

Review

The Original Portrayal of Mozart's Don Giovanni **Magnus Tessing Schneider**

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In the preface to his new book, Magnus Tessing Schneider goes straight into the subject matter with the opening question, “Is the title character of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (1787) a charming, nonviolent seducer, or is he a ruthless, arrogant rapist and murderer?” Taking as his point of departure that there is ample source material to support the suggestion that the original depiction of the title character was indeed not that of an evil brute, he launches the second question: of how a violent, demonic image of Don Giovanni came to dominate the general perception of him.

The aim of Schneider’s study is to investigate these two questions through a multi-disciplinary approach to the opera’s early staging and reception and its continued stage life and interpretations. The original conception of the opera and its title role is seen, as the back cover states, through the lens of its first portrayal by the Italian singer Luigi Bassi (1766–1825), for whom the part was written. Bassi’s version is then held up as a mirror to the translations and interpretations of the nineteenth century, which went on to inform the twentieth all the way to its influential movie adaptations.

The book is divided into seven main chapters, all of which present the reader with in-depth studies of a wide range of sources. The first chapter concentrates on the artistic characteristics of Luigi Bassi, who performed the title role of Don Giovanni from the Prague première in 1787 and for the next twenty years. The following six chapters consist of a systematic run-through of the opera’s action, scene by scene, which turns out to be an effective way of presenting the source material as well as building up the study’s arguments. Schneider’s method consists

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of reconstructing the early performances by impresario Domenico Guardasoni's Italian opera company and comparing the early conception to the various German translations and adaptations which, over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, significantly changed the perception of the title role as well as of the opera itself. Historical prints from three centuries constitute part of the extensive source material while also serving as vivid illustrations – literally and metaphorically – of some of the author's main points.

One of the book's strengths is multi-disciplinarity. Drawing on librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte's original Italian text and its various translations and adaptations, analyses of different music manuscript versions, biographical information gathered from memoirs, anecdotes, and literary fiction, performance reviews, various renditions of scenography and acting styles, as well as academic and critical literature, Schneider is able to convey the complexities of eighteenth-century opera and its contextual origins. The addition of a few tables may have made the wealth of information more accessible, for instance listing central performances, significant translations, music scores, biographical accounts, etc. Even so, Schneider's fluent writing style allows the reader to sort out the various strands of information little by little and follow his elegant weave into a rich fabric of meaning as the text unfolds.

While the close-up study of Bassi's original portrayal breaks new ground, it rests securely on a solid underpinning of some two hundred years of Mozart studies, criticism, and aesthetic theory. Schneider draws on this tradition as well as his own extensive knowledge of musicological and theatrical historiography in establishing some of the opera's dramaturgical structures and genre characteristics (or even *un*-characteristics). Dramatic and theatrical devices such as *contrapassi*, reversions, and the doubling of roles are pointed out and effectively used to develop his arguments.

Along with the events unfolding scene by scene in the opera, Schneider's observations are assembled into a larger construction centred around the development of the tradition of *Don Juan and the stone guest*. From its seventeenth century multi-genre dramatic origins as a popular tale of sin and retribution, complete with farcical as well as superstitious elements, it was reinvented by Da Ponte and Mozart, under the guise of *opera buffa*, into a critical Enlightenment tragedy of a young *galant homme*; only to be reappropriated by nineteenth century Romantic translators and commentators, reverting it to a Christian moral system, with a lasting impact on the reception of the opera and its title role. In this way, Schneider places the *stone guest* tradition within a framework of four centuries of shifting world conceptions, with the Enlightenment artists and connoisseurs appearing as the short-lived heroes of free aesthetic expression in close kinship with the tragic Don Giovanni himself.

In Schneider's reading, the seductive powers of the title role are a metaphor for the powers of the real seducer – the musical maestro, with his capacity of mesmerizing the audience. It is tempting to extend this metaphor to encompass the function of the historiographer. Schneider's carefully constructed body of evidence, engagingly set forth, presents a very convincing case of how different the 1787 *Don Giovanni* of Bassi, Mozart, and Da Ponte must have appeared to the audience and critics of the time, compared to the current understanding. The elegant libertine versus the violent brute, the serenading seducer versus the rapist, the 21-year-old adventurer versus the middle-aged lecher.

Researchers of eighteenth-century theatre have, in general, been able to lead a sheltered existence, delving into Gothic print texts or handwritten manuscripts with little potential for arousing general interest, much less controversy. However, a side effect of critical social, feminist, and colonial perspectives shedding new light onto history is a new critical awareness of the political and social implications of aesthetic historiography. In venturing to nuance – or complicate – the image of the defamed Don Giovanni as sexual aggressor, Schneider has come out of the scholarly comfort zone.

This has prompted the addition of a necessary postscript to the historical analysis, where Schneider discusses the case of *Don Giovanni* in light of academia's «ethical turn». Neither the debate of the purpose of art, nor that of the social and gendered ethics of *Don Giovanni* will be settled with this. They would, however, do well to be informed by Schneider's historical insights as well as his defence of the democratic and liberating potential of a hermeneutical concept of art, with its endless possibilities for forming new meaning and new realities – as exemplified by Mozart's and Da Ponte's tragic, comic opera.