

# Don Giovanni at BoV festival

**M**OZART called his opera *Don Giovanni o Il dissoluto punito*, which he wrote for the Prague Nationaltheater in 1787, an *opera buffa* or *dramma giocoso*. It relates the old legend of the compulsive seducer who is finally dragged down to hell.

It is governed by a single idea: Giovanni's flouting of society in pursuit of sexual pleasure, which binds together a disparate set of ambivalent or comic incidents. Divine retribution appears like an act of God or a different kind of life force personified in a statue of the man he kills at the beginning of the drama.

It has a rather weak libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte with a lot of padding and lifeless cardboard characters. But Mozart's music gave life to these characters and even some of the padding inspired the composer to his greatest heights, in music that reconciles the tragic and the comic aspects of the story.

Last weekend's production of the opera at the Manoel Theatre (Manoel Theatre in association with *Operalaboratorio* of Palermo for the 2003 BOV Opera Festival) reflected this difference between music and libretto in that while the musical performance was alive and expressed the intentions of the composer, the production was dull and lifeless.

A number of mobile flaps made up the set: very apt for the Manoel stage and should have afforded the director (Mauro Avogadro) plenty



THE COMMENDATORE (Maurizio Lo Piccolo) is brought in in a wheelchair in the final scene as Don Giovanni (Ugo Gagliardo) ignores Leporello's (Giovanni Bellavia) fear and trembling at the sight of him. (Picture by Darrin Zammit Lupi)

of scope for his imagination. Instead, no attempt was made, not even by the lighting, to suggest the different moods of the various scenes. The lighting plan was uniformly dull and had a limited range.

Costumes too tended to be drab with a solitary attempt to distinguish the upper classes from the 'peasants' by having Donna Anna and Donna Elvira dressed in the same evening dress throughout. No similar attempt was made in the case of the male characters.

The time was brought forward to the 1960s and *dolce vita*. But there

was nothing in the production, apart from the wedding scene of Zerlina and Masetto in Act I in which pink hoops were used to suggest the shackles of marriage, to suggest either the libertinism or the decadence of the time. There was at most time no drive in the action. Too many scenes were acted out front of stage against a closed curtain. I also missed the purpose of having the Commendatore brought in in a wheelchair in the last scene and carrying off Don Giovanni on the same.

Musically the performance was much more successful. The opera has

a reputation for exceptional difficulty. This is derived from the superimposed dance metres of the first finale and the unprecedented harmonic richness of the score. But conductor Michael Luus at the head of the National Orchestra showed immediately that he was completely in control.

The overture sounded robust. It began with the imposing music of the 'stone guest' and already with the *Allegro* the perilous balance of humour and tragedy had been established as the various themes of the opera were brought together in full sonata form.

This led straight to Leporello's (bass Giovanni Bellavia) grumbling soliloquy and an animated trio when Don Giovanni (baritone Ugo Gagliardo) entered with Donna Anna (soprano Natasa Katai) and a grave *Andante* for the three men after the Commendatore (bass Maurizio Lo Piccolo) was mortally wounded by Don Giovanni. After this introduction the music gained pace and had a forward movement in no way vitiated by the recitative interpolations that characterised 18th century opera.

**M**ozart's musical characterisation is at its height in *Don Giovanni*. The music for Leporello is very much in the Italian buffo tradition and Bellavia has the makings of a real buffo. His aria/catalogue of Giovanni's conquests was an exquisite mixture of grace and finish, of irony and sentiment, of comic declamation and melody – small wonder that Elvira (soprano Lydia Caruana) left the stage vowing vengeance upon her betrayer.

The contrast between the two ladies, the well-bred reserve of Donna Anna and the passionate determination of Donna Elvira, already evident in the latter's first aria, *Aff! Chi mi dice mai*, was well brought out in the singing of Katai and Caruana.

A contrast to the refinement of the two ladies is the music given to Zerlina (soprano Lorèna Scarlata), the simple light-hearted country girl whose vanity makes her unable to resist the Don's tender advances. She appeared for the first time in a good-humoured duet with her fiancée Masetto (baritone Giuseppe Taormina) *Giovinette, che fate all'amore*. She appeared lightly flirtatious yet capable of tenderness in the aria *Batti batti bel Masetto*, while in her duet with Don Giovanni, *Là ci darem la mano*, she passed from a bantering tone to a caressing sensuality.

Giovanni is a demonic character, mercurial and difficult to penetrate. His music says little about his motivation. He adopts the style of each of his victims, including the Commendatore who brings out the heroic in him. Leporello he chaffs in pure buffo style. He woos Anna by courtly flattery, Zerlina by condescension, Elvira's maid by disguise.

**E**lvira herself he evades or mocks, but he can also woo her with false ardour in the trio at the beginning of Act Two. Although he has a pleasant, warm voice and sang well, apart from when he spoils the ending of his aria by going so fast that the orchestra could not keep up with him, Gagliardo failed to bring out these many facets of the character except occasionally when playing and singing off Leporello.

The contrast between his character and that of Ottavio (tenor Domenico Bellantone or Nunzio Galli – the programme did not specify) came out strongly in Act Two. The tame irresoluteness of Donna Anna's fiancée, whom one could never really imagine responding to her requests for revenge was followed by the magically energetic song of Giovanni, *Fin c'haa del vino va la testa*, which though only a list of instructions for Leporello to lay food and drink for the guests at his villa, is really a feverish explosion of sheer sexual drive which seems suddenly to lay bare Giovanni's innermost being, his *raison d'être*.

*Don Giovanni* has many good parts for the singers. Apart from the arias and the duets it has a number of beautiful ensembles, not least the extended dramatic finales which end each one of the two acts. The young members of *Operalaboratorio* showed a sound technique even though one or two voices sounded rather strained towards the end of the performance on Sunday.

The part of Donna Elvira fitted very well soprano Lydia Caruana who sang with a sure voice and clear top notes. The chorus too was musically sound while the National Orchestra gave a consistently good reading of the score, and made up for much that was lacking in the production.