

Overture to Don Giovanni, K. 527—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart's incomparable musical gifts enabled him to compose at the highest level of artistic brilliance in almost every musical genre. We are privileged to experience his legacy in symphonies, chamber music, wind serenades, choral music, keyboard music—the list goes on and on. But, unquestionably, his greatest contributions to musical art are his operas. No one—not even Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, or Richard Strauss exceeded the perfection of Mozart's mature operas. The reason, of course, is clear: his unparalleled musical gift is served and informed by a nuanced insight into human psychology that is simply stunning. His characters represented real men and women on the stage, who moved dramatically, and who had distinctive personalities. Of no opera is this truer than his foray into serious opera in the Italian style, *Don Giovanni*.

Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, at its première in Vienna in 1786, was a decided success, but nothing like the acclaim that it garnered later, in December of that same year, in Prague. The city literally went wild for it, bringing the composer to the Bohemian capital to conduct performances in January of 1787. A commission for another hit ensued, and Mozart once again collaborated with librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte—this time basing the opera on the legendary seducer, Don Juan. Italian *opera buffa* is comic opera, and Mozart was a master of it, but the new opera—given the theme—is a serious one, with hilarious, comic interludes. Shakespeare often made adroit use of the dramatic contrast in that ploy, and so does Mozart, with equal success.

The evidence is that Mozart wrote out the overture at the last minute—almost literally. The first performance was on 29 October 1787, and the overture was finished the day previous, although we must remember that Mozart, being the genius that he was, had almost certainly composed it to the note in his head before sitting down to the onerous task of copying it out in ink. The overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* is one of the most vivacious, sparkling opera preludes in the entire literature—this is most certainly not the case with *Don Giovanni*. Sonorous dark chords, throbbing sighs in the strings, and sinuous lines that wind up and down all ominously portend the condemnation to Hell that awaits the protagonist in our drama. This is the same music that will accompany the Don at the end of the opera, as demons take possession of his wretched soul. But, after putting us all on notice of the libertine's fate, Mozart plunges into a happy *allegro*, which, as the opera audience will soon see, anticipates the comic scenes that are so beloved. But, the composer doesn't lay out a completely untroubled romp leading into the opera, proper, for there are dark moments, too, in this otherwise bright section. It all blends together in an artful reflection of the variegated moods of the tale—and, upon a little contemplation, of the composer's life, as well.