

# OPERA VILLE

TUESDAY, APRIL 22, 2014

## An Illuminating Giovanni at Opera San Jose



The power of dichotomy - the interaction of two seemingly contradictory elements - is a central force in Mozart's operas, and, in itself, created a dichotomy. Mozart's preoccupation with gray areas was a primary reason that he was not as popular as he could have been during his lifetime - and simultaneously a reason that his works have

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maintained a Shakespearean staying power ever since.

Though not the most glamorous production, Opera San Jose's presentation of *Don Giovanni* features - in aspects both vocal and dramatic - near-perfect casting, a quality that tends to bring out the opera's intriguing contradictions. That said, I'm going to cheat and offer what I'll call a "roster review":

GIOVANNI: Zachary Altman's baritone is suede-supple, offering the opportunity for a suave, Eden-snake Giovanni. His wooing of the peasant bride Zerlina is achieved in silky piano phrases, and the mandolin canzonetta, "Deh vieni alla finestra" (sung to another peasant, Elvira's maid), is a jewel of gentle beauties. He also performs the enviable trick of singing shirtless in the opening scene. Giovanni's dichotomy is perhaps the most obvious: he is an evil, immoral man, bordering on sociopath, but we simply can't get enough of him.

LEPORELLO's dichotomy is similar to that of the audience. He is absolutely disgusted by his master's behavior, but would not give up his wingman adventures for the world. Eugene Brancoveanu follows the dictates of his boyish face and errs on the side of enthusiasm, particularly in the legendary Catalogue Aria, in which he inventories Giovanni's conquests with great glee. He sings with a boisterous baritone, and also proves adept at comedy, particularly a stilted attempt at mimicking Giovanni that had opera fans (yes, opera fans!) bursting out in laughter.

DONNA ANNA is the Queen of Denial, a secret Catholic slut who welcomes Giovanni into her bed, cries rape to cover her sin, then finds, to her great horror, that her ruse has led to the murder of her father by her lover. (Freud would have a field day with this.) The majority of what follows is prudish posing, and hardly the kind of passionate, nuanced vocal parts that would best illustrate Cecilia Violetta Lopez's flair for phrasing. But the dam breaks in Anna's final primal scream, the Larghetto aria "Non mi dir," in which Anna pleads for understanding from her impatient (and clearly unwanted) betrothed, Don Ottavio. Lopez's singing is virtuosic, particularly the high, soft lines that bridge the orchestral pauses like threads of gossamer.

DON OTTAVIO: I've  
had more than one  
tenor tell me that  
Ottavio is not as  
pathetic as he appears.  
Nope. Sorry. Ottavio is  
a lightweight Hamlet,  
pledging vengeance,  
swearing oaths,

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#### ABOUT ME



 [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#)

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of six novels, including *Frosted Glass* (Dead End Street, Seattle) and *Rhyming Pittsburgh* (LBF Books, Pittsburgh). His poetry has appeared in more than fifty journals, including *Skidrow Penthouse* and *The Chaffin Journal*, and he works as a judge for several *Writer's Digest* competitions. He lives in San Jose, and plays drums for the San Francisco rock band *Exit Wonderland*.

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reaffirming his love for Anna and doing absolutely nothing to make any of this happen. James Callon performs this thankless role just right, equipped with a bright, clean tenor that shines in the aria, "Il mio tesoro," and wearing a series of exquisite outfits (costumer Alyssa Oania) that add the aura of spoiled dandy.



DONNA ELVIRA's contradiction is as clear as *Fatal Attraction*: the man she hates with such impassioned vengeance is precisely the man she would welcome back to her bed in a second. She is also the catalyst for the opera's greatest irony. Her spoilsport timing prevents the Great Lover from actually having sex in his own opera - and, in fact, thanks also to Elvira, less sex than his pathetic manservant Leporello. Elvira's comically large hatred is made even larger by Nicole Birkland's enormous mezzo voice. What's better, she achieves all this power without seeming to force her instrument.

ZERLINA: The peasant bride is conflicted by a fickle but genuine affection for her groom, but also an overwhelming desire to run off with the nobleman rock star who has placed a bull's eye on her rump. Kindra Scharich performs the two lilting love arias, "Batti, batti" and "Vedrai, carino" with a warm, enchanting mezzo. These two pieces further demonstrate Mozart's fondness for peasant girls (Susanna in *Figaro*) and also an intriguing connection. In the former, Zerlina invites her betrothed to beat her; in the latter, she offers to use her body as a balm to his pain. Sounds to me like the girl's got a fetish.

MASETTO's conflict is well-founded. He wants to trust Zerlina, but is steadily unnerved by Giovanni's dangerous desires for his betrothed (doubly dangerous since Giovanni, as a noble, holds all the power). Unfortunately, Daniel Scofield's pugnacious delivery saps power from a baritone that already lacks the power to fill the room. He does, however, perform some good moments of comedy (between beatings).

Stage director Daniel J. Witzke offers his own dichotomy. The clarity of his onstage personae indicates that he has done his work well, and he certainly excelled in helping his players deliver some finely drawn comic moments. But he chose to end the opera by having Giovanni garrotted by Masetto, when the libretto clearly calls for him to be dragged to hell. I'm all for creative interpretation, but are we now allowed to rewrite Da Ponte? In addition, although bass Silas Elash did an excellent job singing the Commendatore, his statue outfit was not much more than a painted cloak, depriving the opera of one of its most memorable visual moments.

The sets (designed by Annie Smart) were admirably versatile but often drab, especially in the case of Giovanni's apartment. The exception was an array of lamps dropped from the flies during the party scene. I also enjoyed the chorus in that scene, peasants who were clearly excited to invade the manor, and who each seemed to have their own individual schticks.



Finally, what a pleasure it is to watch George Cleve, who has probably conducted more performances of Mozart than anyone on the planet. We're lucky to have such a tesoro in our midst.

Images: Zachary Altman and Cecilia Violetta Lopez as Giovanni and Donna Anna. Eugene Brancoveanu as Leporello. Nicole Birkland as Donna Anna. Photos by Pat Kirk.

Through May 4, California Theatre, 345 South First Street, San Jose. Alternating casts. \$51-\$111. [www.operasj.org](http://www.operasj.org), 408/437-4450.

Michael J. Vaughn is a thirty-year opera critic and author of the novels [Operaville](#) and [Gabiella's Voice](#).

POSTED BY [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#) AT 12:08 PM

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