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*Don Giovanni* Paper

The Voice of Good and Evil: The Baritone as a Hero and a Villain

In the male cast of *Don Giovanni*, the vocal ranges of the parts determine their characters. Leporello, a character whose sarcastic nature is the comic relief during Don Giovanni's dramatic seducing escapades, is cast as a bass. Don Ottavio, who fulfills the role of the romantic hero for the opera, is written as a tenor. Masetto, who can arguably be considered an antagonist against Don Giovanni in his conquest for Zerlina, is also a bass. However, Don Giovanni, the main character, is marked as a baritone, a vocal range that spans both the tenor and bass part. He is offered the most flexibility in his role in the opera, which Mozart uses to his fullest advantage by alternating between roles as a romantic hero and villain.

According to *Oxford Music Online*, bassists are usually antagonists or comic characters, while tenors and castrati – males who are castrated before reaching puberty to preserve their soprano-like voices – are usually the romantic heroes. Composers use these conventions to suggest whether their characters are heroes or villains. But in *Don Giovanni*, the title character is a baritone, which leaves that unclear.

In the first scene of the opera, Don Giovanni immediately gives the audience the impression that he is supposed to be a villain, as his first words in the opera are “Foolish girl, you scream in vain” (85), sung in the lower register of his baritone voice. This impression continues for the rest of the scene as Don Giovanni is shown killing the

commendatore and then fleeing. His domineering and threatening nature continues through the second scene as he shows the relationship he has with Leporello.

It is not until the fifth scene when the rest of Don Giovanni's vocal range comes into play. The scene starts out with Leporello asking for permission to speak his mind, to which Don Giovanni replies in a higher pitch than his initial scenes "I swear upon my honour, / provided you do not mention the Commendatore" (97). However, when Leporello proceeds to tell him that "the life [he is] leading is that of a scoundrel" (99), Don Giovanni immediately replies, "How dare you? You insolent..." (99) with a noticeably louder and deeper voice. This particular exchange ends with Don Giovanni jumping from his lower to his upper register as he sings, "Then we'll be friends again" (99). Already, Don Giovanni is portrayed as a double-sided character who Mozart takes advantage of his vocal range to represent the particular aspect he wishes to show at the moment.

All hope for the good side of Don Giovanni is not lost, however. Mozart gets a chance to showcase his upper range when viewers first encounter Donna Elvira and witness Don Giovanni's attempts to seduce her. There is a constant repetition of "poverina," or "poor young lady," which he sings beautifully in his upper register, and continues "We really ought to comfort her" (103). On the other hand, when Don Giovanni discovers that he is talking to Donna Elvira, he quickly jumps back down to his lower register as he tries to get rid of her. This pattern continues when Don Giovanni meets Zerlina and attempts to win her affection. During the start of his interaction with Zerlina and Masetto, Don Giovanni sings in a legato manner

I hope we shall be friends. What is your name?  
My dear young friend Masetto

And my dear young friend Zerlina  
I must take you both under my protection (115).

This seems to have won Zerlina over by the time that Don Giovanni tells Leporello to get Masetto away. However, when Masetto is insistent on staying, Don Giovanni becomes angry and switches to a staccato lower pitch to threaten Masetto. Later, in his duet with Zerlina, his upper vocals get a place to shine for the first time. Inconveniently enough, they are almost immediately overshadowed by Zerlina's powerful and skilled voice. When Donna Elvira arrives and interrupts the duet, Don Giovanni's voice jumps around as he tries to please Zerlina and calm her while dismissing Donna Elvira.

The range that the baritone possesses allows Don Giovanni to make all these changes. Mozart presents these higher pitches more often in Don Giovanni's various attempts at seduction. The usage of the soft, higher pitches make Don Giovanni seem very romantic and allows him to disguise himself as a romantic hero which is usually the tenor's part. This is further suggested when he meets Donna Anna and offers his help to find the murderer of her father by singing very legato and high

My heart's blood  
I will offer to serve you.  
But why, fair Donna Anna,  
Do I find you weeping?  
Tell me who is the wretch  
Who could distress one so gracious (129).

The irony of this statement, sung so beautifully to attract her attention, is that Donna Elvira comes in yet again and interrupts Don Giovanni. While vocally dueling Donna Elvira during the quartet for Donna Anna and Don Ottavio's favor, Don Giovanni is once again forced to use his voice to its fullest potential by jumping from register to register.

One of the most notable examples is when he initially comments on Donna Elvira by saying, “The poor girl is demented, my friends” (131) with a true bass voice, but then shifts up immediately to the tenor range when suggests “Leave me alone with her. / It just might reassure her” (131). When it seems that Don Giovanni has lost Donna Anna and Don Ottavio to Donna Elvira, he ends up singing his final exchange to Donna Elvira as a last resort in the middle of his range,

Be quiet now,  
A crowd gathers around you.  
Use a little prudence  
Or the world will know your shame (pg. 135).

Of course, Donna Elvira dismisses this warning and confidently sings her victory over Don Giovanni. As a final attempt to win the couple over, Don Giovanni sings his final lines before exiting off stage in a high voice: “Forgive me, beautiful Donna Anna. / If I can ever serve you, call upon me at once. / My friends, I leave you” (135). Sadly enough, he has truly lost this battle to be seen as a romantic hero, because after he leaves the stage, Donna Anna immediately recognizes him as the man who murdered her father.

However, for Don Giovanni ignorance is bliss, as his only aria focuses on the notion of more drinking, more partying, and more women. This is the best exhibition of his upper range, and the time when he completely fulfills the role of the romantic hero.

Thus, Mozart takes full advantage of the baritone voice, which, according to *Oxford Music Online* stretches from the A two octaves below middle C to the F above middle C. Mozart uses this wide range to use to his advantage, by leaving listeners with the question of what Don Giovanni’s role in the opera is. As shown, he jumps from playing one stock character to another just by shifting his voice. However, interestingly enough, almost every time he tries to pass off as a romantic hero, his plan gets foiled as

he even mentions, with quite a bitter low tone, “I think today the devil’s diversion is to destroy my pleasures. All my plans come to nothing” (127). When evaluated from this angle, it seems as if there is an implication that Don Giovanni is not a romantic hero, or at least a bad one. But, if this is the viewpoint that the audience is supposed to have of Don Giovanni, why did Mozart not just write in Don Giovanni as a bass, the typical casting for antagonists?

Don Giovanni’s single aria answers this question. Don Giovanni is a romantic hero in some sense of the word. He even states, “I love [women]. To be faithful to one woman means neglecting the others” (185). It was coincidence on his part that Donna Elvira interfered every time to stop his conquests. But, Mozart also gives him a fair share of bass and villain lines. Thus, Don Giovanni’s character is divided between romantic hero and villain.

Mozart skillfully uses the baritone range to portray the complexity of Don Giovanni’s character. Using his voice to his advantage, Don Giovanni lands somewhere in the middle of the spectrum within the opera, neither hero nor villain, by appropriating both identities at different times. There is no doubt that Don Giovanni is at times a villain, or that he is a romantic hero during others. Thus, his character is caught between the two poles, leaving the audience to make the final interpretation.

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