

## Don Giovanni's reputation restored

Magnus Tessing Schneider, 2022. *The original portrayal of Mozart's Don Giovanni*. London: Routledge, 245 pp. ISBN 978-036-724320-3.

What kind of character is the Don Giovanni of Da Ponte's and Mozart's opera buffa, really? Is he a brutal and violent murderer and rapist who at the end of the drama receives his justified, divine punishment – as he has been portrayed in theatre plays and films for the last 200 years? Is this what Da Ponte and Mozart intended, and is this how the role was rendered in the original staging of the piece? This is the question that Magnus Tessing Schneider sets out to answer in his book. And his answer is an emphatic *no*.

As the title makes clear, the main objective of the study is to attempt a historical reconstruction of the original portrayal of the role, by the Italian baritone Luigi Bassi. However, since the author is fully aware that his results are radically opposed to received and accepted interpretations, he also includes a study of how the traditional Don Giovanni image was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and passed on to the 20<sup>th</sup>. The study of Bassi's Don Giovanni is thus interspersed with a comprehensive study of the history of translations and the critical reception of the opera.

In the first chapter, we meet Luigi Bassi, and Tessing Schneider sets out the prerequisites for describing and interpreting his portrayal of Don Giovanni at the Estates Theatre in Prague and later in Warsaw and Leipzig. The author is fully aware that the reconstruction of a stage performance in the late 18th century is a difficult and delicate task; it has to be based on a combination of both prescriptive and descriptive sources. In the first category we find the original libretto and score, as well as later annotations in those and later revised versions, and, finally, contemporary playbills. The second category comprises a forest of anecdotes, eye-witness accounts and orally transmitted second-hand information about Bassi's portrayal, mostly dating from the 19th century. Tessing Schneider makes an impressive effort to contextualize, evaluate and cross-check these sources against each other. With these source-critical considerations in mind, he uses the following six chapters to guide the reader through the opera, scene by scene. He describes what he takes to be the original portrayal of the Don Giovanni character and contrasts it with subsequent renditions and interpretations of the role. We

learn that the character in Bassi's rendition was subtle, humorous and full of grace and charm.

Drawing on Felicity Baker's revisionist studies of the libretto, Tessing Schneider convincingly demonstrates that the original libretto actually is a radical rewriting of the Don Juan myth, problematizing the question of his guilt and cruel punishment. In this context, the 'Spanishness' of the plot and characters also functioned as a representation of conservative, anti-libertine agendas. In the later adaptations, precisely those elements that Da Ponte and Mozart removed or challenged were reinstated. The interpretation of the opera that was established during the 19th century owed much to the earliest German translations of the libretto, not least the one by Friedrich Rochlitz from 1801. As Tessing Schneider demonstrates, this translation was a drastic adaptation of the drama, demonising the main character and turning him into a dark villain, but also depriving the female characters of erotic agency and christianising the plot. To some extent this was for dramaturgical reasons: the imbalance between the protagonist's wrongdoings and his final punishment was considered a flaw in the plot. Therefore he had to be made a real villain, and through this revision the critical potential of the original version was eradicated.

The second chapter deals with the opening scene: the alleged abuse of Donna Anna and the killing of her father, the Commendatore. In the traditional interpretation of the drama, these are Don Giovanni's two worst crimes: it is understood that he actually rapes Donna Anna and murders her father. But in Da Ponte's and Mozart's version, it is never evident that Anna was abused. This is just the version that she presents to her fiancé, Don Ottavio. Moreover, in Da Ponte's and Mozart's rendition, it is the Commendatore that attacks Don Giovanni, who only reluctantly draws his sword and kills in self-defence. Thus, the question of Don Giovanni's alleged guilt remains an open question for the viewer to reflect and decide upon.

The third chapter deals with the three female characters and Don Giovanni's relation to them. Tessing Schneider shows how in the original libretto, and in Luigi Bassi's original portrayal, he treated the three women in a persistently respectful and chivalrous way. He argues that the three women represent three different attitudes to marriage and relations between the sexes. Where the male protagonists Ottavio and Masetto embrace the idea of traditional marriage, Anna reveals ambivalence, even though eventually she reluctantly submits. Elvira embodies a romantic stance of love as passion. Zerlina (just like Don Giovanni himself) approves of gallantry and flirt – even when it involves a certain amount of seduction and trickery.

Chapter Four discusses the party episode at Don Giovanni's house, and Chapter Five the disguise scenes at the opening of Act 2. In both chapters, the author demonstrates that later translations and productions have made Don Giovanni much more violent and abusive than what is motivated by Da Ponte's libretto, convincingly exemplified by some of the illustrations included in the

book. Chapter Five also examines the intriguing complexity of Donna Elvira's character in the original version, and the degree to which she in later reception has been reduced to a helpless victim without any agency of her own. According to the author, this was more or less a necessity in 19<sup>th</sup>-century productions, since it was at that time impossible to portray a non-idealised image of female erotic desire on stage.

The sixth chapter deals with the graveyard episode, and Chapter Seven with the second finale and the stone guest. Tessing Schneider points out that in the original production, the same singer doubled as Masetto and Il Commendatore. This gave room for a playful interpretation of the scene, fully consistent with the libretto: that Don Giovanni mistakes the talking statue for a human prankster, possibly Masetto himself. This assumption also explains Don Giovanni's carefree attitude towards his awkward guest: he presumably believes that this is one of his enemies in disguise, right up to the very final moment when the stone guest grabs his hand.

In the postscript, the author takes a step back and discusses his findings from a philosophical and aesthetic perspective. He emphasizes the work's original position as an opera for a sophisticated audience of connoisseurs, with a deliberately complex design that aimed at challenging the audience's judgement – concerning gender politics as well as musical taste. He criticises the contemporary ethical turn of both opera studies and opera productions, and the tendency towards instrumentalisation of opera for various didactic and ideological purposes.

Tessing Schneider's claim that 19<sup>th</sup>-century adaptations have also dominated 20<sup>th</sup>-century reception is for obvious reasons not based on a comprehensive study of all stage productions of the opera over the last century. It mostly leans on anecdotal evidence, using examples not least from film versions and some more famous recordings. Admittedly, it can be argued that precisely these well-known renditions have been formative for present approaches to the opera. An exhaustive study of more recent stage productions, when the opera is mostly given in the original Italian, could perhaps give a more nuanced picture, but this question is beyond the main scope of the study.

This is an important book. It is important as a radical historical reinterpretation of an iconic artwork, but also as a defiant challenge to certain tendencies in today's intellectual climate. These two aspects are different but complement each other in ways that are worth considering.

First, in Tessing Schneider's convincing rereading, the opera emerges as a much more complex and intriguing work than what is commonly assumed – as a rewriting of the traditional Don Juan myth, presenting the audience with a number of provocative questions: What was it really that happened here? Who is to blame? What kind of behaviour is acceptable and what is not? What is the place of erotic relations in society? What room is there for female desire? And, last but not least, is the capital punishment of Don Giovanni at the end of the opera really motivated by his alleged offences? Those questions are raised in the

opera, but never answered. The answers are left to the viewers and depend on how they interpret the action and the dialogue and which ethical judgement they adopt. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, translators and critics simplified this complex work, made the moral questions unambiguous, turning the main character into an undisputed villain. That transformation still lingers today.

Tessing Schneider's historical examination is driven by a revisionist agenda but leans on patient and systematic argumentation based on a large and diverse source material. It never becomes programmatic but is characterised by a combination of rigorous source criticism and inventive analytical observations. By this method, the author reaches a new and enthralling understanding of one of the most scrutinised works in the history of opera. He has presented us with a Don Giovanni who is even more interesting, complex, and thought-provoking than has commonly been assumed.

Moreover, this study is important because of what it reveals about a certain contemporary inclination: an impulse towards simplification and unambiguity in the interpretation of fictional stories and characters, and towards an instrumentalisation of historical artworks to suit present ideological agendas. For some reason, there seems to be an uneasiness today towards ambiguous and complex stories and characters, and a preference for the ethically clear-cut. This is a deplorable development because it deprives art of one of its most valuable potentials.

With this combination of two relevant approaches, Magnus Tessing Schneider's book emerges as an excellent example of how a thorough historical study can say something highly relevant also about its own age.

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