girl, betrothed to Masetto)

Masetto (a peasant)

As opposed to Baroque opera that depicts *emotion*; Mozart’s late operas depict *character*.

Dramatic action of movements discussed:

Leporello: “Notte e giorno faticar”

pacing back and forth; syllabic; no ornamentation; 8-bar phrase that extends rather than ends (depicting the waiting); accompaniment picks up when he expresses his wish to be a “gentleman”; use of “patter”

Donna Anna and Don Giovanni: “Non sperar, se non m’uccidi”

Don Giovanni running out of Donna Anna’s bedroom with Donna Anna struggling to determine his identity; she sings the first line; the stage direction says that “Don Giovanni tries to conceal his features”; musically, therefore, he mimics her line rather than taking on any musical characteristics of his own; this continues throughout the scene until Donna Anna’s exit; after Don Giovanni kills her father, he still continues with “her” music, even though it is now in minor—throughout the opera Don Giovanni is a musical chameleon

(Throughout this scene, Leporello mutters and comments from his hiding place)

Donna Elvira: “Ah, chi mi dice mai”

“out of bounds”; huge dynamic contrasts; rhythmic discontinuities; extended phrase structure; huge leaps; Elvira is often described as having “Baroque” music; depicting her as unstable

(throughout this scene Don Giovanni and Leporello comment on this “poor woman,” only realizing who she is at the very end, dissolving the aria into recitative)

Zerlina and Masetto: “Giovinette che fatte all’amore”

Like a peasant dance; sustained drone (supposedly like a bagpipe); 6/8 meter; Zerlina starts and Masetto follows with the same tune

Masetto: “Ho capito, signor sì” K 2:39

Sings alternately to Giovanni, to Leporello (who is trying to drag him away) and to Zerlina (whom he rebukes for being shameless by sarcastically referring to her as a “lady”) *See Kerman/Tomlinson*

Zerlina and Don Giovanni: “Là chi darem la mano” K 2:41

**Performed by Pamela Wood (Music faculty) soprano, Michael Ouellette (Theater faculty), baritone, Charles Shadle (Music faculty) piano**

Don Giovanni begins in a simple tune accompanied with simple chords in a clear 8-measure phrase; Zerlina responds by saying she is hesitant, but with his tune (indicating that he’s “calling the tune”); they then alternate phrases with Giovanni asking on the dominant (the chord that calls out for resolution to the tonic), which Zerlina avoids giving; then their phrases overlap, bringing them closer and closer; note the difference in Zerlina’s repetition of “presto non son più forte” (“already I’m not strong enough”) where the ending of the phrase droops rather than rises, indicating further weakening; finally she consents and they reach the tonic together in a little dance in 6/8 with drone. Its relation to the “wedding song” of Zerlina and Masetto (“Giovinette”) shows how completely Giovanni has stepped into Masetto’s shoes (as this section is so close in style to the wedding song “Giovenette” above). *See Kerman/Tomlinson*