Don Giovanni’s Avenging Women

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Abstract

A common misconception surrounds the role of the female characters in the opera *Don Giovanni*, composed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in 1787 to a libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte. Today’s performance practice often excludes the duet “Per queste tue manine,” between Leporello and Zerlina. This thesis explores the implications of reinstating this important duet and its associated scene as both highlight a significant transfer of dominance from male to female. Its reinclusion sheds new light on the strength of the female characters in *Don Giovanni*.

The incorporation of “*Per queste tue manine*” enables Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, and Zerlina to be revealed throughout *Don Giovanni* as strong avenging women. These roles are analysed with emphasis on their relationships with the male characters, and through a reinterpretation of their music. The thesis concludes that the inclusion of “*Per queste tue manine*” is a vital dramatic element in the performance of *Don Giovanni*, which uncovers the ascendancy of abundant femininity in the three women, instead of reducing them to mere playthings of Giovanni.

Issues of domestic violence (Zerlina and Masetto), abandonment (Elvira) and passionate revenge (Anna) are analysed to expose the shortcomings of productions that omit “*Per queste tue manine*” with its transfer of power from men to the women. These women are not neurotic, forgettable, or dependant. Rather, all possess a strong sense of self and like Giovanni are ambitious. Peter Sellars’s and Jose Montes-Basquer’s productions (both from 1991) offer contrasting dramatic interpretations of femininity in *Don Giovanni*, and are analysed to propound feminist viewpoints on characterisation. Dramatic intention is discussed as a necessary performance tool which, when applied, aids the understanding of characterisation for an audience. Theatre-great Konstantin Stanislavski’s techniques provide scope for the exploration of feminist characterisation in performance.

The words of Aristotle, Sylvia Plath, and Sophocles offer literary connections between powerful femininity, abandonment, and the art of tragedy, which align with the feminist conclusions that are drawn here. The viewpoint of powerful femininity with which this thesis is aligned is that of Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, as outlined in their feminist literary criticism *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979). Gilbert and Gubar advocate that readers and audiences be clearly presented with the influential attitudes of fictional women in literature; a concept that is brought to light in this
thesis through an exploration of Elvira’s, Zerlina’s, and Anna’s attitudes and behaviours.

The synthesis of Don Giovanni’s three women creates an immensely powerful feminine unit, which is exhaustively explored throughout the four chapters that comprise the thesis. Through an examination of the musical score, recordings, DVD performances, program notes, and musical and non-musical literature, all supporting the author’s personal engagement with the music of Zerlina, this thesis uncovers the powerful femininity often hidden within the characterisations of Mozart’s operatic creations. In Hebrew, the name Zerlina means ‘beautiful dawn’; Don Giovanni, guided by Zerlina, and when interpreted in the manner suggested, may too head towards its own innovative and beautiful dawn.
Declaration

This is to certify that

- This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters degree.
- Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other materials used.
- The thesis is less than 15,000 words in length, inclusive of footnotes, but exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed,

Holly Dee Morgan
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Introduction

“Per queste tue manine”

Don Giovanni Act II No. 21a: Zerlina enters the dimly lit space, aggressively dragging Leporello by the hair. Whilst preparing her sadistic torments for him, Zerlina sarcastically sings the same tune to which Leporello had escaped Ottavio in the previous scene. She furiously binds Leporello to a chair, and the chair to a window frame. Leporello pleads to be released, but when his attempts fail, he resorts to extreme flattery. Zerlina shows no sign of relinquishing him from her fiercely tight grasp. The scene is more than satisfying for Zerlina, as the sheepish Leporello (Giovanni’s sidekick) is responsible for harming her husband. To the empowered Zerlina, the only thing more satisfying would be for Giovanni himself to squirm in her torturous spider’s web.

The above depicted stage action vividly sets the scene for the duet “Per queste tue manine” “For Your Little Hands” (Act II No. 21a), in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s and Lorenzo Da Ponte’s opera Don Giovanni (1787). However, despite the visually captivating nature of “Per queste tue manine,” and its exciting musical score, this scene is commonly omitted from modern performances of the opera, such as Zambello Francesca’s 2008 production of Don Giovanni (Music Online). The operatic convention is to fuse both Don Giovanni’s Prague and Vienna versions, usually excluding “Per queste tue manine;” If included at all, the duet tends to be performed in a comedic manner.

The primary aim of this research is to illustrate how the inclusion of “Per queste tue manine” provides an alternative interpretation of the women in Don Giovanni as powerful feminine avengers. I have questioned the way in which Donna Elvira, Zerlina, and Donna Anna are commonly portrayed on stage, and how such interpretations weaken the strong, independent, and quick-thinking characters I interpret them to be. In a thesis of this size, it is not possible to give attention to an abundant number of Don Giovanni productions. Instead, two differing productions from the same year, Peter Sellars (1991) and Jose Montes-Baquer (1991), are examined, both of which include “Per queste tue manine.”

I undertake a feminist political approach to my systematic analysis of the three women and how their individual strengths enforce their latent power. My analysis of Don Giovanni is done so with an attitude pro the power of females in literary history,
and is done so in a similar phenomenological manner to that adopted by Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar (*The Mad Woman in the Attic*, 1974). Stripping away the convention to find the essence of the character, I deconstruct the female characters of *Don Giovanni* without the quantity of sarcasm Gilbert and Gubar employ to articulate their poignantly intelligent thoughts on gender and poetics, as to not diffuse my strength of argument in a thesis of this length.

This thesis explores facets of the sterilisation of the operatic world, and the necessary analysis of feminine characterisation, as does Kristi Brown-Montesano’s book *Understanding the Women in Mozart’s Operas*, 2007. Her book is a bountiful source of knowledge about the origins of the characters Elvira, Zerlina, and Anna in previous versions of the Don Juan story (on which Mozart and Da Ponte’s *Don Giovanni* is based). Brown-Montesano’s discussions of whether opera should be made relevant for a modern audience are echoed in my own viewpoint that Mozart’s work is not a static, and beautiful reminder of a bygone era. Although Brown-Montesano does not give weight to the immense importance (musically and dramatically) of the often-deleted duet “*Per queste tue manine*” she does confirm that it is not commonly performed today stating, “The music is comparatively uninteresting compared to the rest of the already-packed second act. One wonders, however, if this omission also reflects a discomfort with a tough-talking, blade-wielding Zerlina” (2007, 80). I therefore expand upon various ideas raised in Brown-Montesano’s book, while I thoroughly evaluate and advocate for the powerful character of Zerlina and the power of the deleted scene itself.

As a classically trained singer engaged with the role of Zerlina, my initial fascination with the implications of the omission of “*Per queste tue manine*” arose in 2007, when I was asked to perform the duet in a Brisbane operatic excerpts concert. I had no previous knowledge of the duet’s existence; but through subsequent intensive study, I have come to the conclusion that the sexually laden power play exhibited in the action of the duet reveals a great deal about all of the women in *Don Giovanni*. I approach the literature not just as a musicologist, but also as a practicing singer intent on both understanding and realising the full dimensions of the female characters in *Don Giovanni*. I systematically analyse the musical score, recordings, numerous DVD performances, program notes, and musical and non-musical literature in order to expound my viewpoint of the powerful femininity manifested within *Don Giovanni*. As an artist-researcher I have found phenomenological methods of musical analysis,
which treat every musical motive as an expression of characterological significance, most fruitful.

Many scholars, directors, and producers fail to acknowledge that “Per queste tue manine” provides music for the exciting and significant transfer of power from male to female, through the release of Zerlina’s deeply manifested rage against the philanderer, Don Giovanni. When interpreted crudely, the duet can indeed bring laughter in the opera house, but its inclusion nevertheless highlights an authoritative female seeking revenge for previous wrongdoings. The exclusion of “Per queste tue manine” from performances of Don Giovanni significantly distorts the depiction of femininity and the exhaustive struggle for power in the opera.

To explore this significance, it is essential to thoroughly evaluate the female characters of Don Giovanni in terms of their differing motivations and moral outcomes, and their complicated relationships with the male characters. It is the glimpse of an avenging Zerlina in “Per queste tue manine” that both Donna Anna and Donna Elvira exhibit elsewhere in the opera. By ambushing his future victims of seduction before the seductions occur, Elvira acts out her emotions of revenge for the psychological torment that Giovanni perpetually inflicts upon her. Anna, on the other hand, is pursuing a moral quest from the outset. Desperately wishing to avenge her father’s murder, the news that the villainous act was committed by Giovanni’s hand, catapults Anna’s rage into the realm of sadistic revenge. Feelings of revenge are linked to the sexual encounters (or lack thereof) that each of the women experiences with Giovanni.

It is important to connect the vengeful mind-sets of Elvira, Zerlina, and Anna to their sexual encounters with Giovanni, for the two are obviously intertwined. Whether or not Giovanni’s sole interest is in conducting sexual liaisons with all the women portrayed in the opera, the central female figures in Don Giovanni abundantly feel the consequences of his callous wooing. Each of the three women has a different type of sexual encounter with Giovanni: Anna endures stranger-rape; Elvira is manipulated, seduced, and abandoned; and Zerlina is initially charmed and seduced before Giovanni attempts to rape her.

Ellen Koskoff is inclined to believe that music performance facilitates astute observation, which aids the understanding of gender structure and society. Many societies rely on “conceptual frameworks of both gender and musical/social dynamics” both of which are based on notions of power and control (1989, 10).
Potently relevant to modern society, the power play between genders in *Don Giovanni* is unmistakable, and despite Giovanni’s despicable treatment of the three women, it is the women who wield the power in *Don Giovanni*. 
Chapter 1

Powerful Abandonment: Donna Elvira

If abandonment brings out the worst in women, their enslavement to men or to passion, it also brings out the worst common attitudes towards women.

—Lawrence Lipking, “Donna Abbandonata”

Elvira can be viewed as the poster girl for the immoral manner in which Giovanni deals with his sexual conquests. Giovanni has stolen Elvira’s heart, called her his wife, and after three days of ‘love’, abandoned her. He maliciously leaves Elvira to believe that such is her punishment for loving him too greatly. In Lawrence Lipking’s essay, “Donna Abbandonata,” he describes the ‘abandoned woman’ as one who is ever seeking revenge on her former lover whilst constantly straddling the fine line between love and hate (1990, 39). Lipking observes that Elvira’s character evokes a harrowing tale of inconsolable heartache, and obsession over this heartache, which audiences of Mozart’s day may have linked with the once very popular book, Les Lettres Portugaises, or Letters of a Portuguese Nun (1669). Containing five letters written by one ‘Sister Mariana Alcoforado,’ the book poignantly depicts the potently toxic cycle of feelings aroused by a man who has seduced and deserted her. Generations of readers adored the nun and saw the letters as a handbook for dealing with love lost (Lipking 1990, 37).

Scholarly opinion now attributes the letters to a male author, Gabriel de Lavergne de Guilleragues (Lipking 1990, 37). Male authorship would presumably weaken the authenticity of Sister Mariana Alcoforado’s feelings. Nonetheless, the unwavering desperation of female abandonment explored in Don Giovanni as penned by two men, Mozart and Da Ponte, is capable of encouraging intense emotions that are in touch with the feminine instinct. The genius male authors provide much scope in their work for the female ‘voice’ to be heard and appreciated. The three women are portrayed commonly from a patriarchal perspective, perhaps an outcome of predominately male direction. Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar ask on the topic of male authorship, “where does such an implicitly or explicitly patriarchal theory of literature leave literary women? If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ
can females generate texts?” (1979, 7). The writings of Mozart and Da Ponte are so intrinsically linked into the feminine psyche that although the text for Don Giovanni was not a text generated by a woman, it leaves interpretive room for the inner-most passionate (and traditionally masculine) desires of its female characters to be fully explored.

Elvira, Don Giovanni and Genre

Perhaps one of the strongest voices to convey modern feminine thought is Elvira. Throughout Don Giovanni, Elvira lives between the extremities of passion, revenge, and tenderness for Giovanni. The tumultuous temperament of Elvira’s character places her more obviously within an opera seria than an opera buffa context. Interestingly, Mozart wrote on the original score of Don Giovanni neither seria nor buffa but “drama giocoso.” These two words have inspired a copious amount of debate about the genre of Don Giovanni. Charles Ford suggests that Mozart may have refused a simple style distinction between seria and buffa “by synthesising the serious moral intentions of the older genre with the more fluid and dynamic musical forms of the newer” (1991, 157). This synthesis has fashioned numerous performance characterisation dilemmas particularly around the discerning of straightforward uses of “seria moments within buffa” forms (Ford 1991, 157).

In his “drama giocoso” Mozart combined two genres in direct confrontation, “exploiting the flexibility of his fundamentally buffa musical language to articulate the serious intentions of opera seria” (Ford 1991, 104). To execute such a fusion of comedy and drama is much dependant on the performer’s characterisations. Da Ponte’s text and Mozart’s harmonic and melodic genius provides the stimulus, of course, but unless a performer has a deep understanding of when to accentuate the buffa and seria moments, or furthermore, when to play against them, many of the intricacies of the “drama giocoso” form can be lost. Charles Osborne tentatively resolves the genre dilemma: “There is the wholeness of life itself, of which Don Giovanni might be considered a microcosm, whether one considers life or Mozart’s opera comic or tragic, or diverse, depends surely, upon one’s own temperament” (1927, 274).

Maybe it is due to Don Giovanni’s ambiguous genre classification that both original and current performance practices define the function of “Per queste tue
"manine" (the usually omitted duet) as purely providing comical relief (buffo in function). The genre of Don Giovanni is further confusing when one examines the subtext of the plot and the characters’ complex psychological states.

The Abandoned Woman

We know that the idea of the abandoned woman is neither new nor exclusive to Da Ponte’s writing; what is it about the abandoned woman and her subsequent actions that allow such feelings of revenge to rise within her? As Lipking indicates, the word ‘abandoned’ has the same ambiguity of meaning in Italian that it has in English. ‘Abandoned’ as an attributive adjective is ambiguously suggestive of both the person who has been abandoned by someone or something, and one who has abandoned himself—or herself—to something primitively instinctual, such as the desire for revenge (Lipking 1990, 39). In the case of the abandoned woman, if once away from her lover she sees nothing left to live for, abandoning herself to a spiral of revenge will seem the next logical step (1990, 39). In her lust for revenge begins the transfer of power from the man who has abandoned the woman, to the avenging woman who has been left. This concept is exemplified by the actions of Elvira.

The typical contemporary dramatic interpretation of Don Giovanni portrays Elvira’s feverish obsession with Giovanni as one in which he always has the upper hand, in any situation. Elvira’s relationship with Giovanni is thus interpreted as one in which Giovanni holds the power, because he left her in the first place. Foolishly, in traditional operatic interpretations, Elvira pines after Giovanni, perhaps seeking revenge only to receive his attention, which she hopes will inspire a rekindling of his affections for her. This motive is indeed evident in the ‘balcony scene,’ Act II, where Elvira wavers in her feelings about Giovanni and finds herself romantically fascinated by him once again. Interpretations that portray Elvira’s sole motivation for living as seeking Giovanni’s affections completely ignore her diversely faceted personality that is dictated in the score and libretto. Interpretations of Elvira’s character in performance range from melodrama to farce due to an uncertainty about what constitutes an appropriate characterisation of an abandoned woman in a “drama giocoso” (Lipking 1990, 41). Often unacknowledged is the fact that Elvira is, in many ways, virtuous in her vengeful pursuit of Giovanni during the opera.
Unlike Elvira, Giovanni never offers his vulnerable feelings truly to anyone, which ensures his emotional detachment from society. Consequently, Giovanni lives a life of self-denial, which leaves him emotionally underdeveloped (Lipking 1990, 40). Elvira, however, does not feel that any emotion is too strong or shameful to express; her anxiety, fury and longing are explicitly physical and verbal illustrations of emotions that as humans we are taught to conceal from a very early age. The idea that Elvira provides an openly emotional outpouring significantly reveals the true nature of humans through operatic performance. Jean Starobinski discusses in his book, *Enchantment, The Seductress is Opera* that music is the only art-form that can carry such heightened emotions. He says, “Musical art has the privilege of carrying the emotions to their highest degree … music produces an emotional amplification” (Starobinski 2008, 77). Mozart artfully achieves this emotional amplification.

The power Elvira gains from her abandonment by Giovanni is exposed when she warns Zerlina of Giovanni’s wrongdoings. Her dynamism is depicted in the aria “Il fuggi il traditor” (Act I No. 8) by the upper strings when they play a triumphant marcato semiquaver pick-up, followed by a sustained minim, which is then slurred to a quaver. This syncopation significantly introduces Elvira’s fiery tenacity, breathing feminine ferociousness into the orchestral music. The gesture is repeated three times, and on each repetition, the motive descends in pitch, before moving upward again when Mozart deviates from the original (figure 1). This descent in pitch illuminates that Elvira gains energy and power from the heavens (the orchestra transfer this power from ‘God’), which energises her vocal entry. The aria begins in D major, the tonic major of the opera’s key D minor. This choice of tonality ensures the aria’s undeniable impact as the mood shifts from the suffering and passion of minor, to the strength and ethos that major tonality inspires.

A driving rhythm in the upper strings is consistent throughout the aria, and aids in providing forward propulsion. The soaring melodic line of the upper strings is complemented by the strongly articulated dotted quaver rhythms heard in the lower strings. These dotted-quaver rhythms in the cello and double bass emulate the sound of a horse, galloping on its way to battle. It can inspire imagery that Elvira, betrayed yet empowered by her abandonment, is here to save Zerlina from the ultimately fickle lover and heartbreaker that is Giovanni. The torment of Elvira climaxes on a high A, the dominant, after a series of embellished semiquavers (figure 2). These semiquavers emphasise and elongate the word “fallace,” which means to ‘mislead,’ or in this case,
‘betray.’ Elvira ensures that Zerlina hears her message warning of Giovanni’s immorality, consequently reiterating the word “fallace” before reaching a climax on another top A. The feeling of great triumph created by the dotted rhythm motive, together with the soaring violin line, splendidly transforms Elvira’s mental state into one of avenging euphoria. By unleashing her history with Giovanni as a warning to his current conquest, Elvira now has the chance of revenge.

Figure 1. “Il fuggi il traditor” (Act I No. 8) from Don Giovanni
Introducing his argument that the role of Elvira is one of great feminine power, Lipking aptly examines abandoned men as well as women, focussing particularly on the tragic circumstances of *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles (c.429 BC). He reveals that feelings of abandonment affect both sexes, noting that some psychologists would say that a fear of abandonment by either lovers or parents is a primal fear for men as well as women (1990, 46). Relating this notion of fear to *Don Giovanni*, we can speculate that Giovanni leaves his sexual conquests, including Elvira, before they can leave him, therefore preventing his feelings—primarily fearful of abandonment—from being stung. By abandoning his feelings, Giovanni deludes himself into thinking he has triumphed over his emotions; yet in reality, it is the punishment of emotional isolation he faces (Lipking 1990, 47).

The main function of an operatic aria is to deeply explore the emotional challenges and mental state of an individual character. Other than the Act I No. 11 “Champagne aria” “Fin ch’han dal vino” (which can hardly be called an aria due to its
overly simplistic melody and folk-like characteristics), Giovanni is the only character in *Don Giovanni* not to be provided an operatic vehicle in which to divulge his innermost desires and emotions to the audience. Mozart’s omission of such a vehicle leads me to believe that Giovanni is so emotionally underdeveloped, and so cold of heart, that given an aria he would not possess any genuinely deep emotions to fill its music. His abandonment of emotion and emotional contact leaves him as a man caught up in the materialistic aim of acquiring an exhaustive list of conquests, rather than interacting in genuine relationships with mankind: “Giovanni the materialist has no fear of the laws of heaven or earth” (Till, 1992, 213). If Giovanni fears nothing, then he is clearly devoid of any emotional substance, contrary to the passionately emotional Elvira.

**Elvira: the Hysterical Protector**

In traditional performances of *Don Giovanni*, each entrance of Elvira is so hysterical and full of wild abandonment that one wonders whether the directors wish for their audience to laugh (Lipking, 1990, 44). According to Ford, Elvira is presented as ‘hysterical’ in the rationalist (and strictly etymological)\(^1\) sense of the word, as understood in the Enlightenment (1991, 153). Catherine Clément passionately states in *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*:

> If women are the only hysterics, the first lie, championed by Freud following so many others, will always pursue us. If men can be hysterics, we will share equally in the fantasy, the masquerade, the imaginary that is intersected by sexes escaping into each other, and we will no longer be mad or damned. We, as women, will be mad together with this cotton hero, and we will surround him with the tenderness he deserves. Then perhaps he will get back something more than the phallus he wears desperately with the guile of defeat—his missing sex. (1989, 37)

Incorporating the ideas of Clément into the context of *Don Giovanni*, we might judge that Elvira, who is commonly dramatised as hysterical, is no more hysterical than her male counterparts. Why, then, should female degrees of hysteria be named, criticised,

\(^1\) ‘Hysterical’ stems from the Greek *hysterikos* meaning “of the womb, suffering in the womb,” or Latin *hystericus* meaning “of the womb” related to the neurosis of a woman who has a dysfunctional uterus (Harper, Online Etymology Dictionary). This theory was still relevant in the Enlightenment, where it was thought that it was a biological determinism that the behaviour of women was dictated by the function of their uterus.
and mocked through an art-form dominated by men for centuries? What many opera companies interpret in Elvira as ‘hysterical’ is actually a manifestation of desperate emotion; Elvira’s frantic attempts to save the women around her from emotional affliction take a personal toll.

Liane Curtis’s article “The Sexual Politics of Teaching Mozart’s Don Giovanni” explores Elvira’s protective quest: Elvira warns Anna of Giovanni, and does everything in her capability to ensure Zerlina is not subjected to his emotional or physical abuse. Curtis’s interpretation of Elvira’s involvement in the action, and her need to prevent harm, gives Elvira greater power than Giovanni. Indeed, Elvira’s protective nature is evident as she hurriedly enters and breaks up Giovanni and Zerlina’s seductive scene in Act I No. 7 duet “La ci darem la mano”. She immediately warns Zerlina away from Giovanni.

As a method of self-preservation, Giovanni describes Elvira as a mad woman, which, according to Lipking, was the common conception of the abandoned woman in the late eighteenth century (1990, 43). Elvira’s aria, “Il Fuggi il traditor,” which precedes the duet, draws from the opera seria genre with its heightened drama and musical language. Mozart’s writing demands a flexible vocal technique to perform the vocal gymnastics that depict Elvira’s empowered fury. Thanks to Elvira, Zerlina fails to become another notch on Giovanni’s bedpost.

Elvira: The Truth-bearer

The name Elvira in Spanish means ‘truth’ (Hispanic Culture Online, 2007). This meaning is appropriate to Elvira’s character; her desire to tell the truth prevails throughout the opera, and her truthfulness is evident through her continuous warnings to others to beware of Giovanni’s criminal and barbaric nature. Elvira’s protectiveness is firmly rooted in her zealous assumption of the mission of truth-bearer. She reveals Giovanni’s criminality to Donna Anna and Don Ottavio in the ensemble finale of Act I. Following Elvira’s revelations, the trio plan to trap Giovanni, and they consequently intercept his attempted rape of Zerlina.

Despite the power of Elvira’s wild abandonment and her all-consuming call to expose the truth of Giovanni’s character, it is to be acknowledged that she is divided in her feelings towards Giovanni. Like any jilted woman who has experienced intense feelings of passion for a man, she finds it almost impossible to abandon those
feelings. At numerous points in Don Giovanni, Elvira exposes the vulnerable dividedness of her feelings; and even when she realises that Giovanni’s death is imminent and her thirst for revenge is quenched, a part of her emerges full of anxiety and longing. Da Ponte explores Elvira’s emotional uncertainty and inner conflict in the Act II No. 21c recitative “In quali eccessi, o Numi,” which is followed by the aria, “Mi tradi, quell’alma ingrata.” The excerpt below shows the conclusion of the recitative, and the first section of the aria. A literal translation of the Italian has been chosen because practising singers call upon literal English translations rather than re-worked English translations to decipher where Mozart (or any composer) has intended musical emphasis and perhaps sentiment on particular words in performance. The Italian resonates with Elvira’s confused feelings towards Giovanni.

In quali eccessi, o Numi!
In what excess, O Gods!

In quai misfatti orribili, tremendi,
In what misdeeds horrible (and) tremendous

È avvolto il sciagurato!
Is entangled the wretch!
Ah no, non puote tardar l’ira del cielo,
Ah no, cannot delay the anger of heaven,

La giustizia tardar.
Justice be delayed.

Sentir già parmi la fatale saetta,
Feel already it seems to me the fatal lightning bolt,

Che glio piomba sul capo!
That falls on him on his head!

Aperto veggio ol baratro mortal...
Open I see the abyss mortal…
Misera Elvira, che contrasto d’affetti in sen ti nasce!
Wretched Elvira, what contrasting affections in [your]² bosom are born!

Perché questi sospiri? E queste amabascie?
Why these sighs and these sufferings?

Mi tradi, quell’alma ingrata,
Has betrayed me that soul ungrateful,

Infelice, o Dio! mi fa
Unhappy, oh God, he makes me!

Ma tradita e abbandonata,
But, betrayed and abandoned,

Provo ancor per lui pietá.
I feel still for him pity.

Quando sento il mio tormento
When I feel my torment,

Di vendetta il cor favella,
Of vengeance my heart speaks,

Ma se guardo il suo cimento
But when I see his danger

Palpitando il cor mi va
Throbbing my heart starts

(Castel, 354–55)
The torment of Elvira is spurred both by her changeable feelings towards Giovanni, and her vengeful satisfaction in ensuring that he does not wrong another woman. The

² Words written in square brackets in translated passages have been inserted by the author.
inner dialogues of her emotions are illustrated beautifully in Mozart’s writing. Lipking remarks that Elvira stands for the archetypal feminine principle or womb that wants to be protected, loved, and never lonely again (1990, 38), an idea sympathetic with Elvira’s behaviour during this scene. This positive valuation of the womb is contrary to Enlightenment pathologisations of the womb, its rising hot vapours supposedly leading to hysteria. Lipking also highlights the instinctive motherly quality which comes from bearing female reproductive organs (1990, 38). Elvira longs for closeness to Giovanni to temporarily soothe her loneliness, perhaps out of a need to nurture the maternal characteristics of her genetic makeup. The recitative “In quali ecessi, o Numi” contains numerous musical devices that aid in the projection of Elvira’s powerful femininity, and nourish her strength to resist her previous romantic attraction to Giovanni.

Elvira foresees the justice of God’s punishment for Giovanni, and is frightened by this vision. She has constantly warned others of Giovanni; now she finds that she needs to warn Giovanni himself of his fate. Mozart uses a trilled semiquaver resolved in a demi-semiquaver nachschlag motive in the upper strings (figure 3) to musically depict this premonition.

Figure 3. “In quali ecessi, o Numi” (Act II No. 21b) from Don Giovanni
The *sforzando* on the dotted crotchet that precedes the trilled semiquaver motive provides gripping dramatic tension pre-empting Elvira’s cries. The strings *marcato* playing of this motive’s unembellished version projects the heavy emotional storm that is brewing within Elvira. Her powerful emotions seem to become unbearable towards the end of the recitative, when she wavers in her feelings of revenge and decides to pray for Giovanni. A ‘sighing’ motive can be heard in the upper strings at this moment (figure 4), which is brought into being by the rapid movement of major sixth leaps, each followed by a semitone. These musical sighs are like the wind in a storm—a storm that is ready to explode with torrents of emotion.

The aria provides many vocal challenges for the performer. Mozart portrays the intensity of the drama by sending the voice soaring and leaping over almost two octaves throughout the piece. By directing Elvira’s vocal line to the stratospheric high region of A flat, A natural, and B flat, Mozart ensures a timbre of piercing resonance, which accentuates the extremes of her feelings. Her emotions are sent heavenward. Elvira’s tormented punctuations, too, are like the wind in a storm—the wind of her untamed fury. The idea of wind is orchestrally depicted particularly when she sings of her abandonment. This ‘wind’ motive consists of an upward leap, followed by a descending line of six quavers. It is passed from the flute to the clarinet, to the voice on the word *ancor*, to the bassoon, and finally to the cello (figure 5).

Figure 4. “*In quali eccessi, o Numi*” (Act II No. 21b) from *Don Giovanni*
The texturally entwined nature of this motive provides another example of how Elvira’s powerful femininity, identified by her betrayal, is portrayed musically by Mozart. The motive’s composition is intensely connected with dramatic context, and it is this connection that gives the aria its ethereal quality.

The Future for Elvira

A sympathetically researched interpretation of Elvira’s potential strengths is vital for what I would consider a successful performance of the character. Many productions focus on her supposed weakness of character, as is particularly evident in Montes-Baquer’s 1991 production, in which Elvira is portrayed as completely helpless and neurotic. The audience is led to believe that she is smitten with Giovanni, and that her feminine longing for him is that of a somewhat silly woman. I believe that an interpretation depicting Elvira as a woman with a strong sense of self, possessed of the wisdom of one who has suffered in life, serves both the text and the music with greater artistic integrity. Directors should bestow on Elvira the intellectual credit she deserves, instead of reducing her character to that of a weakling consumed by neuroses.
Chapter 2

Powerful Femininity: Zerlina

Eroticizing a request to be beaten is in this situation a daring gesture—a show of strength, as I think the music makes clear. We need not look away from it with the embarrassed distress of our postmodern wisdom, explain it away as “the way they thought then.”

—Mary Ann Hunter, Opera Buffa in Mozart’s Vienna

Zerlina: the servant girl; the weak role; the soubrette. Why should we worry about Zerlina? Liane Curtis insists that there is in fact a great need for us to worry about Zerlina (2000, 125). Not only is Zerlina caught in a difficult struggle to establish domestic stability within a potentially abusive relationship with Masetto, she is also being hunted by Giovanni like sexual prey. Joseph Kerman, who casually remarks in his book Listen that there is no need to worry about Zerlina because she uses her two seductive arias to win over her husband and Giovanni, apparently sparks Curtis’s outrage over Zerlina’s treatment in academia (2008, 266). While Kerman draws a parallel between the seductive behaviour of Giovanni and Zerlina, Curtis protests that there is no such parallel, because Zerlina uses her seductive power purely because it is the only power she has: Zerlina is the young, lower class wife of Masetto who has no choice but to try and make the best out of a bad situation (2000, 126). Sex is clearly not Zerlina’s ultimate goal: peace and stability in her marriage is what she desires. Conversely, Giovanni uses his power, status, wealth, and charisma to seduce women in accordance with his sexual impulses. His musical style lulls his prey into submission (Curtis 2000, 126).

“Zerlina’s willingness to submit to male abuse [in “Batti, batti, o bel Masetto” (Act I No. 12)] can only be painful to a modern audience” (Allanbrook in Siren Songs, 63). However, Zerlina invites violence knowing that she has the upper hand in the situation, a fact that is commonly misinterpreted in performance.

The suggestion of brutal behaviour may not have been so offensive in the eighteenth century. Eighteenth Century Women: An Anthology is a compilation of primary source material from the time when Mozart lived. Although the compilation explores the treatment of women in England, it provides some background into the
view of women during this time. Despite being written fifty years prior to *Don Giovanni*’s conception, Daniel Defoe’s remarks in the 1724 book *The Great Law of Subordination* highlight the primitive and ill-educated attitude towards domestic violence that existed during the eighteenth century:

> The case of the women in England is truly deplorable, and there is scarce a good husband now to twenty that merited that name in former times; nor was beating of wives ever so much the usage in England, as it is now; the difference is manifest, and they tell me, that ‘tis so frequent now, especially among the meaner sort of people, that to hear a woman cry murther now, scarce gives any alarm; the neighbours scarce stir at it, and if they do, if they come out in a fright, and ask one another what’s the matter, and where is it that they cry murther? The common answer to one another is only thus; ‘tis nothing neighbour, but such a one a beating his wife; O dear, says the other, is that all? And in they go again, compos’d and easy, as hearing a thing no great consequence, that has no great novelty in it, nor much danger, and what, if it had, they don’t much care to meddle with. (Hill 1984, 143)

The position on marital abuse expressed above certainly gives weight to concerns about the literary content of “*Batti, batti.*” Depending on the dramatic interpretation chosen for Zerlina’s character, the singer can either foreground or disengage with the masochistic nature of Zerlina’s words:

*Batti, batti, o bel Masetto,*
Beat me, beat me, o handsome Masetto,

*La tua povera Zerlina;*
Your poor Zerlina;

*Starò qui come agnellina*
I’ll be here like [a] little lamb

*Le tue botte ad aspettar.*
Your blows waiting for [waiting for your blows]
Lascierò straziarmi il crine,
I will let you tear out my hair,

Lascierò cavarmi gli occhi,
I will let you gouge out my eyes,

E el care tue manine
And the dear your little hands [And your dear little hands]

Lieta poi saprò baciare.
Happy then will be able to kiss [I will happily kiss]

Ah, lo vedo, non hai core!
Ah, I see it, you haven’t (the) heart!

Pace, pace, o vita mia,
Peace, peace oh life mine,

In contenti ed allegria
In happiness and joy,

Notte e di vogliam passar.
Night and day let us pass.

(Castel, 310–11)

This libretto is alarming for any feminist, or for any woman in touch with the pang of domestic abuse. We must look further than the poetry of Da Ponte in order to decipher the true concern it may bring:

Defining poetry as a mirror held up to nature, the mimetic aesthetic that begins with Aristotle and descends through Sidney, Shakespeare, and Johnson implies that the poet, like a lesser God, has made or engendered an alternative, mirror-universe in which he actually seems to enclose or trap shadows of reality. (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 5)
Perhaps the poetry of Da Ponte does trap “shadows of reality”—but the truth of Zerlina’s situation is real; however, it is ultimately physically unthreatening. Due to the changes in feminist values since the Enlightenment, understanding Zerlina and utilising this understanding through operatic direction is of paramount importance to ensure its relevance in society. Zerlina does not believe that in order to save her marriage she should promote a violent punishment for her misbehaviour with Giovanni; rather she knowingly suggests violence in order to emphasise her regret over her indiscretion. Pure acceptance that Zerlina’s suggestion of violence is without intellectual premeditation or irony, robs her of her cerebral capabilities.

In an effort to diffuse the violent sentiment of the text and portray Zerlina’s understated power in the aria, Mozart has composed a soaring melody, dainty and innocent in character. The first violins imitate the vocal line with slurred legato playing, whilst the cello obbligato consists of an arpeggiated semiquaver pattern (figure 6), which should be played smoothly and lightly to match the quality of Zerlina’s voice. When Zerlina deviates from this melody, it is picked up by the flute, oboe and bassoon, which beautifully match the timbre required for the ‘sweet’ sounding aria.

Figure 6. “Batti, batti o bel Masetto” (Act I No. 12) from Don Giovanni
Mozart has chosen the same time signature groupings of 2/4 and 6/8 as used in “La ci darem la mano” (Act I No. 7) (Giovanni’s attempted seduction of Zerlina). Wye Jamison Allanbrook explains in his book Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart that “La ci darem la mano” is a companion piece to “Batti, batti” (1983, 267), but the 6/8 sections of “Batti, batti” possess greater emotional intensity than the 2/4, and are livelier in rhythmic pulse, even if there is no real shift in tempo (Brown-Montesano 2007, 77). Such emotional intensity depicts Zerlina’s acknowledgement of the penetrating cycle of abuse she endures in her relationship with Masetto.

**Enduring a Cycle of Violence**

Allanbrook observes that Zerlina is co-dependent in her relationship with Masetto, which alternates between beatings and reconciliations (2000, 62). Despite the juxtaposition of a lyrical, cheerful melodic line and accompaniment with a seriously disturbing libretto, Zerlina does use her powerful femininity to convey to Masetto her desire to be with him. Her wish for domestic stability is all-consuming, and her suggestion that she be beaten like an animal therefore seems strangely appropriate to her. In contrast to Kerman, Allanbrook argues that although Zerlina is cast as the seductress, she is seduced repeatedly, and is participating in a cycle of abuse as the “perpetual victim of poverty and the male violence it engenders” (2000, 63). In performance, the soprano must interpret and construct her characterisation of Zerlina with the cyclic nature of her abusive situation at the forefront of her mind. In terms of characterising Zerlina’s arias one must ask if she been in this exact situation with Masetto before, and if so, have her previous methods for diffusing the situation worked? If not, where does her method of diffusion originate? For victims of cyclical violence, it must be certain that harnessing strength to rationally nullify the situation comes from their previous experiences or will for domestic peace. Allanbrook also notes that despite “Batti, batti” being commonly labelled an aria of seduction, no true seduction takes part (2000, 63). Perhaps Masetto wants to be seduced, but there is no true sensuality here. Instead, both Zerlina and Masetto are sentenced to the bleak scenario of their domestic instability and unrewarded seduction (Allanbrook 2000, 63).

On the topic of domestic abuse, Allanbrook remarks that “only a very strong woman can make a joke about female submission, and by making it she reduces the
threat to a cartoon gesture that Masetto sheepishly grants is inappropriate. By naming violence, she unmans it” (2000, 64). Allanbrook is correct in his statement. Zerlina is a strong character who resourcefully and cannily uses her intelligence to ease her uncomfortable existence. Zerlina knows that male violence should be feared, not encouraged, and therefore she encourages it only to protect herself from it. By making a joke about the beating, she is throwing the distrust and sexual jealousy of Masetto right back at him.

Charles Osborne’s depiction of Zerlina in the book *The Complete Operas of Mozart* concludes that “*Batti, batti*” is “too simple to be named an aria,” and that its simplicity is a musical depiction of Zerlina’s simple-natured and “lightly flirtatious” character (1927, 269). Osborne suggests that her reference to domestic abuse is actually her invitation for Masetto to beat her for being so “naughty” (1927, 269). The naughtiness referred to is that of the playful, sexual nature, rather than the act of committing an indiscretion. Osborne’s offerings provide a superficiality that for a modern audience is completely irrelevant, and which in my opinion, over-sexualises the situation. One hopes that modern audiences do not share the morality of Defoe’s England, which would approve a women’s “erotic request to be beaten” on stage (Allanbrook 2000, 63). Nicholas Till discusses how “*Batti, batti*” uses masochistic language in Zerlina’s inviting of sexual torture, continuing that “Zerlina’s sexuality is not sublimated in an expression of tortuous resolve … her appeal is frankly and openly sexual” (1992, 216). I do not wish to deny the sexual pull of Zerlina’s character: however, I believe that her resourcefulness, ingenuity, and intelligence are constantly mistaken for overtly sexual enticement. To simplify Zerlina is to miss the fact that it is Zerlina’s access to powerful femininity which directs much of the action that takes place in *Don Giovanni*, and therefore her character deserves to be justly debated and scrutinised, not simplified.

Allanbrook suggests that “*Batti, batti*” should be sung against the *obbligato* with a slight hesitation on approach to the strong beat in the opening phrase. Other suggestions include a lack of physical contact with Masetto and for the aria to be sung with an acknowledging smile rather than tears (2000, 65). A fine example of this portrayal is Peter Sellars’s 1991 production of *Don Giovanni* (set in the Bronx, New York), an attempt at social realism, in which Sellars portrays Zerlina with feminine integrity. Despite some rather shocking references to modern society (Leporello and Giovanni shooting up heroine, sniffing cocaine, and eating food from McDonalds)
many of Sellar’s directional choices are consistent with each character’s psychology. Sellars’s direction of “Batti, batti” captures Allanbrook’s aforementioned dramatic effect; the glazed eyes of a woman who accepts her situation. Like Allanbrook and Sellars, I believe that such an interpretation guarantees that the audience will know Zerlina is no mere fool. Through her detachment from Masetto, Zerlina is no longer viewed as a seductress and is rather seen as making the best of the unfortunate situation she finds herself in.

Zerlina’s adaptability, Allanbrook cautions, ought not to be mistaken for the instruction of experience, but instead be seen as a manifestation of her instinctive femininity (1983, 266). By resisting the temptation to over-dramatise the aria with tears and physical pandering over Masetto, a production in this manner will help the audience to connect with the strength of Zerlina’s femininity, which she accesses to mend her tribulations. Allanbrook states that if this distance is not present, the image of sexual submission in “Batti, batti” will most likely offend a modern audience (2000, 65). Naturally, how a character is ultimately portrayed on the stage depends on the intentions of the director. In order for Don Giovanni to remain pertinent to the times depends upon how the director deals with the subjects, such as sexual submission.

**Should we be Frightened for Zerlina, or Commend her for her Bravery?**

The idea of domestic abuse that pervades the libretto raises concern for her physical safety as well as for her psychological well-being. Women are adaptable creatures, and although Zerlina endures an unpleasant marriage, she will not allow it to depress her zest for life. Christopher Benn remarks in *Mozart on the Stage*, “Zerlina is the most normal woman of the opera. She is not a coquette, nor an inexperienced country girl. Don Giovanni is not the first man with whom she has had to deal, nor the first of the aristocracy who has paid attention to her” (1946, 74). We must not be misled by Benn’s statement inferring that Zerlina has a past doused in promiscuity with the aristocracy. Rather, we can interpret that she can handle herself in any situation, due to her intelligence and strong feminine instincts. After her first encounter with Giovanni, she has had enough of him. This is not solely because of Elvira’s warnings, but also because she accepts that once the glamour of their first meeting fades, abandonment will follow (Benn 1946, 74).
Many modern critics depict Zerlina as a child who obtains a “natural femininity,” and who on her wedding day helplessly succumbs to Don Giovanni’s courting (Brown-Montesano 2007, 73). I contend that Zerlina is anything but helpless regarding the aristocratic philanderer, Giovanni. She resists the temptation of a lucrative marriage offer, before experiencing what I construe as a temporary moment of poor judgement when together with Giovanni’s she sings “Andiam, andiam, mio bene” / “Let’s go, let’s go, my treasure,” at the conclusion of “La ci darem la mano.” Following “La ci darem la mano” Zerlina’s mind is altered, and the upper-class fantasy Giovanni has presented to her seems more and more undesirable; should she remain in a loveless marriage of similar rank, or be sexually abused by Giovanni? As a consequence of her revelation about Giovanni’s false promises, Zerlina removes herself from the situation, under the helpful guidance of Elvira. Allanbrook states that Zerlina is the “only character who finds a viable answer to the question of how to live in a world which is under Don Giovanni’s shadow” (1983, 258). Despite the admission that she is neither in love with nor obsessed with Giovanni, Zerlina does—through the revelation of her close encounter with him—desire revenge for Giovanni’s wrongdoings. Had she lacked common sense, she may have ended up like one of his previous conquests. Her thirst for revenge, which is shared by her fellow female characters, radiates her powerful femininity outwardly. This strength is physically and mentally applied against Leporello in the commonly deleted duet, “Per queste tue manine.”

*Per queste tue manine*

Following the 1787 premiere of Don Giovanni at the Prague National Theatre, the opera toured in 1788 to Vienna, where Mozart and Da Ponte amended it with the insertion of an aria for Ottavio, an additional scene for Elvira (so that her role was more equal to that of Anna) and the duet for Zerlina and Leporello, “Per queste tue manine.” These amendments are deemed to be due to the change of cast from Prague to Vienna (Rushton, 2010) rather than for the creation of artistic or characterological meaning. The common performance practice today is that if “Per queste tue manine” is included, “Il mio tesoro” is excluded, primarily due to time constraints demanded by an already lengthy second act. An analysis of how these alterations affect Zerlina’s representation of femininity, as constructed by Mozart and Da Ponte, is paramount
when seeking to understand the true nature of the characters in Don Giovanni.

Julian Rushton and like-minded scholars do not consider “Per queste tue manine” important to the characteristic integrity of Don Giovanni. Regarding the exclusion of the duet, Rushton declares that it “is the only piece in Don Giovanni which does not merit strenuous efforts for its inclusion, and it should only be done if the whole Vienna sequence is undertaken” (1981, 55). The popular notion that the function of the duet is only to remedy the lack of farce elsewhere in the opera is challenged when one considers the female characters’ underlying motivations. Throughout Don Giovanni, Giovanni is personified as the ultimate seducer who displays powerful masculinity for which he is often either praised or ridiculed. Through the inclusion of “Per queste tue manine,” Zerlina personally appropriates and acts out the powerful masculinity of Giovanni, while harnessing her own feminine ingenuity as she seeks revenge for his wrongdoings.

Osborne comments that the duet is a “charming and amusing piece of music, and it is a pity, that one never hears it” (1927, 271). However, it is not the melody’s pleasant ‘charms’ that are of interest here; of paramount importance is the visual image of its accompanying stage action that projects Zerlina’s power to the audience. The image of Zerlina attacking Leporello, in revenge for Giovanni’s treatment of Masetto (whilst her loyalty prevails) elevates Zerlina to heroine status. It is she who obtains physical revenge over the pair (Leporello and Giovanni)—a pair who made the lives of those around her most difficult if not traumatic. Not even Giovanni’s descent into hell can conjure as much exciting imagery as does this duet, because now the once ‘hunted’ is the ‘hunter.’ Ellen Koskoff states on gender inter-play that “Music performance can also be used as a context for symbolic gender role reversal and/or transformation, allowing for inter-gender communication and the mediation of antagonisms” (1989, 11). Zerlina acquires a heroic status when she ties up Leporello and threatens him with a knife. Exemplifying Koskoff’s idea, this threatening action is deeply symbolic of gender power transformation. Such stage directions evoke within the audience images of other avenging heroines in literature and cinema. The libretto too, at this point, is exhilarating and menacing in content.

Leporello:

_Per queste tue manine candied e tenerelle,_

By these your hands, white and soft,
Per queste fresca pelle, abbi pietà di me!
By this white skin, have pity on me!

Zerlina:
Non v’è pieta, briccone, son una tigre irata,
There’ll be no pity, villain. I’m an angry tiger,

Un aspide, un leone, no, pieta non v’è!
An asp, a lion. No, I’ve no pity!

Leporello:
Ah di fuggir si provi!
Ah, if only I could try to escape!

Zerlina:
Sei morto se ti muovi.
You’re dead if you move.

Leporello:
Barbari, ingiusti Dei!
Cruel, unjust gods!

In mano di costei chi capitar mi fè?
In the hands of this one who made me fall?

Zerlina:
Barbaro traditore!
Cruel man, traitor!

Del tuo padrone il core avessi qui con te.
of your master the heart had I here with you [if your master had a heart he would be here with you]

Leporello:
Deh! non mi stringer tanto,
Please! Don’t blind me so much,
l’anima mia sen va.
my soul is leaving me.

Zerlina:
Sen vada o resti, intanto non partirai di qua.
Let it go or stay, meanwhile you won’t leave from here.

Leporello:
Che strette, oh Dei, che botte!
What straits, oh gods, what blows!

è giorno, over...è notte?
is it daylight or night?

Che scosse di tremuoto, che buia oscurità!
What shaking of [an] earthquake, what murky darkness!

Zerlina:
Di gioia e di diletto
Out of joy and out of delight

Sento brillarmi il petto,
I feel shining in me the breast [I feel shining in my breast]

cosi cogli uomini, cosi si fa.
like this, with men, like this is how it’s done.

(Castel, 286–87)

The music of “Per queste tue manine” is just as thrilling as the on-stage action. The duet commences with Leporello’s pleads to Zerlina to have pity on him. The first and second violin parts play important roles in imitating the mood specified by the libretto. Mozart has composed a ‘mocking’ gesture (figure 7), which emphasises Zerlina’s belief that Leporello’s request is laughable, as he does not bear a chance of winning her over.
The composition of the vocal line encourages exciting stage direction as evident when Leporello sings “abbi pietà di me” (figure 8). On the word “me” Mozart instructs the voice to sing a dotted arpeggiated motive, which evokes powerful imagery of a furious Zerlina pulling the rope tighter around Leporello’s neck, causing his voice to jump.

Figure 8. “Per queste tue manine” (Act II No. 21a) from Don Giovanni
When Zerlina’s vocal line begins, the audience is aware of the sharp contrast between the emotions of the two characters. Contrasting with Leporello’s low, sluggish vocal line, Zerlina enters with a fiery quaver sequence, which is punctuated by the orchestra after each statement. She demonstrates vocal agility throughout the following musical phrase, two descending semi-quaver scales, followed by leaping semiquaver and dotted semiquavers. Zerlina mockingly repeats Leporello’s earlier vocal pattern on “me” when she sings “ve.” The audience should note this cheeky use of repetition, as Mozart has silenced the orchestra to give impact to the text.

Here begins the quintessential ‘duet’ of the piece where the juxtaposition of the characters’ sensibilities is fully recognisable. The strings provide rhythmic drive and momentum throughout this section, and their highly ornamented flourishes aid in propelling the blazing nature of the text and drama. The music shown in figure 9 exposes a change of mood, signified by the shift in melodic contour. In an effort to establish the genuineness of Leporello’s fear of Zerlina, Mozart has composed a repeated motive of a descending dotted-quaver, joined to a semi-quaver. After four repetitions, the motive is completed in the following bar by sobbing monosyllables, punctuated by rests. The orchestra heightens this variation with repeated semi-quavers (upper-strings) and quavers (cello/bass). Emphasising Leporello’s anxious temperament, Zerlina’s retort (figure 10)—for which Mozart borrows the same rhythmic patterns, ascending in motion—balances the section and further strengthens her fiery characteristics. Leporello responds to Zerlina’s violence via accented sobs, interspersed with crotchet and quaver rests. Zerlina will not stand for his melodrama and commences her earlier melody, stealing the limelight, and allowing her potent femininity to take control.
Hermann Abert describes the additions Mozart made to *Don Giovanni* for the Vienna libretto as dramatically harmful (1976, 18). He goes on to suggest that of these revisions, “Per queste tue manine” is “a coarse little piece that is hardly connected with the story, completely out of character, and calculated only to satisfy the public’s desire for a good laugh” (1976, 18). It is difficult to understand how such an intricate piece of music containing a visually compelling dramatization of gender power relations could be ‘coarse’ or ‘just for laughs.’ The music of *Don Giovanni* deserves much more credit than Abert is willing to bestow. “Per queste tue manine” has the
ability to change the dramatic outcome of the opera, and its musical and stage action empowers all of the female characters. Zerlina effectively represents the wounded feminine spirit seeking revenge on the men who have degraded, abandoned, and mistreated the women around her. According to the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, “society is powerfully structured by gender relations that conspire to render women less powerful than men” (Buckingham, 2004, 5907). This well-known actuality must be acknowledged and confronted in opera. I fear therefore that the “coarseness” Mr. Abert refers to may be a diffusion of the duet’s real underlying agenda: a woman getting her own back from a man. Perhaps such a thought is still intimidating to many men in the twenty-first century.
Chapter 3

Powerful Revenge: Donna Anna

Music is not simply, like mime or other gestural arts, a universal language capable of expressing the fine nuances of feeling. Music has the power to render expression of passions more intense and confers on them a heightened energy. Musical art has the privilege of carrying the emotions to their highest degree—something the most sublime poetry is unable to do.

—Jean Starobinski, Enchantment: The Seductress in Opera

Is what really happened in Donna Anna’s room between her and Don Giovanni important? The late-night intrusion by Giovanni into Anna’s room is followed by the death of Anna’s father, and these two events catapult the plot of the entire opera to its end. The usual directorial assumption is that Giovanni took possession of Anna—that either she gave herself to the strange intruder, or he raped her. Anna’s relentless avenging fire, as well as allusions throughout the libretto to her lost purity, suggests that indeed a rape did occur. Anna’s actions as they follow this fateful night result in Giovanni’s downfall; the occurrence of a rape encourages further understanding of Anna’s infallibly avenging attitude, and of her unbreakable task to avenge not only her father’s death but also her own ravaged honour.

It is insulting to Anna’s moral character to assume that she willingly took Giovanni (or even her fiancé Ottavio) into her bedroom. Mozart and Da Ponte highlight Anna’s high regard for purity throughout Don Giovanni by foregrounding her strong moral values, taught to her by her military father, values that would not have been passed over for any sort of seductive ‘magic’ Giovanni possessed (Till, 1992, 210). Catherine Clément declares, “The implicitly violent idea that all women must fall victim to sexual flattery by virtue of their nature, and its articulation by means of the most beautiful music, renders such moments deeply unsettling and provocative” (cited by Ford 1991, 1). Clément’s statement regarding Giovanni’s methods of seduction leads to the idea that no woman can resist his desires, which as Clément scoffs, is clearly absurd. In fact, Mozart and Da Ponte may well have been making their own statement about the general opinion on rape and the laws surrounding abuse in the eighteenth century, by showing the emotional consequences
of a system that viewed rape as a smear on the reputations of the father or husband, rather than as a disturbing event for the victim.

The dilemma arises however, through the fact that a rape could actually be at odds with Giovanni’s principles of seduction, as this type of sexual assault gives him no opportunity to brag about his success. Surely, given that Giovanni has successfully seduced other betrothed and even married women, why would he feel the need to assault Anna?

I contend that, due to the social position of the Commendatore, Anna’s sense of morality and propriety is so strong that Giovanni believes he is unable to seduce her in his usual fashion. Frustrated, he believes that assault is the only way to unleash his devilish sexual desires. It is precisely the complex mindset of a sexual philanderer and rapist that provides a lens through which to perceive Giovanni’s motives towards Anna.

As Giovanni prides himself on executing relatively public seductions, his carrying out a secretive rape would seem out of character. However, the complex nature of rapists, who crave intimacy, ensures that they believe they are initiating consensual relations with another, even when this is far from reality (Ward, Hudson and Marshall 1996, 19). Seen in this light, Giovanni would not believe himself to be a rapist, but rather that he was satisfying a need for intimacy with Anna. “Sex offenders may indirectly seek emotional intimacy through sex, even if they have to force a partner to participate”, explain Tony Ward, Stephen Hudson and William Marshall (1996, 19). Giovanni’s affliction, however, by no means excuses his vile and demonstrative behaviour.

In the eighteenth century, laws were strict regarding the punishment of rape, although the attitudes surrounding such abuse can be perceived in the twenty-first century as nothing less than ignorant and disgusting. Nicholas Till states that the “sternness of the laws reflected the fact that rape was considered a crime against the property of the father or husband rather than an assault upon the integrity and person of the woman herself” (1992, 210). It is not surprising that a male dominated society would consider the abuse encountered by an innocent female more a problem of her husband’s and/or father’s soiled reputations. Gilbert and Gubar state, “Women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts, because generated solely … by male expectations and designs” (1979, 12). It is apparent that the general attitude in the
eighteenth century towards Anna’s rape would have been one that concerned the egos and statuses of Ottavio and the Commendatore more than it did Anna’s physiological, physical, and emotional health. Anna represents eighteenth-century women, and her treatment by others reveals a society that placed high regard upon morality, yet was immoral in its dealings with women. What remains as a memory of that time are its literary characters, such as Anna, whom performing artists can present to the wider twenty-first-century audience in a manner that shows greater respect towards the notion of femininity and the power that has always loomed within women. The negative attitudes of eighteenth-century society towards the treatment of women are cause enough for Anna to seek vengeance on every male in Don Giovanni, which perhaps makes Mozart and Da Ponte feminist revisionists in their own rights.

Till aptly sums up Giovanni’s character, commenting that, “Don Giovanni is in fact a cheap sensualist rather than a true erotic seducer” (1992, 201). Erotic surely he is not, as his emotional detachment from his sexual conquests portrays him as a mere shell of a man, devoid of any substance that could excite or arouse a woman genuinely. Giovanni has an empty soul, and a mind that lacks a functioning conscience. His penis, over which he seems to have no control, is the only part of him with any life in it.

Anna: The Heroine

Anna harnesses her powerful feminine instincts and uses them to seek revenge on Giovanni. She acquires heroic status as she captivates the audience with her seriousness and tragic circumstances, whilst her ruthless demand for retribution sets her apart from the sentimental and endlessly lenient feminine ideal so common in the operatic tradition (Brown-Montesano 2007, 9). Anna is the catalyst for the order of events in Don Giovanni, and the subject matter of murder and rape demand a serious character that sings serious music. Anna blames one person only for her unhappiness; and that person is Giovanni. The pursuit of Giovanni seems morally and aesthetically necessary, and it calls for the audience to champion Anna towards finding the truth about her father’s death. It seems that the love of her father is more heartfelt, even, than her love for her fiancé³.

³ At the conclusion of Don Giovanni, Anna asks Ottavio to wait another year before they get married so that she can overcome the grief brought about by the loss of her Father.
My argument that the pursuit of Giovanni is necessary to the overall plot direction and moral outcome of *Don Giovanni* aligns with Aristotle’s view on morality and teleology in drama. Aristotle discusses the ingredients for dramatic tragedy in the *Poetics*. He believed tragedy to be discernable by its medium, manner, and objects, when compared to other forms of ‘mimesis’ or ‘imitation’ (music, painting and poetry). Tragedy’s objects are “men in action” (1448a 1), and through the action of the plot, character is exclusively linked with one’s moral purpose and reason for being (Smithson 1983, 5). Considering the plot as a pursuit of morals is clear in the *Poetics*. Aristotle wrote:

> Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men’s qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. (1450a 16ff) (1967, 27)

The thinking of Aristotle (despite his archaic reference to ‘men’) resonates with the tragic character of Anna, because it is the dramatic action surrounding her that catapults the plot to a moralistic ending. *Don Giovanni* can easily be viewed teleologically, because Anna takes revenge on Giovanni, propelling the dramatic action rapidly towards a moralistic end, when Giovanni is denied salvation from his sins.

**Anna and Sylvia Plath**

Although polarities exist in terms of the overall content and dramatic intention, the plight of Anna is also comparable to that of poet Sylvia Plath. Consumed by her father’s death, Plath devoted her life’s work, whether directly or indirectly, to her father. She did this despite harbouring suicidal thoughts, and experiencing moments of extreme rage and hatred towards her father for having abandoned her (Willhite, 2008, 1). These intensely powerful feelings are subjectively illuminated in Plath’s poem *Daddy* (1962), which exposes her outpoured emotions towards both her father and the psychological underpinnings of World War II. In the
present context, what is intriguing about Plath’s writing is that it can be directly related to Da Ponte’s depiction of Anna’s father. Plath’s poetry reads:

Daddy I have had to kill you.
You died before I had the time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal.

Plath refers to her father as a grey marble God-like statue that is vast and imposing in nature. One can immediately visualise this same sculpture, which appears at the conclusion of Don Giovanni, as the earthly form of Anna’s dead father. The Commendatore returns at the end of the opera as a grey, stone monument, whose omnipresence means that he has been watching the behaviours of Giovanni, and now has the ability to shine the light of damnation upon him. The moment this figure appears, Giovanni meets the justice of his murderous and womanising ways, due to his refusal of the possibility of saving himself. Like Anna, Plath found the death of her father to be such a monumentally life-altering experience, which galvanised her emotional being, leading her to seek a mode of literary justice for his death in her poetry. The death of the Commendatore is the catalyst for all of Anna’s ensuing movements and her all-consuming feelings of revenge are key to the dramatic events that follow. Plath refers to her father as the devil with the “cleft,” which one immediately associates with the devil’s hoof. She pictorially and symbolically compares the devils “cleft” to the ordinary cleft in her father’s chin (Willhite 2008, 1). In Don Giovanni Anna’s father is not the devil; instead Giovanni himself is painted as the damned figure that is ultimately sent to the fiery dungeon of hell.

A further connection can be drawn between Plath’s references to her allegedly unfaithful husband, Ted Hughes, as the vampire who drank her blood in the passage:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.
Likewise, Giovanni is an unfaithful vampire who sucks the life out of the women he seduces. Thomas Grey highlights the connection between the Don Juan story (on which *Don Giovanni* is based) and that of the vampire Lord Ruthven, a character developed by Lord Byron’s estranged physician-valet John Polidori in his tale “The Vampyre” (1819) (Goehr and Herwitz 2006, 79). Due to its “Byronic genealogy, the Vampire became the principal Gothic-Romantic reincarnation of Don Juan for about half a century following the French Revolution” (Grey, cited by Goehr and Herwitz 2006, 79). Grey believes that the consequences of the vampire’s seductions are more drastic than those of Don Juan; is not the inner destruction and emotional turmoil of a woman more painful than death itself? As philanderers emotionally damage the women they leave in their wake, it is no wonder that Elvira is struggling to stay afloat in the sea of her agony.

**Anna and Electra**

The suffering felt by wronged women can be traced throughout the history of the arts. We recall the types of characters that came before Anna, and how these women may have affected Mozart and Da Ponte’s characterisation of her. David Cairns points out her predecessors in the operatic genre when he says, “she is the descendant of Elettra and all the other donne furiose whose torments [Mozart] had known how to simulate from the earliest years: not so neurotic as they are, nobler, more poised, still mistress of herself, but inwardly seething” (2007, 156). Sophocles’s version of the Electra story highlights the title character as a woman who constantly out-shadows the male characters in the play. This similarity is illuminated through the words of Thomas Woodard, “in short, her tragedy bursts out of the framework of the double plot, just as her form of heroic action seems incommensurable with the men’s activities” (1966, 126). Electra’s dialogue refers to her inner suffering over her father’s death, and emulates poignantly many of Anna’s sentiments regarding her personal tragedy in *Don Giovanni*. A particularly poignant excerpt is from Electra’s opening soliloquy:

Here at my father’s door
I must cry out
For all the world to hear.
Hades, Persephone,
Hermes, steward of death,
Eternal Wrath and Furies,
Children of Gods,
Who see all murderers
And all adulterous thieves, come soon!
Be near me, and avenge
My father’s death, and bring
My brother home!
I have no strength. I cannot stand
Alone under this load
Of my affliction.

(Sophocles, 71–72)

According to Willner, Electra’s despair, which is an extremely emotional response to her father’s death, is expressed through her public mourning and in her calls for his murder to be actively and passionately avenged. Electra is a graceful hero, who, while pursuing revenge, does not step outside the boundaries of a traditional female role. Willner is particularly apt in her statement that “had herself [Electra] actually taken blood revenge, she might have been disqualified as a hero” (1982, 68). This statement calls into question the credibility of Anna’s heroic status in Don Giovanni. Anna instigates revenge, yet does not personally acquire Giovanni’s blood, therefore solidifying her character as one that seeks revenge and yet receives help to obtain the outcome she desires, thus preserving her angelic status. Anna is in fact a graceful avenger who although powerful, retains moral purity as she bestows the duty of revenge upon others.

Anna: The Angelic, Graceful, Feminine Archetype

The name Anna in Hebrew means ‘grace’ (Meaning of Names Online, 2004). This definition came to mind when I read Cairns’s assertion that Anna is noble and more poised than her operatic predecessors (2007, 156). Nobility and poise are often
qualities/attributes processed by graceful women. Throughout all of the heartache, Anna remains focussed with an infallible sense of grace, as she concentrates on her end goal, and shows her graceful nature even when singing of her rage for the murderous Giovanni.

The feminine ‘archetype’ that male authors generate has usually been that of an ‘angel.’ Gilbert and Gubar state:

In the middle ages, of course, mankind’s great teacher of purity was the Virgin Mary, a mother goddess who perfectly fitted the female role … For the more secular nineteenth century, however, the eternal type of female purity was represented not by a Madonna in heaven, but by an angel in the house. Nevertheless, there is a clear line of literary descent from divine Virgin to domestic angel, passing through (among many others) Dante, Milton, and Goethe (1979, 20).

Mozart, of course, could be placed on the list of literary and creative heavyweights mentioned by Gilbert and Gubar. It is well likely that Mozart and Da Ponte believed Anna’s virginal purity to be of the upmost importance; the possibility of her having been ‘soiled’ by Giovanni would therefore go against the pure angel image, with which she has been pre-interpreted and embedded within the stage action of Scene I. In this light, Anna’s rage towards Giovanni for both the murder of her father and the advantage he took of her are logical catalysts for the fiery rage arias that ensue, where, true to her name, she nevertheless remains graceful under the most immense emotional strain. Anna’s dual role as both the grieving victim and the “clarion-voiced agent of retribution” is one of the many factors that stop Don Giovanni from fitting comfortably into the opera buffa category (Brown- Montesano 2007, 2).
A Woman’s Right to be Angry: Anna’s Rage Arias

Rage arias (such as No. 2 “Fuggi, crudele”) are featured in opera seria, yet omitted in opera buffa, perhaps to emphasise the ‘lighter’ side of life. Therefore it does not seem surprising to find them in Mozart’s fusion of genres, his “drama giocoso.” The first rage aria by Anna is “Or sai chi l’onore” (Act I No. 10). The overriding theme of retribution returns dramatically in this aria, as it is the moment when Anna realises that Giovanni is both her attacker and the murderer of her father (Brown-Montesano 2007, 20). Brown-Montesano suggests that the aria may appear to be a traditional operatic showpiece for the singer, however, the dramatic and musical weight of this scene must be considered in the context of its being a “crucial scene of discovery” (2007, 20). The insightful nature of the libretto is tremendous, as it enlightens the audience as to missing information, about which they may have been speculating throughout the beginning of Don Giovanni. Despite what she reveals, Anna does not explicitly state whether or not Giovanni had raped her; however the extent of her rage and emotion implies that something greater than an innocently unthreatening intrusion had occurred that night. Although this aria can evoke sympathy from even the hardest of hearts, Anna gains power through divulging her revelations. This is particularly evident when examining the libretto alongside
Mozart’s compelling composition. The following excerpt is from Act I No. 10a “Or sai, chil’onore”:

Allora rinforzo I stridi miei, chiamo soccorso;
Then I redouble the screams mine, I call [for] help,

fugge il felon; arditamente il seguo
flees the felon. Boldly I follow him

fin nella strada per fermarlo,
even into the street to stop him,

e sono assalitrice d’assalita:
And I become [a] pursuer instead of the pursued one:

Il padre v’accorre, vuol conoscerlo,
My father runs out, he wants to identify him,

e l’iniquo, che del povero vecchio era più forte,
and the wicked man, who than the poor old man was stronger,

compie il misfatto suo col dargli morte!
Complettes the misdeed his horrendous by giving him death.

Or sai chi l’onore rapire a me volse,
Now you know who my honour ravish of me wanted [Now you know who ravished my honour]

chi fu il traditore che il padre mi tolse:
who was the traitor whom his father took from me

Vendetta ti chiedo, la chiede il tuo cor.
Vengeance I ask of you, it asks for it your heart [vengeance in this construction is asked for by your heart]
Rammenta la piaga del misero seno;
Remember the wound of the poor breast;

Rimira di sangue coperto il terreno,
See again with blood covered the ground,

Se l’ira in te langue d’un giusto furor.
If the anger in you languishes of a righteous fury.

(Castel, 302–303)

It can be assumed from the phrase highlighted in bold that a rape took place in Anna’s bedroom, and that her ‘honour’ (virtue and purity) was taken from her. Anna sings “Or sai chi l’onore rapier a me volse” / “Now you know who ravished my honour.” To have one’s honour ravished implies that Giovanni did succeed in his sexual attempt with Anna. Another indication by Da Ponte that a rape was initiated is Anna’s use of the phrase “compie il misfatto suo col dargli morte!” / “Completes the misdeed his horrendous by giving him death!” which implies that Giovanni concludes and escalates the wrongful deed of sexual assault by killing her father, therefore adding to Anna’s rage.

Conclusion

Of course, the absence or presence of a rape in Don Giovanni—a hotly contested topic—can be left up to directorial adaptation. Peter Sellars graphically displays the event of Anna’s rape at the start of his Don Giovanni production by showing both Dominique Labelle (Anna) and Eugene Perry (Giovanni) unmasked. By choosing to show the characters in this way, Sellars makes known to the audience that Anna is aware that it is Giovanni in her bedroom. This directorial choice makes it easy to establish Sellars’s intention from the outset, although, it does confuse the later realisation by Anna that Giovanni is indeed the late-night intruder.

Anna epitomises the resilient female ideal that in many ways is contrary to the feminine ideal of the enlightenment. This sense of self is what makes Anna the
exciting, avenging woman she is, and therefore she should be played with sympathy to her circumstances, but with a deep understanding of her defiant disposition.
Chapter 4

Dramatic Intention: The Art of Performing Zerlina

When you play a good man,
Try to find out where he is bad,
And when you play a villain,
Try to find where he is good.

—Konstantin Stanislavski, Stanislavski: A Life

Establishing the need for a revised interpretation of Don Giovanni’s women has been of paramount importance to this thesis, but the question still looms of how performing artists can bring to life the particular feminist nuances of Elvira, Anna, and Zerlina. The dramatic intention of the performer is what will separate the commonly portrayed marginalised representation of femininity from the foregrounded strength I have argued for. A term commonly employed in the theatrical world, dramatic interpretation requires the performer to wholly—physically and spiritually—embody the intention and motivation of the character, through the performer’s use of gesture, stance, and vocal quality. The difficulty associated with this notion of performance craft, when applied to the operatic world, is that the expertise of singing requires that many opposite qualities be demanded to work congruously. Examples of such polarities include a vocal quality that is free, yet controlled, and a voice that is powerful enough to be heard over an orchestral pit, yet subtle enough to capture the essence of a piano marking in the score. Such difficult technical challenges are aesthetically necessary to successful live performances, and they place heavier demands on the singer than those encountered by an actor. Renowned recording and operatic artist Renee Fleming explains that since operatic productions do not use amplification, a solidly established vocal technique is crucial to its audibility in a theatre (Jampol 2010, 140).

Method Acting and Opera

A physical alignment that encourages the basic essence of breathing, that is, movement in the upper and lower ribs, length of spine, pelvic floor activation, and belly wall release, are required in performance without emotional distraction or
interference. When such an alignment is employed, the singer can begin to use her body to project her sound to the back of the concert hall. Method acting (using one’s deepest personal emotions to provide stimulus/motivation for character) is not suitable for the operatic singer, because effective dramatic intention manifests through the performer’s embodiment of the character, whilst she maintains a conscious awareness of her body and technique. Singers must reserve an amount of their own emotions, to avoid loss of focus in the sound, and to prevent an over-emotional response to a piece of music.

If an opera singer is a method actor, her sound will suffer, and it is unlikely she will be employed professionally. Amidst the dramatic, and more often than not, melodramatic circumstances of operatic plots, singers ought to observe the subtleties of acting, rather than (as is all too easy) over-acting their parts. The following examples show the detriment to vocal quality of portraying particular moods without subtly and technical awareness: constant smiling whilst singing in order to portray happiness will cause the sound to be overly bright, and the lower partials usually projected in the sound will be lost; on the other hand, the overly emotional portrayal of a depressed character might cause the artist to hunch her shoulders, resulting in the loss of rib and diaphragmatic function, and in a detrimental affect on the quality of sound. Tension in the muscles surrounding the larynx and neck is caused by inaccurate singing posture; therefore a very personal and over-emotional approach to character in vocal performance may employ muscles that restrict larynx freedom of movement.

**Emancipation of Women through Performance**

During the emergence of the eighteenth-century operatic tradition the emancipation of women was very much helped by the arrival of opera, which “not merely drew attention to women, but pointed up the injustice of assuming that nature had made them in every respect inferior to men” (Brophy 1929, 37). Breaking down the long instilled ideas of female inferiority is exactly what should be exemplified in performances of *Don Giovanni*. The authority assumed by Elvira, Zerlina, and Anna must be enhanced and embodied through the use of vocal timbre and dramatic intention, in order to present the powerful femininity of each female in the most effective manner.
The performers of Elvira and Anna can propel their timbre of excitement, and exhilaration, by harnessing a strong sense of dramatic understanding. Clément states in another essay “Though Voices, History” in *Siren Songs*:

However deep or bright they may be, the female voices that express spiritual power are always extreme, as if related to the psychical state the ancient Greeks called *hubris*—a violent desire, supposedly inaccessible to humanity and strictly consecrated to the gods themselves. Whether deep or stratospheric, these voices verge on the divine. (2000, 25)

Each of Anna’s rage arias should be sung with a cutting vocal quality on the top notes, and a bottom register that oozes warmth, whilst maintaining cut in the sound. A particularly touching place for such tone quality is at the conclusion of “*Crudele! Ah no, mio bene!*” As seen in figure 12, Elvira’s vast range (octave and a fourth) requires a definite difference in tone in order to create the drama Mozart intended. Intensity of cut and focus in the sound is ideal on the final cadenza, in order to emphasise her infallible rage.

Figure 12. “*Crudele! Ah no, mio bene!*” (Act II No. 23) from *Don Giovanni*
Zerlina and the Ideal Performance

But what do we do with the less ferocious characters, such as Zerlina? She is not lavished with soaring melodic lines consisting of piercing top notes, or vocal acrobatics. How, as intelligent performers, can we harness her powerful femininity through dramatic intention, when her character is usually played by a soubrette or light lyric soprano, whom many would define as possessing the least powerful of female voices? These voice types run the risk of falling into what Clément calls the “gamut of nineteenth-century stereotypes of women: fearful, grasping, treacherous, weak, and complaining” (2000, 25). With the dramatisation of Zerlina, less is definitely more, as a cold and detached interaction with Masetto will provide a sublime contrast to Mozart’s jovial melodic lines and Da Ponte’s violent sentiments. By distancing herself emotionally, spiritually, and physically on stage, through harnessing the intention of resignation, and accessing memories of what it feels like to be detached from an activity, the singer can project a convincing portrayal of Zerlina. We can learn from the principals of Russian actor and teacher, Konstantin Stanislavski, who observed early on that method acting caused hysteria in some actors. He consequently developed a more trustworthy method of accessing genuine emotion, which relies more on the imaginative power of the performer, than his or her own personal memories (Benedetti 1990, 35). Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action was developed at the Opera Dramatic Studio from the early 1930s, and contains a focus on physical actions in order to gain access to honest emotions (Benedetti 1990, 35). Stanislavski states:

A person in the midst of experiencing a poignant emotional drama is incapable of speaking of it coherently, for at such a time tears choke him, his voice breaks, the stress of his feelings confuses his thoughts, his pitiful aspect distracts those who see him and prevents their understanding the very cause of his grief. (1949, 74)

The singer who plays the part of Zerlina must distance herself emotionally from any personal feelings about the notion of domestic abuse, or domestic drudgery, and present to the audience her cold acceptance of her situation. Sopranos with light voices who play Zerlina acquire the efficacy to affect the audience, as well as to initiate propulsion for the plot, through craftily pre-determining their movements and actions. In the words of Stanislavski, “every actor should so harness his gestures so
that he will always be in control of them and not they of him” (1949, 73). Again the notion of reserve in performance arises, which highlights that the preservation of the actor within the singer must be observed if an intelligent performance is to be exhibited. Modern productions of Don Giovanni, including Opera Australia’s 2011 production, prefer to marginalise—perhaps to ensure Zerlina’s scenes inject the buffa into performance. Common are such productions, which present Zerlina as conventional and two-dimensional.

Directing Zerlina to paw and pander over Masetto, practically begging him for forgiveness, does not do Mozart’s music any justice; nor does it present a characterisation thoroughly examined, dissected, and evaluated by the performer. Such an interpretation is the highly acclaimed 1988 Covent Garden production, conducted by Colin Davis, and featuring Kiri Te Kanawa as Zerlina. Despite the undeniably ‘beautiful’ voice of Te Kanawa, this production aids to appease Mozart traditionalists, and alienates any notion of intelligent feminism existing in lower-class characters.

Ellen Koskoff reinforces the persuasive nature of music performance on inter-gender relations: “the inequalities or asymmetries perceived in such relations may be protested, mediated, reversed, transformed, or confirmed through various social/musical strategies, through ritual behaviour, disguise, secret language, or social deceptions involving music” (1989, 10). Zerlina’s reversal, Elvira’s protestation, and Anna’s transformation of inter-gender relationships are significant literary moments, which solidify the interest in these women as feminist icons.

Dramatic intention is absolutely paramount if a feminist interpretation is to be pursued. The difficulties associated with my favoured interpretation of Don Giovanni are that the extremely competitive operatic climate encourages performers to stay silent regarding their interpretation of individual characters, and as the performer has rent and bills to pay, any confrontation regarding representation of women can seem inappropriate. In my operatic utopia, directors, performers, and conductors would carry out open dialogue with one another, workshop ideas and perspectives, rather than simply presenting Zerlina (or any character) in the traditional marginalised form and setting without questioning its relevance. The irony is that singers use their own voices to convey emotions, characters, and intentions—yet in many areas of the operatic industry it is the internal ‘voice’ (wants, needs, concerns) of the singer that is not audible to many directors, producers, and conductors. It is time we all spoke up.
Due to the age of recording, and consequently, You Tube, IPods, Smart phones, CD, DVD, and video, society has been conditioned to scrutinize sound and to critically evaluate it in terms of personal expectations and past experience. In short, all the ‘baggage’ we bring as audience to a concert hall can sometimes hinder our appreciation of the sounds produced, or the directorial choices, causing what I term ‘operatic tunnel-vision.’ Due to the strenuous efforts of opera and recording companies to lose all the ‘unattractive’ human elements,\(^4\) performance is no longer a giving and receiving of our humanity. The suppression of the female power within operatic artists, by the quest for perfection and through opera’s increasing affiliation with popular culture, parallels the suppression of feminine power present in traditional representations of Don Giovanni’s women.

\(^4\) Brown-Montesano critically evaluates to great extent the current pressures, demands, and capitalist desires of opera companies in her book Understanding the Women of Mozart’s Operas.
Final Thoughts

Don Giovanni on the Stage

Elvira, Zerlina, and Anna: These powerful women arise in fiction, but their driving feminist strength provides much debate in the academic world. More than 220 years after Don Giovanni’s creation, one wonders whether Mozart and Da Ponte could have conceived of the scrutiny and the passion its characters have aroused. The women of Don Giovanni possess unsurpassable psychological strength, intellectual aptitude, and are in touch with their emotional cores. Their collective feminist intensity is an example of how we, as vulnerable beings, can triumph over the direst circumstances (deep sorrow, heartache, death, and abuse). Elvira, Zerlina, and Anna are feminine archetypes that provide scope for women’s imagining of themselves.

Performers should physically and vocally embody an artful use of dramatic intention in order to characterise the spirit of these women. Performing with intent ensures that individual personalities are placed aside in order to wholly and authentically represent the intelligence and integrity of each character. I am championing a new era of Don Giovanni where Elvira is no longer played as neurotic, Zerlina as a seductive minx, and Anna as a fanciful woman who is infatuated with her father’s killer, Giovanni. These interpretations are discordant to their depth of character, as well as artistically untrue to the libretto, musical language, and characteristic veracity.

Productions of Don Giovanni remain popular, and this opera, has the power to alter society’s perceptions about the treatment of women. Although the comedic elements should not be removed or excluded from Don Giovanni, the female characters’ roles should be performed with an awareness of their true psychological states. Although Peter Sellars takes the serious aspects of Don Giovanni to the extreme, his interpretation of its women highlights their recognisable strength. Montes-Basquer’s traditional interpretation, on the other hand, merely reduces the women’s intelligence to that of inanimate objects.

The insightful reversal of gender control enacted in “Per queste tue manine” significantly illuminates the suppressed position of the women in Don Giovanni. For the less astute feminist spectator, the visual significance of Zerlina’s domination of Leporello demonstrates a potent shift of authority. The empowerment of Zerlina
makes credible a feminist interpretation of the entire opera, and ensures that we greatly value her role as an avenger.

A night at the opera should be an experience. The weight of tradition requires operatic performers to keep one eye on the past, and the other directed towards the future. Thus, the boundaries of commonly assumed operatic aesthetics (such as Sellars’s heroine addict depictions) should be expanded. Artists should straddle the tectonic plates that lie beneath the operatic genre, dividing the commonly conceived from the radical, to form an intermediate aesthetic. If the plates are rocked violently, will a backlash of volcanic proportions occur, or will larva spill over the opera, thus distorting and disrespecting its creators? A degree of backlash from conservative groups is almost guaranteed when art is reinterpreted radically from the common representation. What is required is an interpretation that is believed to be relevant for the twenty-first century consciousness (and market, if you will), as well as remaining consistent to the libretto and the “drama giocoso” genre classification.

Plácido Domingo said in an interview, “I don’t mind opera changing from one century to another, if it has a reason” (Jampol 2010, 127). There is, indeed, a strong reason—modern female integrity—why Don Giovanni should be modified through directorial assimilation in this century. Christopher Benn aptly remarks, “A production of Don Giovanni must aim not merely at good presentation of Mozart’s music, but at making the opera as a whole convincing to the modern audience” (1946, 75). The key to the reinterpretation I favour is Zerlina’s feminine honesty and strength, exhibited in “Per queste tue manine”: the force of Zerlina’s character expressed during this duet has the power to breathe new life into Don Giovanni. Catherine Clément’s words explain my attitude towards the Don Giovanni figure and the future of Don Giovanni on the stage:

I am much more seduced by a Don Giovanni shot through with panic yet standing up to everyone to fill as best he can his manly rags, than by the brave, raping hero who has been so praised. It is time to smash this idol and restore it to a truth, which, although no longer Mozart’s truth, nor that of the eighteenth-century, is ours. (1989, 37)
In Hebrew, Zerlina means ‘beautiful dawn’ (*Dictionary*, 2010). It is Zerlina’s fiery tenaciousness, as uncovered in this thesis, which, heralds a new and beautiful dawn for the future of *Don Giovanni* on the operatic stage.
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Don Giovanni, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, directed by Göran Järvefelt, Opera Australia, Melbourne, December 17, 2011.


