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Lecturer: Dr. Wolfgang Marx

Who pulls the strands?

Don Giovanni's women

Tales about innocence, passion and vengeance

Essay by Fy Gadiot

MMus, Student number: 05110572

9 Grosvenor Place, Apt. 1

Rathmines, Dublin 6

Phone: +353 (0)85 140 17 89

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1 Curtains up!

The curtains open. Leporello, Don Giovanni's servant, keeps watch in front of a building, soliloquizing complaints about his master and life, when suddenly a rumbling is heard. Don Giovanni rushes on stage, followed by Donna Anna, who holds on to him, screaming for help, calling him a traitor and more. Don Giovanni had come to her room, in the pitch-dark of the night, as an unexpected intruder – what he did or tried to do is left open for the moment to the imagination of the audience. Donna Anna still does not know, who the nightly intruder was, and tries with all her might to uncover the mystery. 'Like a desperate fury I will pursue thee unto death' she threatens – Don Giovanni is at least a little agitated 'This desperate fury will lure me onto destruction'¹ he worries – but Donna Anna loosens her grip when she hears the Commander, her father, arriving, and runs off stage to get help. The Commander challenges Don Giovanni to a duel, but misjudges his opponent – only a few strikes later he is mortally wounded and by the time Donna Anna returns with her fiancé Don Ottavio she finds him dead, and both Don Giovanni and Leporello have disappeared. All of this action happens less than 10 minutes after the curtains have opened – several characters are already introduced, a dark picture is drawn.

Next tableau (scene 4) – again it is night, seemingly only a few minutes later. Don Giovanni and Leporello are chatting away when suddenly Donna Elvira makes her first appearance, in travel clothes, raging about a barbarian who dishonoured and abandoned her – if he does not return to her she will scratch out his eyes or do worse when she finds him. When they spot each other, the recognition is immediate, giving Donna Elvira steam for another outburst of anger - 'Monster, fraud, hatchery of deceit!' she calls him. Cowardly Don Giovanni makes his disappearance and leaves it to Leporello to clear Donna Elvira's mind, making way for Leporello's famous catalogue-aria. But Don Giovanni got it wrong if he expected to get rid of a Donna Elvira so easily – she calls for vengeance and wrath; but contrary to Donna Anna she plans to take action herself.

While he makes his departure Don Giovanni is already looking for another conquest. In the third tableaux he comes across Zerlina and Masetto, a peasant couple who are about to marry. It is not quite clear if it is the challenge of seducing a bride, or if it is Zerlina's beauty that awakens Don Giovanni's interest, but he has made up his mind. From now on he will try everything to conquer her – and at first he seems to be quite successful. In her seeming naivety she follows him. With probably THE seduction duet of all opera, 'Là ci darem la mano' (no. 7), Don Giovanni tries to seduce Zerlina. Their vocal lines play with each other, and at the end it seems as if he has caught her in his web. But before the two of them can leave the stage the raging Donna Elvira appears almost like a saving angel-of-wrath and interrupts the seduction. Zerlina is taken aback, and naturally,

¹ Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus and Lorenzo Da Ponte: Don Giovanni (1878) in Italian and German, transl. Thomas Flasch (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun. 2005).

her initial doubts return. She does not quite believe Don Giovanni that Elvira is mad and instead of following the womaniser she follows her sense and lets Elvira drag her away.

1.1 Prospects (introduction)

After this rapid opening the plot slows down – leaving time for all strands to interlace. But Da Ponte and Mozart use 10 scenes to introduce all the roles and manage to launch them all in three completely different situations, depending on each of the female characters.² What is it that makes these three women different to the other women of Don Giovanni's earlier life? After all he must have been living as a 'libertine' for quite a while and with remarkable success, so either Don Giovanni changed and lost his skills or the women he meets during this opera are different than his previous conquests. Why does his earlier success suddenly change? Bad luck for Don Giovanni cannot be the only reason – and if we know anything for sure, it is that Don Giovanni himself does not change either, not even when finally facing death and eternal torment. Instead it are his women, the opposite sex, his main interest, that changes and starts to emancipate, no longer accepting the disrespectful manner in which Don Giovanni treats them. Donna Anna, Donna Elvira and Zerlina, each with different characteristics and roles, stand as representatives for all women; hence, they are the interest of this essay.

As shown above, each of the three women gets her individual introduction, before fate takes its course in the opera. All three women are of particular importance to the opera – and over the years served as inspiration for several authors. Who is Don Giovanni's female counterpart? Who is the heroine of the opera? We have three female parts, but more than three answers. Since Donna Anna was inspiration for probably the most influential literary response to the opera, a fictive letter by E.T.A. Hoffmann (1813), she has been overestimated a lot. Other authors like Dent (1913) restore Donna Elvira's reputation as main character, and only recently she also became inspiration for Lipking's 'Donna abbandonata' (1990). Finally, as a peasant girl, Zerlina has often simply been ignored, not considered as vital to *Don Giovanni* at all, and if mentioned, her cleverness has most of the time been underestimated. However, she was the starting point for Adorno's 'Homage to Zerlina' (1952/53); and her character seems to hold more than just the naivety of a peasant girl.

In this paper, I will try to answer the posed questions about Don Giovanni's women. Through scrutinising libretto, predecessors of Da Ponte's text, secondary literature, and musical language, I will try to clarify the balance of Donna Anna, Donna Elvira and Zerlina. To remain coherent this essay will be divided into a separate section per character, creating a quasi-biography of each and commenting on responses in literature. The last chapter 'Who pulls the strands?' will hold a concluding comparison. Therefore, a literature

² According to Edward Dent *Don Giovanni* was originally planned in four acts, (Act I with Donna Anna, Act II with Zerlina, Act III with Donna Elvira and the final act with the statue), which was then reduced to two acts. The individual introductions of each woman are a relict of the initially intended structure. Dent, Edward J.: *Mozart's Operas. A Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press 1955 (1st edition 1913), p. 138.

review does not take place in a separate chapter; instead, I will comment on available literature wherever it seems suitable and helpful.

2 Donna Anna

As *seria carattere* Donna Anna is listed at the top of the register of the female characters. She is the daughter of the Commander, the fiancé of Don Ottavio, and must be quite a young lady, since she is not even married yet.³ She does not return on stage until the eleventh scene, when herself and Ottavio ask Don Giovanni for help in their plan of vengeance on the murder of the Commander. It does not take long before Donna Elvira interrupts the trio and rages against Don Giovanni, who for his part tries to assure the couple that Elvira is insane. But Elvira plays her role well, and there is something in Don Giovanni's reaction that makes Anna realise who he really is.

Understandably Anna nearly faints when she finally tells Ottavio her version of the story about the nightly event. While Leporello organises a feast for Don Giovanni to make Zerlina's seduction finally possible, Anna, Ottavio and Elvira have been searching for a way to catch Don Giovanni red-handed. They decide to give Don Giovanni's party an undercover-visit. When we arrive there (scene 19-20), 'Anna can hardly be persuaded to take any action at all,' Dent concludes rightly. She leaves the lead to Elvira and 'Ottavio follows any lead that is offered him'.⁴

In the second act Donna Anna loses profile. She turns up at the discovery scene of Leporello, and again in the dramatically seemingly redundant scene 12, in which Ottavio once more proposes to her. Again, Anna puts the marriage off, and takes the opportunity for another lament-aria. Afterwards she only returns in the finale after Don Giovanni's descent into hell.

2.1 E. T. A. Hoffmann and Donna Anna⁵

As mentioned above, it is Hoffmann's fictive letter from 1813 that draws attention to the role of Donna Anna. Hoffmann describes her from the very beginning as a soulful woman, with a powerful temper and full of extreme and contradictive emotions: 'Love, rage, hatred, desperation' are the terms he uses. And, in his view, Don Giovanni (called Don Juan throughout the text) seems to be so enchanted by Donna Anna's appearance that he can barely disengage from Donna Anna's accusing and demanding grip. Because of the text's major influence on the reception history of the opera, it deserves some in-depth examination in this place.

³ Worth mentioning is that Donna Anna and Zerlina must be of similar young age since both are engaged but not yet married, while Elvira is ageless. Still, Donna Anna is often played by middle aged women which changes the perception of the role in the opera, but should not confuse an interpretation of her.

⁴ Dent 1955.

⁵ Hoffmann, E.T.A.: 'Don Juan. Eine fabelhafte Begebenheit, die sich mit einem reisenden Enthusiasten zutragen' (1813), see <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/etahoff/donjuan/donjuan.htm>, accessed 10/05/07, (no page numbers).

During the first half of the opera somebody joins Hoffmann⁶ in his loge, and only in the interval he realises that it is Donna Anna herself. Although he is aware that he just saw Donna Anna on stage while she must have been sitting next to him already, he does not question this oddness any further, however, such supernatural events are quite typical for romantic writing. The person he is talking to therefore seems to be a mixture of the singer who plays the role (as she tells Hoffmann that she has sung parts of his own compositions before), and the actual Donna Anna who as a phantom has come to life from the narrative. As a supernatural figure she is able to give Hoffmann revealing insight into the characters of the opera.⁷ The hallucination is throughout depicted with a strong sensual touch; when the interval ends Donna Anna suddenly vanishes.

Hoffmann learnt to understand that Donna Anna is the ideal, pure and innocent woman, and the counterpart of Don Giovanni. Don Giovanni's urge is to find ideal and true love, but so far he has not succeeded. Donna Anna is the first woman with whom this perfect love would have been possible, but for Don Giovanni Anna comes too late. Because of his thoroughly sinful and fraudulent life, Don Giovanni cannot do anything other than demolish her purity with sexual sin, thus Don Giovanni destroyed any prospect of satisfying his urge for ideal love. Because of the loss of her pure innocence, Anna will never be able to love Don Giovanni truly, yet on the other hand she desperately longs for him. Hoffmann's Anna is dialectic, she pursues Don Giovanni's death, but when he is gone she has nothing left to live and long for. Their meeting fails because it happens too late in their lives, and both are too deadlocked in their habits and beliefs.

Hoffmann speaks of Donna Anna's seduction and not of rape, unlike Anna's version which she explains to Ottavio after she recognises Don Giovanni. And ever since Hoffmann kicked off this idea of Donna Anna's seduction it has remained an enduring question as to whether she has been seduced or raped or nothing happened whatsoever. But we have to take Hoffmann's reading with a pinch of salt. Hoffman is clearly affected by the romantic way of thinking.⁸ Like Beethoven⁹ he could not understand how Mozart could possibly write such beautiful music for such a tremendously sinful subject and such a villain as Don Giovanni. This must have been a huge problem for him, since he made all this effort to find an answer. In order to justify the antithesis of music and subject in *Don Giovanni* he creates his own *Don-Giovanni-truth*. He does not even attempt to write this in an academic discourse – a lot of his ideas cannot hold out against academic treatment,

⁶ The letter is written in the perspective of a 'travelling enthusiast' and addressed to a 'Theodor'. For the sake of simplicity I will call the narrator Hoffmann, as he is the author of the texts and it presents his own ideas.

⁷ Hoffmann's ideas on the change of perception because of an hallucination reminds us of Abbate's suggestions about hermeneutical readings of life performances. Abbate, Carolyn: 'Music—Drastic or Gnostic?' In *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 30, No. 3, Spring 2004 (University of Chicago), see <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu>, accessed 16/03/07.

⁸ Troger, Dominik: 'Review: E.T.A. Hoffmann: Don Juan – Eine fabelhafte Begebenheit, die sich mit einem reisenden Enthusiasten zugetragen' in *Don Giovanni Portal* (2006), accessed at <http://www.operinwien.at/forum/dgprojekt/dgeta.htm>, 16/03/07.

⁹ According to Nino Pirrotta Beethoven considered Mozart's Don Giovanni scandalous. Pirrotta, Nino: *Don Giovanni's Progress: A Rake Goes to the Opera* (1991), transl. Harris D. Sanders, Jr. (New York: Marsilio Publishers Corp 1994), p. 103.

as he must have known, being a composer and writer himself. Hoffmann is also first to suggest that Donna Anna will not survive the year of waiting she asked from Don Ottavio before they marry, since her subject of desire has left the here and now.¹⁰ As Dent says rightly, 'Hoffmann's view of her condition has no justification whatever. It is entirely his own invention, and its only value is to illustrate the German romantic mind.'¹¹

2.2 Donna Anna's afterlife

In spite of this, many writers have taken on board this Hoffmannian view of Donna Anna; some pushed his ideas even further, leading to amusing statements of, for instance, Pierre Jean Jouve (1942), who applies Freudian sexual theories and believes that Donna Anna had a deep relationship to her father. Therefore, she suffers from a father complex, which she projected on Don Giovanni, and as a result she developed the desire of being not only seduced, but raped by Don Giovanni.¹² By all means, even if we believe the father complex story, why should Donna Anna possibly want to be raped? However, because of this view Jouve believes that

it is on her [Anna] that the true tragedy of Don Juan is centred. She is the chosen vessel of suffering, madness and helplessness: but her rôle is that of the witness – first of the crime and finally of the punishment.¹³

While I agree that Anna must suffer and feel helpless, she neither witnesses the murder-scene nor Don Giovanni's meeting with the statue or his decent to hell – in fact she always is just too late to see these things happening. To call her the 'chosen vessel of suffering, madness and helplessness' also ignores the role of Donna Elvira. As we will see in the next chapter on Elvira, it is her that suffers most demonstrative on stage – when for example Don Giovanni and Leporello keep adding insult to injury in a flat and sadist manner, and Elvira finally must leave helpless, as Don Giovanni refuses to take her warnings seriously.

Hildesheimer (1977) does not believe the story Donna Anna tells Ottavio at all. First of all he finds it incredible that Don Giovanni would have tried to rape Donna Anna, seeing that he must have enough opportunities to get sex for free.¹⁴ But Hildesheimer forgets that Don Giovanni attempts to rape Zerlina not much later, during the finale of the first act. Zerlina does not cry out loud for no reason ('People, help, otherwise I am doomed') and Don Giovanni tells the story himself, although pretending that Leporello was the delinquent ('Here is the brute that attacked you'). If Don Giovanni is able to a

¹⁰ This idea of Donna Anna's death is connected with the fact that the singer of Donna Anna in the narrative died at 2 am the same night, the time when the narrator was just writing his letter.

¹¹ Dent 1955, p. 184.

¹² Jouve, Piere Jean: *Mozart's Don Giovanni* (1942), transl. Eric Earnshaw Smith (London: Vincent Stuart 1957), p. 24.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hildesheimer, Wolfgang: *Mozart* (1977), transl. Marion Faber (London et al: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 224.

rape within such a short time, he may well have been able to rape Anna at the beginning of the opera. Yes, Don Giovanni first tries to make his conquests by seducing them, but if he feels that he is not going to succeed and that the woman is not going to give in voluntarily, he will take her anyhow.

Besides, Hildesheimer doubts that Anna could have taken Don Giovanni for her fiancé, 'especially since it is improbable that Don Ottavio, being who he is, would steal into her bedchamber.'¹⁵ Indeed, for a recent audience this may seem quite improbable. But in opera in general there are a few things that one just has to accept – tricks of people pretending different identities simply by changing costumes always seems to work out, since the figures apparently do not recognise each other's face, posture or voice. If we do not take that for granted half of the opera world must be blind, deaf or simply stupid; and we would have major difficulties particularly with Donna Elvira's fault in the next act, when she mistakes Leporello for Don Giovanni.

Furthermore, it seems helpful to have a brief look at Donna Anna's predecessors. The very first play of Don Juan, Tirso de Molina's *The Trickster of Seville and his Guest of Stone*, starts with a very similar scene: Isabella is tricked by Don Juan, she takes him as Duke Octavio and is baffled when she realises that he is not.¹⁶ There is another character in the play which is called Ana and at first glance it seems more likely that Donna Anna is simply derived from her. But that is just a little too straightforward to be true. In their development from the early play till Da Ponte's libretto characters were merged and combined, aspects from one were applied to the other. However, in Molina's play Don Juan had muffled his face and pretended to be someone else, and answers to the Isabella's questions that he is a 'man without name', certainly not willing to reveal his true identity. In Da Ponte's version Donna Anna did already realise that she was fooled and is desperately trying to catch a glimpse of his face, somehow his scarf or mask came off already, but he is still trying to hide his face – like his predecessor he is obviously not quite willing to give her the slightest hint of his identity.¹⁷

Abert points out that neither Bertati nor Da Ponte, or, above all, Mozart ever indicate a secret love of Donna Anna for Don Giovanni, and 'particularly if it were a question of a maiden losing her honour,' it would be rather unlikely if an opera would not 'have presented the matter with complete frankness.'¹⁸ He elaborates that he believes her

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 225.

¹⁶ Molina, Tirso de: *The trickster of Seville and his guest of stone* (1630), transl. Roy Campbell, in Eric Bentley (ed.): *Six Spanish Plays*, Vol. III (USA: Anchor Books edition 1959).

¹⁷ It is not quite relevant if Don Ottavio would be the character to steal in Anna's (or anybody's) bedroom. It may be unlikely, but not impossible. Besides, what young women does not dream of her handsome prince that surprises her romantically? And as long as Anna believes or hopes it could be Ottavio, she can easily be misled. Or else, maybe Don Ottavio visited Anna in her room before (why not, they probably were not allowed a lot of cuddling and kissing in public before they get married) – then it must have been even easier for Don Giovanni to fool Anna. After all, Ottavio does not react particularly surprised to the question of entering Anna's room, but, naturally, more to the fact that somebody else entered her room, pretending to be him. However, these are just more speculations.

¹⁸ Abert assumes that Don Giovanni in the first place is an opera *buffa*. I tend to agree with this view, but it is part of another discussion that goes beyond the scope of this essay.

love to Ottavio not to be 'like that of Elvira or Zerlina. It is based not on sensuality, but on ethical precepts, as indeed is her whole being.'¹⁹ If we change 'ethical precepts' into 'precepts of models of decency' I am happy to agree with Albert. Anna is not introduced as 'moral law', as he deduces, but as agent of decency and societal conventions.

Finally, Hildesheimer wonders why Anna's account on the happenings comes so late and questions if the mourning about her father is real. He is attracted to the idea that Anna's sentiment is more a love-hate feeling about the hero than grief for her father.

*We know her father only as a dying man in the dark of night, and after that only as a ghost; but we are continually confronted with the compelling attraction of her seducer, even when he is not on stage.*²⁰

True, Don Giovanni spends more time on stage than his challenger, but the Commander is never really out of our mind. With her enduring grief Anna keeps reminding us of his existence in all her arias. I find no reason to doubt that her music and words express anything other than the loss of her father – after all this came as a shock and Anna has not even left her parent's house yet. Hildesheimer's speculations that Anna's music would sound the same, if Mozart had wanted to portray her passion for Don Giovanni instead of her grief for her father are far-fetched.²¹ It is not all that strange that Anna wants to wait for her marriage for another year. Donna Anna is grieving for her father and the only thing Ottavio can think of is to press her towards marriage, which, honestly, is tasteless if your father-in-law to be just died.

Kunze sees Donna Anna not just as the antipole of Don Giovanni, but as the leader of the counter-action against him.²² But looking at Donna Anna we do not see her taking any action at all after she realises the death of her father. Yes, she freed herself from Don Giovanni and instead tries to unmask his face – she must actually have a quite impressive physical strength to hold on to him for so long – but the Commander takes over from her and is killed by Don Giovanni shortly after. From this moment Donna Anna does ask for revenge, and after she realises who committed the crime (with the help of Elvira's interlude), she is naturally more focused on Don Giovanni. However, Anna never even thinks of taking revenge herself; she delegates this role to Don Ottavio and cries a little more. In fact she has to be persuaded to keep up the masquerade and play her role in the first finale. Certainly, one cannot call her the leader of the counter-action, if she is barely able to act herself. This, of course, is part of the role-image of a *seria* character, which I will invest below (section 5.1, p. 17). Her fault, however, is that she chooses Ottavio to help her, who is a *seria* character himself and, therefore, can scarcely act more than she can.

Abert, Hermann: *Mozart's Don Giovanni*, transl. Peter Gellhorn (London: Eulenburg Books 1976), pp. 64-65.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 66.

²⁰ Hildesheimer, p. 227.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Kunze, Stefan: *Mozarts Opern* (Stuttgart: Reclam 1984), p. 322.

While Hoffmann and subsequently many others treat Anna as major character, Søren Kierkegaard (1843) goes in the complete opposite direction and regards both her and Ottavio as minor characters. In fact he believes that both their Arias in the second act are a completely unnecessary embellishment and interrupt the otherwise constant and perfect dramatic flow of the opera; hence, we should abolish both arias.²³ Instead Kierkegaard considers Donna Elvira to be Don Giovanni's main counterpart.²⁴ Elvira is also Dent's heroine, but he does not call Anna unimportant. Nonetheless, Dent strongly turns against Hoffmannian perceptions of her:

*Anna has been made into a tragic figure by later interpreters, but it may be doubted whether she is really anything more than self-absorbed and aloof; [... she is] not tragic at all; she is simply young and very foolish, almost as inexperienced.*²⁵

He regards her as 'in fact a thoroughly unpleasant young lady' whose motive is nothing but duty and family pride.²⁶ This he also relates to her vocal line which remains controlled constantly, and is unexceptionally normative, thus leaving no room for the expression of true emotions.²⁷ For Kerman on the other hand she is 'Mozart's most cruel and painful portrait.' While she started the opera as a woman of 'formidable courage, pride, purpose', at the end of the opera 'she is a shell of her former self.'²⁸ Kerman also believes that Anna and Ottavio 'promote so much of the action' – 'promote' is a well-chosen word, because actual *action-providing* ranks not quite amongst their best qualities.²⁹

The interpretation of Donna Anna is by far not exhausted, but for the purpose of this essay we shall now move on. To conclude, I believe we should take Donna Anna simply as what she is presented – a noble but naïve young girl, just about to marry, that had two of the worst experiences of her life – a man trying to rape her and the murder of her father. Whether or not Ottavio and Anna finally converge is not the subject of the opera. There is no obvious reason to question the truth of Donna Anna's story.

3 Donna Elvira

It is still quite a prominent perspective that Donna Elvira is subsidiary to Donna Anna, but this idea is mostly clearly Hoffmann-related. To elaborate further on Elvira, again we shall first take Da Ponte's libretto as a starting point and investigate the development of her character. Elvira's introduction was about as prompt and unexpected as Anna's. She runs on stage, meets her abandoner nearly immediately and presents herself with a bombastic outburst of rage and anger. The discovery that she is only one

²³ Kierkegaard, Søren: *Entweder – Oder* (1843), transl. Michelsen/Gleiß (1885), accessed at <http://www.textlog.de/kierkegaard-stadien.html>, >> Don Juan und Elvira, 18/05/07.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, >> Der Don-Juan-Epos.

²⁵ Dent 1955, p. 158.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Kerman 1990, p. 113.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

victim out of many does startle her for a moment, but certainly does not calm her wrath. She leaves the stage (scene six) calling for vengeance, wrath and scorn – but she does not leave for long. She will be back to save Zerlina from Don Giovanni's seduction (scene 10). Again her appearance is rapid; it is as if Don Giovanni pulls at one side of Zerlina, calling Elvira insane and pitiable, and Elvira at the other, calling him a fraud and more – but in the end she wins, so to speak, taking Zerlina with her. Her achievement is not only that she rescued Zerlina, but also that she managed to interlace her strand with the *buffa* girl's.

Next, in scene 12, Elvira intertwines her strand with the *seria* couple Donna Anna and Don Ottavio, who are just asking Don Giovanni for help with the detection of the Commander's murderer. She storms onto the stage, calling him a monster and exposing his true nature to Anna and Ottavio. Once again Don Giovanni tries to take both on his side, calling Elvira a lunatic, but yet again Elvira manages to convince Anna and Ottavio that her story is the truth - and at some point gives reason for Anna to realise who Don Giovanni is. This insight might only have come much later, if Elvira had not turned up in time. As abruptly as she entered the stage, she leaves again – but she managed to find collaborators in her intention to frustrate Don Giovanni's ambitions.

From now on, Donna Elvira, Donna Anna and Don Ottavio act together. Their next entry is joint, when they pay an unexpected visit to Don Giovanni's feast in the finale of the first act. Elvira takes the lead; Anna and Ottavio still seem to be shaken by the earlier revelation. Together they break in the door when Zerlina cries for help and make sure that it is not Leporello who is blamed for his master's crimes.

Elvira's return in the second act is painful for the audience. She still suffers from lovesickness; Don Giovanni happens to overhear Elvira's tune expressing pain and sadness, and immediately takes advantage of the situation ('Ah taci, inguisto cuore,' trio no. 15, act II, scene 2). In, for the spectator, a very painful and uncomfortable manner Elvira is once more fooled and humiliated. As the listener you want to cry out loud and just hope that a saviour appears in time to rescue her, (like she was herself for Zerlina,) to prevent her from believing Don Giovanni once again, when he pretends to repent and love her truly. But as if this repeated swindle were not cruel enough, Don Giovanni and Leporello play another costume game to humiliate her even more, and Elvira is quite easily fooled. We can hardly believe Elvira's credulity (nor can Leporello by the way: 'oh see, that lunatic believes him once again', trio no. 15) – Elvira mistakes Leporello for his master, despite the different face (but again it is dark) and the different voice, but, as mentioned above in the chapter on Donna Anna, this is one of the vagaries of opera which we just have to accept. The costume change does not depict Elvira as any less intelligent than she was before. In fact, the others will later mistake Leporello for his master as well. Her still existent strong feelings for Don Giovanni explain how she can once more believe his confessions of love – because she wants to believe him. Her love is reason for her anger (why would she bother to be angry if there were no feelings involved?), but if her beloved would only repent, she would be most happy to take him back. Love is blind, as one says.

Leporello keeps Elvira at it until Zerlina, Masetto, Anna and Ottavio interrupt them (scene 8). She is about to save Leporello's life, like the others still thinking that he is Don Giovanni. Leporello only unveils himself to save his life, as the two other couples are ready to kill him. Of course, everybody is baffled by the scale of the deception.

Elvira has one more prominent appearance, at the dinner of Don Giovanni (scene 14). By now she realised that Don Giovanni's feelings are not to be changed, he will never return to her. She does not aim to see him dead, but she realises, that if he is not to better his way of life he will suffer from eternal torment – not really a thing you wish on the man you love. Therefore, she tries to warn him and to appeal to his sense of reason, but Don Giovanni only replies with mockery. When Elvira leaves the statue is already on his way to take Don Giovanni to his fate.

When we meet Elvira in the final sextet after Giovanni's descent into hell, she is ready to return to her convent to finish her life there.³⁰

3.1 Donna Elvira's afterlife

Hoffmann treats Donna Elvira only as a minor character, whose former beauty has faded away. But on the other hand she has entered literature as the main female counterpart of Don Giovanni, as in Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical treatise *Either – Or* (1843), for which the opera *Don Giovanni* served as fundamental inspiration.³¹ *Either – Or* does not give much away for our purposes, as it is more concerned with general ideas about *Don Giovanni*, seduction, erotic and music, but it features a few sections which are concerned with Don Giovanni's (Juan's) relationship to the other characters.³² While, as mentioned above, Kierkegaard goes a bit far to discard Anna (and Ottavio) as nonentities,³³ he treats Elvira as Don Giovanni's most dangerous opponent.³⁴ She is the only one of the three women in question that was actually seduced by Don Giovanni, albeit that was before the episode of the opera. Her seduction (and subsequent abandonment) triggers her sense for moral justice, a sense that Don Giovanni neither has himself nor understands. Kierkegaard concludes, therefore, Don Giovanni must fear Donna Elvira. In this respect Zerlina later also becomes dangerous for him. Kierkegaard calls Elvira the personification of passion.

Kunze argues against the importance of Donna Elvira as she loses her interest in actual revenge, and is mainly concerned in saving the soul of the man she loved. But contrary to Anna, Elvira takes action herself; in fact, quite often it is her that pushes the plot forward instead of Don Giovanni. If it were not for Elvira, who else would have saved

³⁰ In the libretto it is never mentioned explicitly that Elvira was a nun before she met Don Giovanni. In Molière, however, it is said that she was a nun and Don Giovanni came, plucked her off the convent only to abandon her few days later. Thus, it seems quite plausible that our Elvira was a nun before, too.

³¹ Kierkegaard 1843.

³² Ibid., 'The Centrality of Don Juan,' 'Don Juan and Elvira,' 'Don Juan and the Other Characters' and 'Don-Juan-Epos'.

³³ Ibid., 'Don Juan and Elvira'

³⁴ Ibid., 'Don-Juan-Epos'.

Zerlina? And again, would the masquerade even have happened if it were not for Elvira taking the lead?³⁵

Amongst others Dent regards Elvira – at least partly – as a rather more comical than tragic character, for example when Don Giovanni and Leporello overhear her singing in the second act:

*Elvira soliloquizes in a formal aria, but the two men, standing in the background and unable to see her face, make their brief comments in what would normally be the ritornelli of the orchestra. [...] these comments make sure of the comic atmosphere – we know at once that we are not going to be allowed to take Elvira seriously for a moment.*³⁶

Although Dent considers Elvira to be part of the comical sphere, he still regards her as 'by far the most interesting of the characters, after Don Giovanni himself'³⁷ and the 'central figure of the plot.'³⁸ That is because she is constantly taking the lead, pushing the plot forward and frustrating Don Giovanni's plans. She is the character that is 'always in the thick of the plot.'³⁹ Noske is in agreement with Dent:

*Apart from the Don himself, Elvira is undoubtedly the richest character of the cast and by far the most modern. Only she breaks through the barriers of the 18th century and takes on the dimensions of a true heroine.*⁴⁰

Lipking digs deeper in the relationship of Don Giovanni and Donna Elvira, and comes to the conclusion that she is his Alter Ego:

3.2 Lipking: Donna Elvira as prototype of longing and abandoned women

Lipking (1990) dedicates a whole article to Donna Elvira. As the prototype of suffering women because of male mistreatment and abandonment, she is called 'Donna Abbandonata.'⁴¹ He draws on a wide variety of literature, which is not necessarily related to the opera, but he points one thing out: In literature and opera and before, ever since there have been many Abbandonatas, just as in real life. We know the pain and suffering Elvira goes through, because we have heard her story before - or, maybe, experienced it in our own lives. Lipking regards Donna Elvira as Don Giovanni's counterpart:

³⁵ Kunze, Stefan: 'Nachwort,' in Flasch 2005, p. 167.

³⁶ Dent 1955, p. 157.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 158.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 159.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Noske, Frits: 'Don Giovanni: Musical Affinities and dramatic structure,' in *ibid.*: *The Signifier and the Signified: Studies in the Operas of Mozart and Verdi*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 35-92.

⁴¹ Lipking, Lawrence: 'Donna Abbandonata,' in Jonathan Miller: *The Don Giovanni Book, Myth of Seduction and Betrayal* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1990), pp. 36-37.

Don Giovanni stands revealed in his true colours, an embodiment of the masculine principle that cares for nothing but the exercise of domination sexual power – ,barbara', as Donna Elvira likes to call him. He is all man, all appetite; that is to say, all phallus. And Donna Elvira stands for all women, the stereotypical feminine principle or womb that wants to be filled and protected and loved and never lonely again. The two are as close – and distinct – as pages in a book.⁴²

While Don Giovanni's role emotionally is not quite difficult – after all he does not feel a thing – Donna Elvira's role is much harder, 'tossing between extremities of passion – savage revenge and tenderness, the bounds of love and hate. She is never quite under control.'⁴³ Elvira also gives the audience a hard time watching her. As mentioned before, it is difficult to view the scenes in the second act when Elvira once again is taken in by Don Giovanni – in Lipking's words, 'the beauty of what we hear is almost (but not quite) enough to cover the embarrassment we feel at watching Elvira's foolishness exposed.'⁴⁴ Elvira appears on stage pretending to be strong and independent, (and probably believing it herself,) but when touched at the right place she breaks down – all that is left is weakness; reason for Kunze to believe that she cannot be seen as the driving force of Don Giovanni's opponents.⁴⁵ Don Giovanni knows exactly where to touch her to create the right reaction, but he has just gone too far this once – even women in love learn. Don Giovanni's costume game leaves no hope for Elvira – she learns, that Don Giovanni simply pretended to be another personality when they met first, (and again in the second act.) The 'real' Don Giovanni is not who she fell in love with. When she realises that she is hunting a phantom, she is ready to caution Don Giovanni and leave. But Don Giovanni fails to recognise when Elvira is there to warn him and treats her yet again with mockery – he would have been better to have listened to her at the time.

Lipking relates Elvira to the 'manic-depressive tradition' in literature where heroines (or heroes) tend to commit suicide out of love-sickness. Hence, he questions if Elvira's final words ('I'll go to a retreat to end my life', 2nd finale, sextet) mean that she actually goes to a convent to be a nun for the rest of her life, or, maybe, imply that she will commit suicide. The latter is not quite plausible – although she displayed some emancipation, travelling alone to hunt Don Giovanni, she has great respect for Christian faith. She was not concerned about the sacred sinfulness of Don Giovanni's betrayal in the first place, but more about the secular aspects of his betrayal, the actual pain she felt. Yet, her faith is beyond doubt – she believes in hell and eternal torment and it is from this she wants to save Don Giovanni. In Christianity suicide still results in exactly this aforesaid eternal

⁴² Ibid., p. 38.

Lipking also sees Donna Elvira as 'male construct', as stories of abandoned women mostly have been told by men. Don Giovanni in particular is a male product, since both the opera and all the anticipating stories are works of male authors. However, this issue is not of importance here.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

⁴⁵ Kunze 2005, p. 167.

He does, however, call it a blind prejudice to believe that Elvira is the musical-dramatically subordinate character to Donna Anna. Kunze 1984, p. 343.

torment; hence, it is rather unlikely that she would kill herself just to meet Don Giovanni back in hell again.

Unintended, Lipking hits on a point though. The idea that Elvira dies is not quite new, but it stems from another source. In Molière's play *Dom Juan*, Elvira is the only woman that wears a veil. At the end when Dom Juan is about to meet the statue in the tomb, first a ghost appears 'in the shape of a veiled women,' to give him his last chance to repent. Dom Juan actually wonders if he had heard that voice before.⁴⁶ He still does not take the hint and fails the test, but the attentive audience wonders, if this was the ghost of Elvira – who consequently must have died for whatever reasons. Da Ponte makes sure though that Elvira outlives Don Giovanni and there is no obvious reason why she should die in the aftermath of the opera. If she passes away later, suicide will not be the reason.

As said above, for Lipking, Elvira is Don Giovanni's alter ego: 'She assumes the form of Giovanni's nemeses, his missing conscience, his alter ego. That is to say, she supplies what he lacks, the pity and fear that mark a human being.' From all the characters in the opera only Elvira can hold a candle to Don Giovanni.

Despite her susceptibility to his wiles, she seems almost able to read his mind, as if prior carnal knowledge has enabled her to sniff out each of his movements. Whenever his appetite is about to be satisfied she arrives on the spot, fatally cramping his style.

A lot of the authors mention Elvira's contradictive musical language. At some points she seems to be a reincarnation of an *opera seria carattere*, at others she is utterly *buffa*.⁴⁷ But not just that her style is contradictive in points, her lines as such seem to be a little out of control, musically too extravagant to be *seria* and too elaborated to be *buffa*. But before we investigate Donna Elvira's and the other's musical languages any further, we will first have a look at Zerlina.

4 Zerlina

Without Zerlina the plot is impossible – Elvira would have no chance to save her, and without her in the first finale Elvira, Anna and Ottavio would have had no possibility to convict Don Giovanni. She is on stage about as much Anna and Elvira, but is generally treated as a subordinate character to both – and yet, there are few authors who argue that she is actually the main character, like Steptoe for example.⁴⁸ Zerlina is the *buffa* character, although (or, maybe as part of *buffa*-conventions) she tries to imitate some of the *seria*-elements in her lines, as we will see later.

While Anna and Elvira are introduced in quite agonizing circumstances, Zerlina's introduction is all positive and sweet. It is her merry wedding day; she and her fiancé are surrounded by friends and celebrating, when - like a dark shadow - Don Giovanni appears

⁴⁶ Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin): *Don Juan* (1665), transl. Neil Bartlett (London: Oberon Books 2004), act V, scene 5, p. 76, 'Don Juan: That voice sounds very familiar...-'.
⁴⁷ Dent 1955, p. 157, p. 159; Lipking 1990, p. 39, p. 44.

⁴⁸ Steptoe, Andrew: *The Mozart-Da Ponte operas: the cultural and musical background to Le nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni, and Così fan tutte* (Oxford: Clarendon 1988), p. 151.

on scene (scene. 7). Masetto realises pretty soon what the 'gentlemen' wants, when Don Giovanni not just offers but simply orders to swap the location of their feast into his palace. Zerlina tries to reassure Masetto that she is with a nobleman, who will not do any harm. She is 'in the hands of a cavalier', and 'hands' can be taken quite literally. Zerlina does not have much choice, as later events will show, Don Giovanni would take her with him anyhow.

The seduction-duettino follows, but when Zerlina is about to give in to Don Giovanni, Elvira turns up and rescues her (scene 10). Six scenes later Zerlina tries to make up with Masetto ('Batti, Batti...') and is quite successful, but again Don Giovanni turns up to finish his frustrated seduction. Masetto hides in a niche, but Don Giovanni discovers him with his attempts to get hold of Zerlina, who is not quite willing and anxious. He gets himself out of the tight spot by pushing Zerlina towards Masetto ('She cannot be without you anymore'), but is a little confused – hard to believe for him that his attempts to seduce Zerlina are actually not successful.

Everybody moves to the feast in Don Giovanni's palace, Masetto is naturally jealous – although Zerlina displayed her faithfulness when they last met Don Giovanni. But Don Giovanni has not yet given up and tries everything possible to separate Zerlina and Masetto. He starts a contradanse with Zerlina, while Leporello is in charge of diverting Masetto. Zerlina is in a dilemma – refusing to dance and ignoring the noblemen is impolite, but on the other side Masetto is tortured by helplessly watching the scene. When Don Giovanni finally believes that everybody including Masetto is distracted, he simply drags Zerlina away – obviously it was taking him too long to persuade her to give in – and attempts to rape her. Apparently, Don Giovanni did not expect much resistance and is slightly out of balance, when Zerlina frees herself and gets help from the formerly masked Donna Anna, Donna Elvira and Don Ottavio.

Zerlina and Masetto reconcile in the next act, after Masetto is beaten up by Don Giovanni dressed as Leporello. 'Look, that's what happens if you are too jealous?' she asks nosily, followed by a fine little aria in which she displays her care for him (no. 18). From now on they only return jointly with the others – next, when they find Leporello with Elvira, and finally in the finale.

4.1 Adorno's Zerlina

[...], and she [Zerlina] is perhaps too shy not to come with him [Don Giovanni] at once in his castle.⁴⁹

For Adorno, Zerlina is the most natural peasant girl, a model of innocence and purity – and the only character he dedicated a homage to. Of course he had been studying Don Giovanni before, and he continued to do so after, but generally his main interest was 'The

⁴⁹ Adorno as quoted in and translated by Hoeckner, Berthold: 'Homage to Adorno's 'Homage to Zerlina'' in Lydia Goehr and Daniel Herwitz (eds.): *The Don Giovanni Moment: Essays on the legacy of an opera*, (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 211.

Don' as he called him. Here, in 1952 Adorno chose to highlight Zerlina – not Anna, not Elvira. For Adorno the main reason for the frustrated seduction is, because 'opera *buffa* does not allow the seduction of the innocent.'⁵⁰ Zerlina is not seduced, but now sexually awakened.⁵¹ 'Naïve at first, but she learns quickly' Hoeckner concludes.⁵² She absorbs Don Giovanni's captivating seductive skills and applies them to Masetto. This is why Zerlina successfully achieves reconciliation with Masetto in 'Vedrai Carina.' In 'Là ci darem la mano' Zerlina learns about the game, the play with the voices. She also learns promises – Don Giovanni promises all she wishes, without ever even attempting to fulfil them. In 'Batti, batti' Zerlina offers Masetto just what he wants to hear and needs in his anger – in his jealous rage he certainly would love the idea of beating Zerlina – yet, in this opera he will never use violence against her, Zerlina would not take that.

With his homage in parts Adorno reaches beyond Mozart's Zerlina. 'She is no longer a shepherdess, but not yet a citizen. She belongs to the historical moment in between, and, in passing, she reflects a humanity, [...]'⁵³ – Here is the point where Adorno's Zerlina is not Mozart's Zerlina anymore, but serves for detached philosophical ideas of his own, similarly to Hoffmann's Anna, who is not Mozart's Anna.

In the Viennese version of the opera Zerlina got a whole extra scene with Leporello after the discovery of him in the second act. For the dramatic flow of the plot the scene seems rather unnecessary, but it tells us a little more about Zerlina's character. Very emancipated she actually takes revenge for Donna Elvira ('See, you dreadful villain, where it leads you to if you insult the ladies', Recitative of scene 10a³) and ties him up to his chair ('You terrible seducer, if I just also had your master's heart here next to you!' duet no. 21a). She ends her line telling us 'this is how to deal with men' and goes off to get Elvira, so that she can punish Leporello herself – but Leporello was lucky and could escape. In this scene Zerlina is displayed as a resolute woman, hardly believable that she would have been so easily seduced by Don Giovanni in the first act. 'Initially the object of Don Giovanni's game, she [Zerlina] later directs her own play' finds Hoeckner in the context of his Adorno-interpretation.⁵⁴

4.2 Zerlina – victim or actress? Another speculative interpretation

But does Don Giovanni really seduce Zerlina successfully? Or is she 'perhaps too shy not to come with him' (Adorno)? Normally Zerlina is described as anxious, and innocent in Adorno's view, yet some authors sense a certain notion of female cunning. Would a

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Adorno, *Ibid.*, p. 212: 'For where would her grace and loveliness have been had not the half-powerless noble on his flight through the opera only just awakened them.' Hoeckner suggests that her 'grace and loveliness' equals 'sexuality'. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

down-to-earth woman be so easily seduced by any old Tom, Dick or Harry? 'Batti, batti' opens her story up for more speculations. Dent relates it to a scandalous incident in 1775 in Venice – when a Doctor named Giuseppe Mussolo spanked a young lady on her bare behind in public.⁵⁵ The memory of that incident was reawakened at the time, as the doctor was banned for several years from Venice, but was pardoned and did return twelve years later – which is at the time of writing of the Libretto – and Dent believes that it is likely that Da Ponte and Mozart had heard about it. Whilst I think Dent's idea that Masetto is indirectly 'visualised as a wife-beater' goes a bit too far, the hint of violence still creates a new dimension to Zerlina's and Masetto's story. It is a story about behaviour, trust and love, the final test before they get married. It does not really matter if Da Ponte and Mozart knew about the incident, the fact that Zerlina lowers herself to being beaten by Masetto as compensation for a flirt, suggests that the idea of violence existed in their relationship before. In this respect Zerlina's flirting with Don Giovanni could well be seen as a sign of retaliation for quarrels or a sign of warning from Zerlina's side, alerting Masetto that if he does not behave she will not stay.

If we assume this as Zerlina's reasoning, Don Giovanni is as much an object in her game as Zerlina is in his, but hers is less bland. Zerlina never intends to go any step further than this first flirtation. As said above, Don Giovanni tells her what she wishes to hear, but so does she, telling him what he wants to hear. It has often been mentioned that Don Giovanni's seduction-duettino suggests success on the womaniser's side, but Zerlina is flirting and uses her female skills, which she in this perspective (unlike Adorno's) has long developed and knows well how to use. As Kerman observes, 'despite her show of tremulousness, she [Zerlina] is fully in control.'⁵⁶ It is 'Zerlina who invents the melody's adornments, extensions, diversions, and so on' to their duettino.⁵⁷ After all, later, Zerlina does cry out for help when Don Giovanni attempts to rape her – because she did not give in to his seduction skills. Zerlina is not just the naïve peasant girl, object of Don Giovanni's game, and it is doubtful, whether she at any point truly believes that Don Giovanni actually wants to marry her. Don Giovanni represents a tool for Zerlina to get her own back on Masetto - 'look, that's what happens if you are too jealous', the line she sings after Masetto is beaten up by Don Giovanni in Leporello's clothes, undermines this idea. Nevertheless, in this game Zerlina misjudged her opponent a little. Don Giovanni will not let her go as easily as she thought; hence, Elvira comes in the right minute to save her from a tricky situation.

Let us return briefly to other responses on Zerlina. We mentioned Dent; later in his book he suggests that Zerlina often was considered the main female character by singers and spectators, and so argues Steptoe.⁵⁸ Kierkegaard regards Zerlina as simply a

⁵⁵ Dent 1955, pp. 139-140.

⁵⁶ Kerman 1990, p. 111.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁵⁸ Dent 1955, p. 184 and Steptoe 1988, p. 151.

straightforward common peasant girl – any other interpretation would mean a misunderstanding of Mozart.⁵⁹ Pirotta ascribes the attributes 'rash flirtatiousness,' 'calculated weakness,' and 'masked moments of strength' to Zerlina; thus, he concludes, she is 'beyond doubt' a *prima buffa*.⁶⁰ Albert believes Zerlina to be the simple country girl with an innocent grace and with a natural impulsiveness; together, Masetto and Zerlina are 'an ordinary loving couple, who despite all kinds of sin and peril find themselves together again in the end.'⁶¹

All together there are less creative interpretations of Zerlina than of Donna Anna and Donna Elvira, but they are undeniably present.

5 Mozart's women

So far this discourse was mainly based on libretto and the responses to it. Mozart may however have had his own thoughts about Anna, Elvira and Zerlina. There exist few letters from Mozart in the Don Giovanni period, as shortly before his father, who was his main correspondent, died in May 1787, so we will have to look directly at the musical evidence. Here it certainly becomes obvious that each of the women has her own personal style – seemingly closely connected with conventions about *seria*, *mezzo*, and *buffa carattere*. In order to progress it is first necessary to look briefly into the conventions which are brought along by such a role constellation.

5.1 Stock characters and role patterns – about *seria*, *mezzo* and *buffa* parts

In comic operas, and as Daniel Hertz argues particularly in *dramma giocoso*, as *Don Giovanni* was labelled, a typical role hierarchy had been developed even before Mozart. According to Hertz principally Carlo Goldoni was responsible for the creation of these conventions. In order to compose something more entertaining than an *opera seria*, but noble enough for audiences of all classes, he generated the *dramma giocoso*, which combines *seria* and *buffa* characteristics.⁶² As mediator Goldoni introduced the '*mezzo carattere*', who could interact with both the noble *seria* parts and the peasant *buffa* parts. However right or wrong it is to name Goldoni as being solely responsible for these standards, or to centre them solely on the *dramma giocoso*,⁶³ it is undoubtedly true that

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard 1843, 'Das Don-Juan-Epos.'

⁶⁰ Pirotta 1991, p. 114.

⁶¹ Albert 1976, p. 40.

⁶² 'These *drammi giocosi* of mine are in demand all over Italy and are heard with delight; noble, cultivated people often attend, finding in them, joined to the melody of the singing, the pleasure of honest ridicule, the whole forming a spectacle more lively than usual,' as Goldoni says. Later he verifies: 'If the drama is a little on the serious side, it is condemned for want of levity; if it is too ridiculous, it is damned for want of nobility. I wished to find the way to content everyone, but finding no models any where, I have been forced for the past six years to create them.'

Both cited in Hertz, Daniel: 'Goldoni, Don Giovanni and the *Dramma Giosco*.' In *The Musical Times*, Vol. 120. No. 1642. (Dec., 1979), p. 993.

⁶³ Since the term is up for discussion generally, it is certainly not sensible to restrict Goldoni's or rather Hertz's ideas solely to the *dramma giocoso*.

Mozart and Da Ponte made use of existing role patterns (with all its related conventions) and did not reinvent the wheel with *Don Giovanni* or any other of their operas.⁶⁴

By the time of *Don Giovanni*, comic operas typically featured three couples – one noble (*seria*), one peasant (*buffa*) and one in between (*mezzo*), plus additionally other parts if necessary. *Seria* characters bring in the tragic element of the opera, and since the subject of such operas are mainly love issues, their tragedy is mostly unfulfilled love. And being what they are, instead of conveying their love for each other, their role is rather to react exaltedly to the subject of love as such.⁶⁵ According to their higher social status, both female and male *seria* parts are normally the highest voices in the opera. Their function is not so much to act but more to display virtuoso arias, with sophisticated and long coloraturas, which naturally are more easily deployed to situations of emotional pain than outcries of joy. Also, because of the *melismatic* nature of their musical lines, *seria* characters can hardly push forward any action. In their parts the plot stagnates, their arias give room for musical embellishment of their emotions, they are ‘major sentimental statements,’ but not to action or decision-making.⁶⁶ Again because of their status they have to remain within the bounds of conventions. To move forward, they always need help of *mezzo* or *buffa* characters.

The peasant couple on the other hand represents the comic part of the opera, and due to their generally *syllabic* singing style they are able to provide action to the plot, but often they need a guiding hand to know what to do.⁶⁷ Since *seria* and *buffa* parts find it hard to communicate with each other, here the *mezzo* part is needed, mediating between both spheres and capable of both singing styles. *Buffa* characters generally avoid certain singing styles associated with *seria* parts: ‘long formal opening ritornellos, melismatic singing and coloratura, wide leaps between long notes, sustained high notes and the broad duple rhythms of the “exalted march.”’ Instead they use a kind of ‘neutral declamatory singing.’⁶⁸ As the *mezzo carattere* can cross the boundaries of peasant and noble style, he or she is freer from codes of musical conventions than the others and able to use all styles when required.

⁶⁴ Because of the lack of actual written material for *Don Giovanni* by Mozart, various scholars refer to a particular letter Mozart's to his father about his ideas on stock characters in comic operas:

Das nothwendigste dabey aber ist. Recht Comisch im ganzen. Und wenn es dann möglich ware 2 gleich gute frauenzimmer Rollen hinein zu bringen. – die eine müsste Seria, die andere aber Mezzo Carattere seyn – aber an güte – müssten beide Rollen ganz gleich seyn. – das dritte frauenzimmer kann aber ganz Buffa seyn, wie auch alle Männer wenn es nörtig ist.

Although it seems as if he anticipates the cast of *Don Giovanni* (e.g. Pirotta 1994, p. 114, Rushton 1981, p. 6), and he mentions Da Ponte in this same letter as promising librettist, I would be cautious of relating it directly to the *Don Giovanni*, since the letter was written years earlier. We do not know if his views especially on the quality of the three roles for this particular opera altered.

Mozart to his father (7 May 1783), in Bauer, Wilhelm A. and Otto Erich Deutsch (eds): *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, Gesamtausgabe, Band III (1780-1786), (Kassel et al: Bärenreiter 1963), p. 268.

⁶⁵ Hertz 1979, p. 995.

⁶⁶ Hertz as cited in Hunter, Mary: ‘Text, Music, and Drama in Haydn's Italian Opera Arias: Four Case Studies.’ In *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 7, No. 1. (Winter, 1989), pp. 29-57.

⁶⁷ Although dealing with Haydn and not Mozart, Mary Hunter's article is quite helpful in this respect, as it describes common role patterns and aria features of *seria* and *buffa* arias. Hunter (1989), pp. 31.

⁶⁸ Platoff, John: ‘The *buffa* aria in Mozart's Vienna.’ In *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 2, no. 2, (Jul. 1990), pp. 103-104.

While the function of a *seria* aria is reflection, the *buffa* aria stands for action, therefore, *buffa* characters can progress and put past events behind them, but *seria* characters are too heavy-headed and melancholic to move on – they mark time and find it hard to gain happiness.

Having clarified role patterns of the stock characters, we shall now have a closer look at the musical evidence of the three ladies in *Don Giovanni*. The boundaries of social order are sometimes blurred in and by *Don Giovanni*, not just Leporello imitating lines of his master, but also for example Zerlina adopting Don Giovanni's language in their duettino (no. 7). Fritz Noske explains this plausible in his splendid essay '*Don Giovanni: Musical Affinities and Dramatic Structure.*'⁶⁹ The embellishments in Zerlina's line are quite unusual for a *buffa* part, and her syncopations especially belong 'to the refined language of the upper classes,' as remarked by Noske.⁷⁰



Example 1: Zerlina, No. 7, bars 21-26, p. 112.⁷¹

Her introduction in the opera sounds different and with few embellishments, no unsettling harmonies, no syncopation, overall rhythmically quite simple – thoroughly *buffa*:



Example 2: Zerlina, No. 5, bars 17-22

But Zerlina is ambitious, she has learnt from Don Giovanni, as can be seen in her own seduction aria 'Batti, batti'. Starting off with an overall syllabic line, she soon reaches sections with small but noticeable embellishments, which however have an onomatopoetic reasoning and are comparatively slow. When she sings 'you may tousle my hair, or scratch out my eyes, and I will still kiss your dear hands with joy' her line is wild and tousled, but kissing with joy she sings dulcet:



⁶⁹ Noske 1990, p. 35-92.

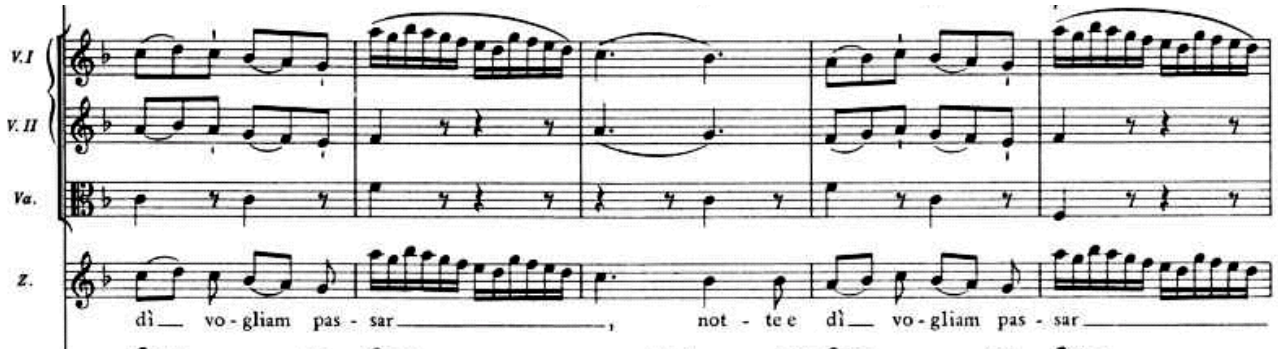
⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 47.

⁷¹ All musical examples are taken from the *Neue Mozart Ausgabe Online*: NMA II/5/17: Don Giovanni, Wolfgang Plath and Wolfgang Rehm (eds., Basel et. Al: Bärenreiter, 1968), see <http://dme.mozarteum.at>, accessed 21/05/2007.



Example 3: Zerlina, No. 12, bars 19-34.

Her line becomes even more determined in the *Allegretto* part, showing real small coloraturas:



Example 4: Zerlina, no. 12, bars 71-75.

Although Zerlina and her music is generally *buffa*, she sometimes reaches out to the tones of higher classes as the examples show. However, she has not yet reached the normative but upper-class *seria* language of Donna Anna, her *seria*-moments remain little facets, ornamental dots within a *buffa* surrounding.

Donna Anna on the other hand never takes up the *buffa* tone – not just musically she remains agent over social convention throughout the opera. When she enters first she is pursuing Don Giovanni, though breathless, she displays a wide pitch range in her very first bars, with over an octave being sung:



Example 5: Donna Anna, No. 1, bars 74-78.

In the continuation it becomes clearer how her style differs from Leporello's *buffo* tone. She is less dependent on the orchestra accompaniment; her melodic line runs up and down and is richly ornamented, whilst Leporello's line is unexceptionally syllabic, mostly backed by bassoon or strings. In her first duet with Don Ottavio Anna has more time to display her capacities and launches ornamentations like the following:



Example 6: Donna Anna, No. 2, bars 186-192.

Donna Elvira's entrance is marked by an even broader range, which she deliberately savours. She runs from everything between the b'' flat and d' and is partial to leaps of all kinds, particularly octave leaps. Therefore she sounds much more spirited and less

conventional than Donna Anna, who also makes use of a broad range, but has a much smoother voice line than Donna Elvira.



Example 7: Donna Elvira, No. 3, bars 30-36.

Elvira is not just capable of major leaps but also of coloraturas – yet again not without using her wide pitch range, as at the end of her aria, no. 8.



Example 8: Donna Elvira, No. 8, bars 38-45.

Amongst other moments in the last sextet it is well visible that Elvira is also capable of singing in *buffa* style. Whilst Anna and Ottavio remain singing in their distinctive *seria* style (example 9), they are followed by Donna Elvira, who clearly takes on a much calmer and *buffa*-like tone. Elvira anticipates the lines of both Zerlina and Masetto, which enter only two bars later (example 10).⁷²



Example 9: Donna Anna and Don Ottavio, No. 24, bars 725-728.



Example 10: Donna Elvira, Zerlina and Masetto, No. 24, bars 739-142.

The difference between Elvira and Zerlina and Masetto is basically the tonality. Whilst Elvira expresses herself in e-minor, Zerlina and Masetto express their recovered happiness in D-Major, but their melodic flow is alike.

So, there we have three women with three different styles of speech. Donna Anna's style is sophisticated, typical *seria*, and therefore conventional - she never touches another

⁷² Elvira has not much left to say apart from that she will enter a monastery, as she had her talk at Don Giovanni's Dinner before his decent to hell.

class. Zerlina on the other side is generally *buffa*, but ambitious as she tries to reach out to the tones of higher classes. Donna Elvira somehow is the exotic-in-between. She is well able to speak the musical upper-class language, but is not concerned about conventions. She breaks out of the norms. She speaks *buffa* as well as *seria*, but expressivity of emotions always rules. Even when she speaks *seria* she breaks conventions, when rage rules her style she is sometimes short breathered, her leaps are just a little too exaggerated to be classical *seria*. Thus, her style of speech is independent and eccentric. Mozart on his side seems not to break with the conventional patterns of stock characters – Anna stays unexceptionally *seria*, Elvira stays *mezzo*, although naturally Mozart capitalises the musical possibilities of her role type, and Zerlina remains largely *buffa*, but receives some additional *seria* decoration.

5.2 Stage presence

It is about time to consider stage presence of the individual characters. Mozart and Da Ponte had to adjust their opera to the wishes and abilities of the opera company, therefore some arias and scenes slightly vary between the different versions. It is by now established that each of the versions is authentic and one cannot consider one as more genuine than the other. The presence of the individual characters is best displayed in a table. The following table (p. 22) contains the numbered pieces, which features one or more of the female characters.

All three characters have two arias in the Prague-version; in the Vienna-version Elvira has a third aria in the second act. Anna has one duet, Elvira a trio and Zerlina a duettino. Anna is also part of the introduction, and Zerlina enters as leader of the choir. Both Anna and Elvira take part in the quartet. Zerlina has another duet with Leporello in the Viennese version, which, unfortunately, is often left out. One also has to consider that Elvira has her last prominent appearance in act 2, scene 14, which is part of the finale, at Don Giovanni's last dinner.

As one can see from this table, the number-wise Anna, Elvira and Zerlina are similarly prominent on stage. If one stands out most, then it is Elvira, who especially in the first act launches two solo arias, while the others only have one. In the second act her last appearance is fitted into the finale, but still musically important. If one includes the Vienna Aria, then she certainly has to sing the most. However, it seems we cannot decide on who is the heroine of this opera simply by comparing the stage appearance.

Donna Anna	Donna Elvira	Zerlina
Introduction with Don Giovanni and Leporello (no. 1)		
Duet 'Fuggi, crudele, fuggi' with Ottavio, (no. 2, scene 3)		
	Aria 'Ah chi mi dice mai' (no. 3, scene 5,) commented by Don Giovanni and Leporello	
		Choir 'GiovINETTE che fate all'amore' (no. 5, scene 7)
		Duetto 'Là ci darem la mano' with Don Giovanni (no. 7, scene 9)
	Aria 'A fuggi il traditor' (no. 8, scene 10)	
Quartet 'No ti fidar, o misera' Elvira, Anna, Ottavio, Don Giovanni, (no. 9, scene 11)		
Aria 'Or sai chi l'onore' (no. 10, scene 13)		
		Aria 'Batti, batti' (no. 12, scene 15)
Finale 'Presto pria ch'ei venga', all characters bar statue (no. 13, scene 16-20)		
	Trio 'Ah taci, ingiusto core' with (or contra) Don Giovanni and Leporello (no. 15, scene 2)	
		Aria 'Vedrai carino' (no. 18, scene 6)
Sextet 'Sola sola in bui loco' with all characters bar Don Giovanni and Statue		
		Vienna: Duet with Leporello, 'Per queste tue manine' (no. 21a, scene 10a)
	Vienna: Aria 'Mi tradì quell'alma ingrata' (no. 21b, scene 10d,)	
Rondo, 'Non mi dir, bell'idol mio' (No. 23, scene 12)		
Scena ultima, Finale (Sextet, sometimes omitted)		

6 Who pulls the strands?

Kunze states that it is Don Giovanni alone who kicks off any activity,⁷³ but in fact, Don Giovanni would prefer his situation to remain unchanged, which is his being in control over the plot and other characters. Not much action would be involved in his idea of plot and life, apart from a seduction here and there. But the opera is not about his crimes; it is about the other's intentions to stop him.

By pretending to be somebody else Don Giovanni had some control over Donna Anna, but as soon as Donna Anna realises the charade, she frees herself and instead tries to gain control over him. After this first shock she becomes rather passive, but from now on Elvira is there to provide action. She crosses his way constantly and pulls his plot into the opposite direction of what he wants. She acts independently from anybody else and loose from social conventions, displayed in both music and text. She travels on her own without male company and makes her own independent decisions, without male guardianship. If Donna Anna is the agent of social law, Donna Elvira is the agent of ethical law. Finally there is the odd one in the row, Zerlina. We can hardly call her an agent of innocence after we accredited her as a calculating female. But Don Giovanni also fails to

⁷³ Kunze 1984, p. 322.

gain control over her. In fact she is most independent from him, she has neither successfully been seduced nor raped, nor has her father been murdered. Thus, she has less to be impassionate for. Yet she is there, particularly in the Vienna-version, to support the others. Zerlina is the agent of femininity. Although all of the three ladies attempt to get control over Don Giovanni throughout the opera nobody really manages to. In the end Don Giovanni loses all control over his situation to a dead man (not a woman, but that would be an interesting staging-idea), a divine being, but still, the statue does not really gain control over his mind – Don Giovanni never repents.

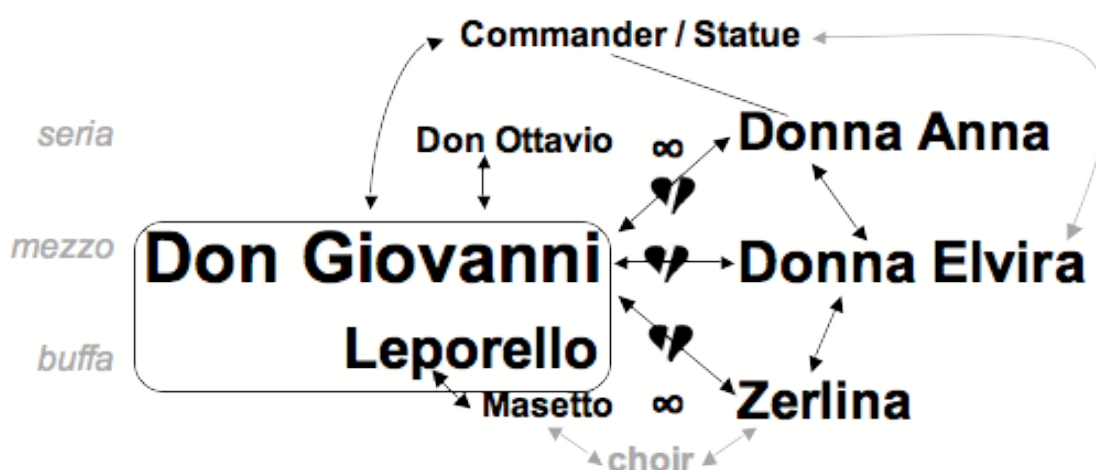
Thus, in terms of who is the main driving force of the counterplot, Donna Elvira is the right and only answer. She is also the only one who, apart from Don Giovanni and according to her status as *mezzo* character, can interact with both spheres *seria* and *buffa*. Donna Anna cannot be Don Giovanni's main counterplotter, as she is, according to her role pattern, bar the start constantly (and sometimes annoyingly) inactive. However, if the question is who is the counterpart in terms of the complete opposite of Don Giovanni, Donna Anna must be named. Don Giovanni is active; Donna Anna is passive. Nevertheless, singers apparently used to choose Zerlina as the main part; at least it is her who gets the famous tunes (which is not surprising, since one can more easily sing along *buffa* lines than *seria* coloraturas). And if the question is who develops most during the plot, Zerlina is probably the answer. The relationship of Donna Anna and Ottavio goes nowhere. Although Elvira leaves empty-handed, her character develops over the opera. Even though she returns to her earlier life she has learnt from her - or better Don Giovanni's - faults, but she disposed of her rage and fury. Solely Zerlina and Masetto really step onwards. Zerlina has grown from her first entrance till the finale, as discussed above, musically as well as dramatically. Only Zerlina and Masetto achieve true conciliation at the end and gain happiness with their togetherness.

Who is Mozart's heroine? He seems to remain largely within the conventions of the stock character patterns, but puts a strong musical emphasis on Elvira and decorates Zerlina's line uniquely. In terms of musical complexity Donna Elvira's part is the most challenging, while Zerlina gets the most popular tunes, and Donna Anna sings constantly upper class but conventional *seria* style. To draw any conclusions from this is rather speculative, but I regard both Elvira and Zerlina as musically more interesting than Anna, because Elvira exploits all her possibilities in music and Zerlina develops and adopts from the higher styles.

Who is the most interesting character? Hildesheimer thought Donna Anna is the most interesting, since she poses so many unanswered questions and leaves room for interpretation. Many of the questions however can be answered by looking at earlier versions of the tale; others are only posed because Hoffmann chose her to be his muse and to provide his own fantastic answers to questions that were not really there. Other discrepancies in Da Ponte's libretto, such as the dramatic insignificance of Anna and Ottavio after their first appearance and their therefore somehow unmotivated returns

during the rest of the opera, the unclear background of Elvira, or structural incoherency at some points, are lapses that stem from the hurry in which he had to provide this text and were not intended to cause major interpretive difficulties. Besides, because of Hoffmann the question about Donna Anna's previous history has become a big issue, as he did not look into the older versions of the Don-Juan story. But if we skip these sources for clarification, we equally have to skip them for Elvira and Zerlina, and ask what happened in their lives before the start of the opera. After all, it is never mentioned explicitly that Elvira was a nun before, it is only most of the time assumed as that is how she is described in Molière's play. Why did Don Giovanni go as far as marriage to get hold of her? He could have just raped her like he attempted to do with Donna Anna and Zerlina. And why does Zerlina play along with Don Giovanni's seduction in the first place? What is wrong in her relationship with Masetto?

Back to the question of who the main heroine of the opera is - a character-graph proves to be useful (next page). Male parts are on the left, female on the right side, vertically the characters are ordered by voice-style (*serialbuffa*).



Don Giovanni, together with Leporello, dominates the left side; next to them all other (male) characters seem pale. To balance this bulk of masculinity Da Ponte introduced three female parts. None of these seem as prominent as Don Giovanni's role is, but all of them are bigger parts than Masetto or Ottavio, or even the Commander, although he acts as a sort of *deus ex machina*. Since both the *seria* Anna and *buffa* Zerlina have their male and equal counterpart, it is dramatically logical that Elvira is Don Giovanni's *mezzo* counterpart, and as we have seen – the answer to the question 'Who pulls the strands' is Elvira.

'Every girl has what makes me happy, and therefore I take them all,'⁷⁴ are the words that Kierkegaard puts in Don Giovanni's mouth. Right he is, for Don Giovanni all women are the same, equally important at the moment of conquest, equally unimportant when abandoned. Dent's believe that the opera was originally planned in four acts with one separate act for each woman (as mentioned in the second footnote of this essay) emphasises this idea of equal importance of all three.⁷⁵

If Da Ponte, Mozart and Don Giovanni do not differentiate between main and subordinate heroines, the only question that remains is who is your personal favourite character? She will be your heroine.

⁷⁴ Kierkegaard 1843, >> Das Don-Juan-Epos.

⁷⁵ Dent 1955, p. 138.

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Score

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