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Don Giovanni (review)

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(Review)

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fit the sleeves so tightly (at least on my copy), that it is almost impossible to extract the discs, without getting fingerprints on their playing surfaces (or inadvertently tearing the sleeves). Do the people who work for the record companies and who make such decisions ever actually *use* the finished product? I decided to play it safe and store the discs in the kind of generic CD jewel cases that one can readily buy; as a result, this recording takes up *twice* as much shelf space as its producers intended it to.

In any event, the booklet (or rather, the book) is attractively designed. In addition to the numerous photos, it contains an introductory essay on the opera (not quite as thorough as the one that accompanied the Philips LP set, but certainly adequate), a plot synopsis, and the libretto. The English translation of the libretto, by Lionel Salter, is the same one originally commissioned by Philips back in 1978. It strikes a nice balance between reproducing the literal sense of the Italian and reading well in English.

With a respectful nod to Norman's *Armida*, I would suggest that this new recording of the opera is now the one to own. It makes one curious to know how *Armida* might work on the stage.

Roland Graeme

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### *Don Giovanni*. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

*Don Giovanni*: Garry Magee  
*The Commendatore*: Clive Bayley  
*Donna Anna*: Majella Cullagh  
*Don Ottavio*: Barry Banks  
*Donna Elvira*: Vivian Tierney  
*Leporello*: Andrew Shore  
*Masetto*: Dean Robinson

*Zerlina*: Mary Plazas  
 Philharmonia Orchestra  
 Geoffrey Mitchell Choir  
 David Parry, conductor  
*Chandos Opera in English* (distributed by Koch International) CHAN 3057(3) (3 CDs)

Chandos describes this recording, on the front of the box, as “The Original *Don Giovanni*.” This means we hear the Prague version of the score — and nothing but the Prague version: we are not given any of the Vienna additions, either in appendices or on separate CD tracks. An admirably succinct booklet note explains the textual issues and points out that what we usually hear (in the opera house and on records) is neither pure Prague nor pure Vienna, but a “*hybrid version* [italics in the original] which Mozart never intended to be given” (booklet, p. 13). Furthermore, “Mozart’s original version has three major advantages. Without the additional high-lying aria (i.e., “Mi tradi”), the role of Elvira can be correctly and effectively cast with a dramatic rather than a lyric soprano. The version has exceptional structural integrity and musical cohesion, and a distinctive orchestral sound-world, all of which are compromised by the inclusion of the additional arias. Above all, it is dramatically concise and powerful to a greater extent, perhaps, than any other of Mozart’s operas” (booklet, p. 13).

One could quibble about the first two of these claims. Where, for example, is the evidence that Mozart preferred a large, powerful soprano voice for Elvira? (For that matter, is there any Mozart soprano part that *doesn't* benefit from the application of a good-sized, healthy, technically secure instrument?) And, even without “Mi tradi,” the role contains passages that are not only “high-lying,” but require agility (as in the outburst in the act 1 quartet, “Che mi dice di quel traditore”).

Similarly, while many commentators have made the point about how the added Viennese numbers interrupt the dramatic flow of the opera, particularly in act 2, it's difficult to see exactly how they “compromise . . . [the opera's] distinctive orchestral sound-world.” They are, surely, orchestrated the same way as the rest of the opera — that is, effectively, beautifully, and appropriately.

If a conductor takes consistently fast tempos, it's possible to squeeze the Prague score onto two CDs. David Parry's reading, though never sluggish, is on the relaxed, expansive side. Chandos has played it safe by using a three-CD format. Disc 1 ends after Giovanni's “Fin ch'han dal vino.” The rest of act 1 occupies disc 2, which has a playing time of only twenty-two minutes. The whole of act 2 is on disc 3.

I have quoted from Da Ponte's Italian libretto to identify individual numbers (and will continue to do so, to avoid confusion). However, as is also indicated on the box, one crucial way in which this is *not* “the Original *Don Giovanni*” is that it is sung in English. The translation, by Amanda Holden, was first performed by Opera North in Leeds in October 1999, and again in London (at Sadler's Wells) later in the same month. The Chandos studio recording was made in London in August 2000, with several members of the Opera North production's cast repeating their roles.

Holden's translation is excellent, on the whole. It fits the notes, avoids awkward turns of phrase, and is eminently singable. It also strikes an appropriate tone: comic, but with more serious undertones, and avoiding excessive colloquialisms or cheap jokes. Proper names are given as in the original: the title role is not transformed into “Don Juan,” and the “Commendatore” retains his Italian title. Again, one can question details. Holden slips in rhymes whenever possible; most of these are effective and indeed witty, but a few do seem strained (e.g., “shame/vain” or “canzonetta/better”). On the issue of tone, for an angry Masetto to describe Zerlina as a “bitch” is very much in character; but would Leporello — on two separate occasions — really call his employer a “bastard” to his face? The middle section of Anna's “Or sai chi l'onore” is rendered as “Remember him wounded / and think of him falling; / the body, the bloodshed, / the sight was appalling; / don't ever forget him, you know why he died.” Typical of Holden's style, this looks a bit odd in print but is clear and effective when sung — the only potential problem is “the sight was appalling,” which steers dangerously close to potential bathos à la Gilbert and Sullivan.

While I am quibbling: the use of the slang expression “to run out of steam” (for Leporello's “che già fosse sfogata,” referring to Elvira) at first struck me as

an anachronism; but no doubt it could be argued that the Industrial Revolution had begun by 1787.

Questions of edition and language aside, this is a strong performance. Parry's reading, as I have suggested above, is leisurely yet tidy — a middle-of-the-road *Giovanni*, with no apparent interpretative axes to grind. Although this is not, of course, a "period instruments" performance, the recitatives are accompanied by fortepiano rather than harpsichord. Appoggiaturas are observed, but there are no vocal embellishments. The orchestra and chorus are first-rate.

The cast makes a strong case for the translation: uniformly crisp enunciation (especially in the recitatives), but never at the expense of vocal phrasing or lyric flow. The accents are less identifiably "British" than I had anticipated, although if Holden's translation were to be sung by an American cast, the overall effect would no doubt be different.

In photographs of the Opera North production, Garry Magee comes across as a baby-faced yet rather punkish Don Giovanni, and his singing doesn't contradict that impression. The voice — on the light side to begin with, and short at the bottom — has a bit of edge and grain to it; he tends to be incisive, rather than ideally smooth or suave. He has an interesting take on the character: this Don seems intelligent yet genuinely amoral; he is self-contained and thoughtless, rather than malicious or evil.

Andrew Shore's Leporello is a good match for Magee's Don, because his bass has a decidedly "rusty" edge to it. He is an accurate singer, though, and genuinely funny in a sly, unexaggerated way.

The three ladies are good, although perhaps not ideally contrasted in timbre. Majella Cullagh sounds young, alluring, and aristocratic — major advantages for a Donna Anna. As is so often the case, the *allegro moderato* section of "Non mi dir" is negotiated with a hint of caution, but singing it to English words is an accomplishment in itself. Despite that booklet note about the proper casting of Elvira, I'm not sure I would classify Vivian Tierney as a dramatic soprano. Hers is a warm and lovely sound, however. She is particularly good in Elvira's angry and vindictive moments, which she makes vivid, but without turning shrewish or sacrificing vocal quality. Mary Plazas is a pert Zerlina, very much in the bright-voiced soubrette tradition of casting the role. My personal preference would be for a singer who could bring more warmth and sensuality to the music. She is well paired by Dean Robinson, who is a satisfactory Masetto in every respect.

Barry Banks scores some verbal points, but before he could be considered an Ottavio on a major-league level, his slender voice would need to develop more body and variety of color. The runs in the aria (i.e., "Il mio tesoro" — this is the Prague version, remember, so he doesn't get to sing "Dalla sua pace") remain decidedly earthbound. Clive Bayley, a superior Commendatore, finds the right tone of implacable but emotionally detached sternness for the final scene. He does not, for example, make the common mistake of sounding sadistic or (worse) sarcastic.

The sound is excellent, in what might be described as a nonaggressive way: the listener gets a sense of the performance as a whole, without this or that detail being put under the sonic microscope for close inspection at any given moment. The producers have not gone overboard with extramusical effects, but the “stereo staging” is capably handled.

I put this recording to a logical test, by lending it to a newcomer to opera who had not yet heard *Don Giovanni*, or (incredible as it may seem!) any other Mozart opera. He was fascinated, and I practically had to pry the set out of his hands to complete this review.

Chandos usually issues, in due course, single CDs of highlights from these complete sets. In this case, however, I’d recommend springing for the complete performance, because it plays so well as drama.

*Roland Graeme*

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### *Attila*. Giuseppe Verdi

*Attila*: Simone Alaimo  
*Odabella*: Tiziana Fabbricini  
*Foresto*: Marco Berti  
*Ezio*: Franco Vassallo  
*Uldino*: Gianluca Floris  
*Leone*: Enrico Rinaldo  
*Orchestra Giovanile della Sardegna*

*L. Canepa Chorus*  
*Massimiliano Stefanelli, conductor.*  
*Recorded live in performance at Teatro di*  
*Tradizione, Sassari, Sardinia in December 1999*  
*Kicco Classic (distributed by Qualiton Imports)*  
*KC061.2 (2 CDs)*

Early Verdi is back. Once dismissed as crude, unperformed, and unrecorded, many of the pre-*Rigoletto* operas have become familiar, several becoming almost repertory items. *Attila* can now be had on CD, on video, and on stage in the recent past at the Chicago Lyric and New York City operas.

When (Friedrich Ludwig) Zacharias Werner’s 1808 drama *Attila, König der Hunnen* caught Verdi’s attention, he turned to Francesco Maria Piave for a libretto but supplied the scenario himself. Eventually dissatisfied with Piave’s work, Verdi gave the project to Temistocle Solera, whose personal life got in the way of finishing the project. Act 3 went back to Piave, resulting in the weakest section of the text.

Werner’s huge historical canvas was replete with historical and fictional characters imagined in the vivid, neo-Shakespearian style of German Romantic tragedy. Little is available in English on Werner, but an entry in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* rues his early “dissipated life,” and opines that “he lacked self-control, and produced no work of lasting merit.” Pierre Bellemare rejects that view, citing Mme de Staël, among other commentators, as giving testimony to Werner’s stature that for at least a decade made him a viable successor to Schiller.<sup>1</sup>

Werner, who knew his history, opposes a surprisingly noble Attila with Ezio