

Unmasking Giovanni, K. 527

*Behind the Scenes with
the Washington Opera Company*

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PLOTS thicken. This one is dominated by a madman, Don

Giovanni, and he is pure energy incarnate. Here is a man perhaps incapable of love, and of being loved. He gets what he wants, by any means necessary, and he wants every woman. A charmer, a rogue, Don Giovanni is also the charismatic hero in this opera.

I catch my first glimpse of Don Giovanni three weeks before the premier and just a few days into rehearsals. This is a fight scene, and Don Giovanni is again and again killing the *Commendatore* – the most powerful man in 18th century Seville.

Engulfed by the space and mirrors of Rehearsal Room C at the Washington Opera Studios in DC's Tacoma Park, Don Giovanni sings while he kills. Masked and uninvited, an intruder in the bedchambers of her father's villa, Giovanni has seduced the *Commendatore*'s daughter, Donna Anna, and now he resists the urge to slice up her father for defending her honor. Meanwhile, the photographer is nearly decapitated.

Erwin Schrott is handsome and muscular. His voice stops me in my tracks, and I cannot but help stare at him when he sings. (This is true with all the singers.) Everyone expects this Giovanni gig to become Erwin's signature role. He is a Spanish stallion, the perfect Don Giovanni, and everyone knows it.

The *Commendatore* is played by Russian bass Feodor Kuznetzov, another stunning *virtuoso*. The two singers belt out the Italian recitative amidst the jarring interruptions of swords. Fight master Brad Alan Waller coaches the principals in his quest for the authenticity of the duel. Fights are rehearsed to death, run daily before every major rehearsal or performance. These guys are as yet unconvincing as swordsman. That, definitively, will change.

The grand piano bursts into sound and as quickly stops. Between cues, pianist Danielle DeSwert -- a young artist standing in for an entire orchestra -- yawns, reads her novel, sips cold coffee from a styrofoam cup. Mozart's score – *Don Giovanni*, K. 527 -- is a labyrinth, but Danielle has conquered it. She will never play it on stage for this gig.

The *Commendatore's* understudy shadows his principal's every move, and though he has no sword and no opponent, he mirrors every thrust and jab in anticipation of some uncertain twist of fate that might instantly thrust him on stage before patrons who have paid up to \$200 to see this charming rogue Don Giovanni be as physically and emotionally provocative -- and as sexually licentious -- as he comes.

Down the hall in Rehearsal Room A, the leading ladies practice a flamenco minuet. The libretto (text) is in Italian; the singers are international. A Russian translator hovers in earshot of director John Pascoe. Schedules are revised daily, with principals and supernumeraries -- "supers" -- called or released to suit the acts and scenes of the day. Singers relax in the lounge between calls, sleeping on couches, reading novels, checking email.

With Verdi's *Aida* running at Constitution Hall, the rehearsal stage at the Company's Tacoma Park studios is a mere confabulation of plywood. Medieval props are scattered about the wings, and singers wear scraps of costume to get into their roles. Frustration and exhaustion are punctuated by outbursts of laughter and occasional embarrassments. It seems impossible to translate the scattered chaos of early rehearsals into any meaningful future on stage. In three weeks, however, Don Giovanni will open to a sell out crowd. Tension builds daily.

Mozart Was A Rebel

Washington was born a metropole of fine arts. In front of the Lincoln Memorial on the nearby Potomac River, Gentleman George and Lady Martha and their aristocratic friends spent many evenings reading Goethe and listening to Mozart. Constitution Hall is minutes from the White House, the Washington Monument and Farragut Square. Nearby are restaurants, sidewalk cafes and sunny parks. I walk the tidal basin, home to the Jefferson Memorial, where (in spring) the cherry blossoms are in full bloom.

Don Giovanni, K. 527 is a projection of Mozart's personal distaste for the aristocratic dictates of the 18th century. This is Mozart's scathing critique of the stifling morality of the Spanish Inquisition. Here are the amorous Casanova and the passionate Don Juan taken to extremes: Don Giovanni is the reckless embodiment of unbridled male energy. He is invincible. He is Mozart's nemesis.

"He is the archetypal self-willed, 'I want to do this, I will do this, I don't care what happens to anybody else', kind of figure," says director and designer John Pascoe. "He is looking for love. This is a commentary on the consequences of Don Giovanni's selfish actions -- of anyone's actions. He is the archetypal freedom of expression, and this is all the old clichés: you reap what you sew; you make your bed and you lie in it. It is all about karmic justice."

This is the Washington Opera Company's reincarnation of Don Giovanni. The innovative high-tech set, the Spanish setting, the violence of swords and muskets punctuated by trumpets, and the thrust stage with the orchestra behind and audience on three sides – such features challenge the old Don Juan legend to new life. Paramount is the sympathetic emotional attention to the suffering of the man, Don Giovanni. It is an otherworldly interpretation of desire and renunciation, and the hope and despair of the human condition.

Frivolousness and Deceit

From the start the Don is there, pursuing his latest victim. Donna Anna is Don Giovanni's ultimate conquest, his boot in the face of authority. "For a masked man just to enter the *Commendatore's* house was to dishonor the family," says Erwin. With her fiancé, Don Octavio, Donna Anna seeks to avenge her father's murder and unmask her attacker. The Don is undeterred, and unsuspected, and in flirting with Donna Anna he flirts with destiny.

If Giovanni has ever loved, it was the three days and nights with Donna Elvira, the jilted young maiden who traveled to Seville to confront her seducer. “Three days is a long time for Don Giovanni,” says American soprano Jennifer Casey Cabot, who alternates Donna Elvira with Russian Tatiana Pavlovskya. “He caught on quickly that the only way to have her was to promise to marry her. She’s young. She’s high-spirited. She’s lost her virginity. She’s ruined.”

The peasant Zerlina is the other damsel distressed in this plot, and the Don schemes to have this uncommon beauty, and get rid of her fiancé Masetto. Zerlina is played by Russian soprano Irina Mataeva. Initially shy to Don Giovanni’s advances, in the form of Erwin Schrott, Irina is not casually manhandled or kissed as the role demands.

The three femme fatales -- Anna, Elvira and Zerlina -- soon conspire to unmask their deceitful seducer, Don Giovanni, who tallies his female conquests in a ledger. “In Italy six hundred and forty; in Germany two hundred and thirty-one; a hundred in France; ninety-one in Turkey,” recounts Leporello. “But in Spain already a thousand and three.”

“Who is Leporello?” says freelance Canadian bass Robert Pomakov, the indefatigable Leporello. “He is Don Giovanni’s servant, sidekick in a way. And in some senses he is Don Giovanni’s conscience. Leporello wishes his master was a better person, or at least a more humane person, and Leporello tries to bring that out in him.”

On stage Leporello is a *tour de force*, a pillar of comic relief and drama, a perfect buffoon. Complicit in violence and deception, he scampers here and there, feeding off the scraps of the Don’s decadence, fending off the blows of his conceit. Off stage, Robert is thoughtful and unassuming. “I remember where I came from,” he tells me, “and also where everyone comes from.”

Sport and Bravado

What goes around comes around. Don Giovanni is haunted in the end by the stone statue from the *Commendatore's* grave. The cyclone of Giovanni's devastation has caught him. His sword has slain men, his lust woman. Fortunes have been lost, lives ruined, chastity and honor despoiled. For Don Giovanni all is sport and bravado. He is more than mere villain however: he is the personification of charm.

"I hate that he is so bad with the girls," says Erwin, a warm and loving man who is universally respected on the set. "I feel sorry for him. Don Giovanni is young, he's rich, he's powerful. He's a beautiful guy. He's so elegant and highly educated. Words are his best weapon, so he can get out of every situation, and he is clever. I think that everyone would like to be a Don Giovanni just for five minutes in their life."

When the supernatural *Commendatore* calls at Giovanni's villa and demands that Giovanni repent his sins, the Don refuses. He is contemptuous. How has he sinned? Is his defiance of stifling morality and religious hypocrisy a sin? Is his dissent against wealth and privilege a sin? Is it a sin to mock the repressed sexuality and double standards that have women burned at the stake for witchcraft?

"Spain at this time was one of the most repressive societies there has ever been," says choreographer Sara Erde. "It was a horrible time -- the Inquisition -- and you couldn't step out of line for a minute." Sara stylized this opera with a Spanish baroque flamenco style to accent the sexuality of people repressed by church and state. Every time I see her, Sara is overflowing with happiness. Her joy touches everyone.

"Don Giovanni is used to getting his own way," she says, "because he is a fabulously wealthy nobleman, and he was spoiled as a child. And so this man is a kind of

freedom fighter. He is saying, 'Why can't I feel sensual with my body? Why can't I be an atheist? Why can't I follow my own choices and live how I want... why can't I... *why??* ' "

Don Giovanni detests cowardice. Repentance is for the meek, and the Don is never meek. He bristles at any threat to his freedom. In his youthful mind, perhaps, he is immortal. He rebels to the last. He is indignant. Repent warns Leporello, terrified. This is all I have, Don Giovanni answers. Encircled by the bloodied souls of his victims, Don Giovanni sinks into the flames.

Out of This Underworld

Hell is uncannily technological here. It is the final dress rehearsal, and I am beneath the stage at Constitution Hall. The souls of Don Giovanni's exploits huddle amidst steel scaffolding and electrical cables eerily lit by flaming strands of red neon. Stage technicians -- "techs" -- man the plastic hoses of a fog machine, ready to blow the smoke of the underworld onto the stage. Everyone waits for the gates of Hell to open and consume Giovanni. On a mobile communications headset -- teleconferencing the entire production team -- an assistant stage manager listens for the precise cue.

There it is. Trap doors above us pop open and, fortunately, no one on stage falls through. Stairs are rolled into place. To the horror of Don Giovanni and Leporello, and to the surprise and awe of the audience, the Don's victims burst into the light and dance death. The hour of doom has come: Don Giovanni slides down the stairs and disappears.

Erwin is exhausted. Sweat drenches the velvet and lace of his aristocratic persona. He has sung his brains out, defeated angry mobs and manipulated peasants, reveled in the vagaries of excess. He has frolicked with the principal women of this

opera, in his unprincipled role, sharing Don Giovanni's total energy with the audience for hours. He stares transfixed, then he smiles and crawls out of this hole.

Every squeak and shadow of this opera is choreographed, from the sharps and flats of the French horns to the kisses on the lips of the three prima Donnas. The synchronicity of Giovanni's doom, for example, was built on hundreds of hours -- and hundreds of thousands of dollars -- of imagination translated to reality.

Far from the stage and high above the action, through a wooden door marked "Personnel Only," sits a woman in a mobile communications headset keying a computer to flash the English translations from the Italian libretto onto two giant neon supertitle screens. She has "just 3000 cues." In the darkness beyond her post are the ducts and walkways of the hall's cavernous over-ceiling. Relic projectors haunt the shadows like dinosaurs in a museum. This is the stuff from which phantoms of the opera are made.

Through another door I find the tiny room from which projections beam the stage some 200 feet below. Here sits stage manager Christy Langan with a stopwatch and a closed circuit TV and a heaven's view of the entire hall. She is, she says, "coordinating everything you see on stage."

Slide projections loop across the stage, casting scenes of angelic beauty, coats-of-arms or Gothic fortress-villas -- painting everything with mood and innuendo. Video clips portray the torment of Don Giovanni's victims. The Moorish architecture comprising the spartan set rolls and pivots through complete reconfigurations of the stage. Every closet and curtain seems to shelter a tech wearing a mobile headset and surfing the airwaves of electronic choreography. The complexity is stunning, costing tens of thousands of dollars per day of rehearsal. Mozart must be turning in his grave.

Inside the Company

Mozart struggled to profit under the stifling economy and feudal authority of 18th century Europe. His first paid appointment brought 150 guilden annually (~ \$3000). He was obliged to remain the submissive, humble servant. His liberty and genius suffered under the Imperial whim of the Emperor. "At least I have the honor of being placed above the cooks," wrote Mozart, in 1781.

Early in 1787, Mozart and librettist (writer) Lorenzo da Ponte conspired to produce an opera about a seductive libertine. Don Giovanni played in Prague (1787) and Vienna (1788). The success won Mozart a permanent appointment as Imperial Kammerkompositeur (composer); his annual salary was 850 guilden (~ \$16,500).

The Washington Opera Company spends in a day's rehearsal perhaps twice what Mozart earned in his best year. Singers, laborers, techs, musicians, make-up artists, dressers and fitters, contract employees and freelancers -- everyone must be paid. Even the labor unions get involved, strictly regulating the parameters of rehearsals. There are supers and understudies. The thrust stage at Constitution Hall was specially modified.

Director and designer John Pascoe is creativity in motion. Seven months of computer enhancements born of John's imagination led to hundreds of possible set designs. John is everywhere, all at once, directing principals and action – and delegating with confidence to the genius that surrounds him. Still he dabbles in such minute details as the selection of tights for the lovely Zerlina. Too white, John Pascoe declares. She should look naked.

Some 100 costumes dress up this opera. Costume director Marcia Leboeuf oversees a warehouse of costumes past and present; rows and rows of footwear; drawers of period jewelry; special paint and dye rooms. Stitchers, designers and planners

create, borrow, alter and loan costumes. Everything is meticulously fit: the principals must be able to move in their heavy clothes, to dance and fight and run, and it would be a sorry opera if the singers could not sing, suffocated by their corsets or strangled by their capes.

Il Dissoluto Punito (*The Dissolute Punished*)

On the night of the final dress, Constitution Hall hums with patrons of the Washington Opera Company. John Pascoe is “feeling very much out on a limb.” Singers pace in the wings with the supers and techs. More techs and managers occupy the unheavenly overceiling. The victims of Giovanni’s conquests have gone straight to Hell under the stage. Everyone waits for Maestro Domingo to mount the podium and lead the orchestra. In just under four hours it is over.

Two weeks behind the scenes with the Washington Opera Company leaves me pondering the gifts I am given, beyond the sheer magic of the sounds, for which all words fail miserably. The camaraderie was remarkable. There was Mozart and da Ponte’s social commentary and John Pascoe’s drive to make it real. There was Placido Domingo’s wisdom and humility, and the affection routinely doled out by Erwin Schrott. There was alternate conductor Giovanni Reggioli touching everyone with grace and choreographer Sara Erde touching everyone with joy. So many people behind the scenes, all routinely wonderful, unmentioned here.

Such experience brings fresh life to this metropolis. It was very sweet, a once in a lifetime gig for me. Through this opera I met many new people, complete strangers all, but I was invited to share in the intimacy of their professional world behind the scenes. Smiles and little kindnesses proliferated, and I was repeatedly reminded of the sanctity of choice.

This do the critics fail to see: the humanity behind the masks. The singers sing their hearts out, giving it all they got, baring their very souls. The critics miss the point entirely -- taking pride in their ruthlessness and nurtured detachment -- because they think their writing is about them (and so it is).

Don Giovanni is about choice. He exercises total freedom of expression, and total freedom from consequence. It's that old, Faustian bargain, and Mozart drives it home. It is about compassion, and Don Giovanni takes us there.

The performance moves me deeply. Leporello makes me laugh, and I weep during the melodious arias about hearts broken and love lost. I feel sorry for the Don, as he screams in torment. Misguided by power and arrogance, he is, I believe, just another human being hungry for love and happiness.

Thus there is no ending here, but a beginning. Encircled by the souls of his broken victims, Don Giovanni sinks into the flames. Unconsciousness is defeated by reality, as always, with life reverting to that staid and ostensibly trusted course of social conformity, and we the people are challenged to ponder the consequences of our actions, to exercise choice, confronted as we are, with the daily specter of doing good, or doing evil. ~ **begin.**

SIDEBARS

Maestro Domingo

“Mozart is the number one most popular composer in all the world and Don Giovanni is perhaps the greatest opera ever written,” says Placido Domingo, artistic director of the Washington Opera and Los Angeles Opera companies. Maestro Domingo is in high demand every time I see him.

“For me it is a great thrill to conduct,” he says. “We have a wonderful cast and the singers are very special. It is not easy to have a Don Giovanni that really looks like Don Giovanni, or to find three leading ladies that are as beautiful and as believable as they are here. ”

“Erwin Schrott is one of the most outstanding young singers,” he says of his chosen one. “I first met him in Buenos Aires, and he was so young, and of course I immediately engaged him.” Erwin won the international *Operalia* competition – one of Placido Domingo’s special creations.

Placido Domingo’s dream to establish a training program for young artists was born in 2002 when the *Young Artist Program of the Americas* welcomed twelve singers and two coaches as they set up residency in Washington. Maestro Domingo is intimately involved, mentoring singers in their chosen roles.

Maestro Domingo treats the score of *Don Giovanni*, K. 527 furiously. During one rehearsal finale, the Maestro’s baton flies out of his hand and into the flutes. Everyone laughs. Maestro Domingo apologizes, revealing the precious humility that people love him for.

The Fine Arts Scene

With *Aida*, *Don Giovanni* and *Fidelio* behind them, the Washington Opera's coming season includes Strauss's *Di Fledermaus*; Bellini's *Norma*; Vagner's *Die Walkure* (starring Placido Domingo); Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*; Rossini's *La Cenerentola*; Verdi's *La Traviata*; and Andre Previn's *A Street Car Named Desire*. (See www.dc-opera.org).

Beyond the wonderful world of opera, the capitol district offers a plethora of entertainment and arts opportunities: it seems every gallery and museum is in striking distance of Constitution Hall. Green spaces all around are spiked with ornate statuary both lovely and grotesque. On non-rehearsal days I explore the Kathleen Ewing (1609 Connecticut Ave) and Anton (2108 R St. NW) galleries.

Nearby Georgetown offers myriad restaurants, performances and galleries. Erwin Schrott takes me to an Italian bistro where he upstages the staff with his near perfect Italian. Next door I find a live jazz quartet and, nearby, the contemporary art of the Fraser (1054 31st St) and eklekticos (406 Seventh St.) galleries. Africa speaks through the sculptures and paintings at the Parish Gallery (1054 31st St.), while Gallery Okuda (1054 31st St. NW) hints wildly of Nippon.

Another night finds John Pascoe and the principal singers entertaining public questions at the Watergate Hotel – an apt testimonial to truth and consequence. Back in Georgetown for an Ethiopian buffet, opera *aficionado* Reuven Goldstein shares his feelings about *Don Giovanni*, the matinee we have just seen. “It was incredibly powerful,” he says. He too is mindful that mere words fail to convey the sound and the fury.