

**CIM Opera Theater:
Don Giovanni (23 Apr.)**

by Peter Feher



It's hard not to be enamored with *Don Giovanni*, Mozart's supreme realization of passion, danger, and desire in music. And CIM Opera Theater made falling in love with this 1787 masterpiece the most natural thing thanks to a splendid production at Playhouse Square last week.

Taking the stage of the Mimi Ohio Theatre on Wednesday, April 23, for the first of two performances, the

largely student cast seemed to be discovering the drama afresh. The story of the cad and lecher Don Juan has been told countless times, but the Italianate version that Mozart crafted with librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte remains the most viscerally immediate, even centuries later.

That's because the seduction occurs in the music itself. Crucially, the audience never actually sees the opera's title character succeed with any of his amorous intentions. Rather, we only hear of his former conquests and sordid past, chiefly from his servant Leporello, who early on delivers the aria "Madamina, il catalogo è questo" (My dear lady, this is the catalog).

In order to live up to this reputation, the singer portraying Don Giovanni needs to be a suave and persuasive presence onstage. Baritone and 2014 Cleveland Institute of Music alum Brian James Myers proved perfect in the role. He could convey boastful brilliance, such as in the rapid-fire notes of the brief, bravura "Champagne Aria." Elsewhere, he would retreat into coaxing sweetness, most winningly in the Act 1 duet "Là ci darem la mano" (There we will give each other our hands), in which Giovanni almost has his way with the young peasant Zerlina.

She's one of a trio of female characters who wrestle with whether to resist or acquiesce to their seducer — in the process revealing something of the essence of human desire. Zerlina has by far the most straightforward motivations and material, and mezzo-soprano Caroline Friend brought a light sound and good-natured charm to the role. She sang “Batti, batti” (Beat me, beat me), Zerlina's ticklish number addressed to her fiancé Masetto (bass Ku Liang), as pure innuendo.

Donna Anna is pulled in many more directions by the men in her life. Competing interests come to a head in her Act 2 aria “Non mi dir” (Tell me not), expertly interpreted in all its moods by soprano Mikayla Liu. Anna will marry her betrothed, Don Ottavio (tenor John-Joseph Haney), but only after avenging her father, the Commendatore (bass-baritone Andrew Allan Hiers), killed by Giovanni in the opera's opening scene.

Attempting to aid both women is Donna Elvira, a former lover now hellbent on retaliation. Predictably, she's also the first in private to forgive Giovanni. Her tendency toward extremes traps her in a kind of complicity, though you wouldn't have suspected this from soprano Ariel Wong's impressive self-composure throughout Act 1. Her character's irresolution in Act 2 proved dramatically intriguing if somewhat technically tricky to pull off.

In the end, the individual who marks Giovanni's undoing is Leporello, sung by Daniel Oh with a robust tone that easily redeemed a few shaky rhythmic moments. Fate is sealed not by any action the servant takes but simply by his refusal to cover for his master when the spirit and statue of the Commendatore comes knocking.

The CIM Orchestra, under conductor Harry Davidson, lit up during this final scene that sees Giovanni dragged off to hell, the trumpets and trombones thundering out at full volume. JJ Hudson's generally adept and unobtrusive stage direction became a bit excessive here, with background projections of flames suddenly flashing to the fore. But this was the rare indulgence in a production that otherwise made vividly clear that the drama of Mozart lives in the music.

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