

The subtle betrayal

JESSE SIMON

In the spirit of accentuating the positive, it should be said up front that the new production of *Don Giovanni* at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden has a magnificent cast. Not only did one have the impression that each role was filled by a singer whose strengths matched the part, but the singers functioned remarkably well together in their various configurations; the result was an evening of eloquent arias and crisply wrought ensembles, rarely ostentatious but endlessly attentive to the nuances of Da Ponte's cynical humour and Mozart's glorious music.

The quality of the performances, however, must be weighed against that of the staging. The evening marked the third and final installment of the Staatsoper's new Mozart/Da Ponte cycle, in which all three operas were entrusted to a single director. That director, Vincent Huguet, conceived of the operas not as a series of unrelated works connected by thematic threads, but as a continuous trilogy set within a single narrative universe: thus the young women and men in *Così fan tutte* reappear as their older (if not wiser) selves in *Figaro*, and once again – even older, even more jaded – in *Don Giovanni*, which culminates in the death of the central protagonist who had appeared previously in the guises of Guglielmo and Almaviva.

It was an ingenious starting point but not one that stands up to any kind of scrutiny, and anyone hoping for grand revelations that would make sense of the lapses and inconsistencies in the two previous stagings would have been deeply disappointed. When faced with the reality of a grand concept that didn't really work, the director could have backed away gracefully and admitted defeat, or he could have doubled down on his bluff in the hopes that sheer conviction would carry him through. Instead the stagings pursued their central idea with a maddening timidity that offered few insights, made few points and managed, finally, to draw virtually no conclusions from three of the most generous and multi-faceted studies of human nature in the standard operatic repertoire.

Both *Così fan tutte* and *Figaro* settled for being highly fanciful period evocations – of the late sixties and early eighties respectively – and were content to coast solely on their look without giving much attention to character, coherent action, or the myriad thematic

Huguet, Don
Giovanni
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Mozart: *Don Giovanni*. Vincent Huguet,
director. Michael Volle (Don Giovanni),
Slávka Zámečnicková (Donna Anna),
Bogdan Volkov (Don Ottavio), Peter Rose
(Commendatore), Elsa Dreisig (Donna
Elvira), Riccardo Fassi (Leporello), David
Oštrek (Masetto), Serena Sáenz (Zerlina).
Staatskapelle Berlin. Daniel Barenboim,
conductor





Mozart: Don Giovanni. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Vincent Huguet, director.

Staatsoper unter den Linden, April 2022. © 2022 by Matthias Baus.

possibilities that lay buried none too deeply in the fertile soil of Da Ponte's libretti. *Don Giovanni* suffered from many of the same flaws as its predecessors; but while the staging was less weighted down by smug self-appreciation of its sets and costumes – the action took place in something resembling the 'present day' – it was in some ways an even greater betrayal of the operatic text.

As in the previous operas, the staging was consistently unsure of the tone it was attempting to establish; it had little sense of its characters and did a superb job of conveying that uncertainty to the audience. Individual scenes were haphazard and confused, cluttered with unnecessary action and laden with obscure imagery. But in addition to all of that, the staging seemed paralysed by the fear that its subject matter had aged badly and would no longer be accepted by a modern audience. So it set about toning everything down: Don Giovanni didn't slay the Commendatore in cold blood, it was just an accident – he slipped and hit his head; it could happen to anyone. Nor was Don Giovanni a serial womaniser but rather a successful fashion photographer who had, in Spain alone, merely photographed 1003 women. These attempts to make the scenario more palatable served only to drain it of its vitality. If *Don Giovanni* has commanded the stage for more than two centuries it is precisely because licentiousness and personal liberty are seductive as hell, while honour, compassion and nobility of spirit – as embodied in Don Ottavio – can be painfully dull. To tone down the vigour with which the title character pursues his vices is to miss one of the central points of the opera.

Mr Huguet's *Don Giovanni* was considerably more frustrating than either *Così fan tutte* or *Figaro* because, among its indifferently-staged scenes and prevailing reticence, it also managed to suggest (and then ignore) a number of fascinating possibilities. After a while it grew painful to watch the staging fumble its own good ideas so consistently. The notion of Don Giovanni as an artist whose practice was devoted to the search for an ideal of beauty had great promise, but was quickly abandoned, as though no one quite knew how to follow it through. The second act confrontation between Donna Anna and Don Ottavio took place in a funeral parlour, and there was something wonderful about the idea of the two characters having a public relationship breakdown while trying to select a coffin. A more assured staging with a lighter touch could have transformed the scene into a masterpiece of black comedy; instead it was left to languish, unable to capitalise on its own immense potential.

The call-backs to *Così fan tutte* and *Figaro* served only to expose the limitations of the unified-trilogy concept. It was just about plausible that Guglielmo, Almaviva and Don Giovanni were one and the same character – although his late-career pivot from record executive (in *Figaro*) to renowned fashion photographer seemed highly improbable – but one struggled to see the threads connecting Figaro the sardonic intriguer with Leporello the agreeable lackey, or Donna Elvira with the Countess; and when the curtain of the second act rose on an updated version of the opening set from *Così fan tutte* it forced us to consider that Donna Elvira had also once been Fiordiligi, and the realisation came as a gust that toppled the flimsy house of cards on which the three operas had been so precariously

balanced. The more one thought about it, the more the concept crumbled into nothing.

Yet it could have worked: with even a little more thought it would have been easy to fashion the characters from the different operas into a loose group of friends who remain connected in various romantic and professional configurations over the course of a half-century. There would have been some loose ends and inconsistencies to be sure, but if the stagings had possessed any degree of confidence in their own storytelling – instead of merely believing that elegant sets and hipster costumes were enough to sustain an opera – the audience would have been willing to look past them. What emerged instead was a mess that grew less convincing with each installment: in the end, *Don Giovanni* was too reliant on the setup of *Così fan tutte* and *Figaro* to work as a standalone drama, yet too indifferent to the world created in those earlier operas to succeed as the final part of a trilogy.



Mozart: Don Giovanni. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Vincent Huguet, director. Staatsoper unter den Linden, April 2022. © 2022 by Matthias Baus.

The production was nonetheless redeemed to a great extent by the singers, notably the charismatic Michael Volle, whose Don Giovanni was the evening's greatest source of dark energy. He was far from an obvious choice for the role, and in both 'Fin ch'han dal vino' and 'Deh, vieni alla finestra' he was neither as lyrical nor as fleet as one would expect from a more traditional reading; but in the recitatives and dramatic scenes he was untouchable. Although his tone was commanding and his sense of timing impeccable, he never allowed himself to dominate by force of personality; instead he brought life to his scenes through an alert engagement with the people and objects around him. He helped the first act quartet to unfold as a natural extension of the drama, his preparations for the festivities that conclude the first act were infused with rare excitement, and not even the staging could extinguish the beguiling charm of 'La ci darem'. Throughout the evening Mr Volle was wholly attuned to the notion that singing and acting are inseparable, and his remarkable recitatives, while remaining true to the libretto, had an organic, improvisatory quality as though he was bringing the dialogue to life in a whirlwind of inspiration.



Mozart: Don Giovanni. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Vincent Huguet, director. Staatsoper unter den Linden, April 2022. © 2022 by Matthias Baus.

If the other performances were necessarily more measured, Slávka Zámečnicková delivered a quietly superb Donna Anna. It was not a performance that drew undue attention to itself: her accompanied recitatives – especially in the first act, describing her 'mystery' visitor – avoided all hint of melodrama, and were delivered in a natural, almost conversational manner. Even her arias were marked by restraint: her tone was appealingly rich, her projection effortless, and the brief coloratura section in 'Non mi dir' wholly secure, but instead of placing technique at the forefront of her performance she channeled everything into the expression of Donna Anna's confusion, grief and despair. If the production was hopelessly muddled on the question of character, Ms Zámečnicková was at least able to render the emotions beneath her scenes

with great clarity.

Although Elsa Dreisig was given the difficult task of bringing life to an underdeveloped Donna Elvira she was a strong vocal presence throughout the evening: ‘Ah, fuggi il traditor’ gave her the opportunity to sculpt elegant ascending lines topped with clear high notes, but ‘Mi tradi’ was even more impressive for its beautifully crafted, yet naturally delivered expressions of doubt and resolve. Serena Sáenz had an ideal sweetness of tone for Zerlina and her ‘Batti Batti’, supported by delicately played cello, was thoroughly charming.

Riccardo Fassi was an unusually dignified Leporello with few of the buffo trappings normally associated with role. If his ‘Catalogo’ was matter-of-fact and somewhat prone to understatement, he maintained an engaging presence throughout the evening – notably in his various second act appearances – and seemed to enjoy an especially strong rapport with Mr Volle in their scenes together. As Don Ottavio, Bogdan Volkov never attempted to exceed the limitations of the role, but delivered a gentle, finely balanced ‘Dalla sua pace’ and an ‘Il mio tesoro’ that came across more as thoughtful interior monologue than tenor showpiece. David Oštrek was a convincingly rustic Masetto, dismayed by the unfolding events yet unable to do anything about them; and Peter Rose brought reassuring heft and appropriate severity to the Commendatore.

Along with Mr Huguet and his team, Daniel Barenboim has been the other constant of the trilogy and, as in *Così fan tutte* and *Figaro*, he guided the Staatskapelle through a performance equally alert to granular details and broad dramatic sweep. At no point in the evening could the tempi be described as overdriven, but neither did any of the scenes come across as leisurely or meandering; rather it was a performance of judicious pacing and subtly rendered contrasts in which alternating moods of gaiety, gravity and danger emerged naturally from one another. It was, above all, a reading tailored to the strengths of the individual singers, and throughout the evening one could sense Mr Barenboim both urging and supporting the fashioning of graceful vocal lines.

For all the fine music, however, the staging remained too burdened by its trilogy concept to offer much engagement with the themes and ideas that make *Don Giovanni* so enduring; instead it presented a series of tentative scenes that shied away from anything that might be considered too problematic. What emerged was both bloodless and toothless, passingly nice to look at but content to abandon its excellent cast in a dramatic vacuum; and for a staging which claimed to offer a critique of sexual politics from the sixties to the present, it was remarkably reluctant to engage with the obvious sexuality of the libretto. Yet the extreme discomfort, which the staging was unable to hide, was curiously reassuring: it only reinforced the notion that *Don Giovanni*, in his ability to abash modern directors, remains one of opera’s most indelible and uncontainable figures.