Don Giovanni: Beyond Mozart

Before Mozart wrote his incomparable Don Giovanni, the Don Juan legend had appeared as a popular subject of several different kinds of entertainment, musical and non-musical alike. Don Juan appeared as the subject of spoken plays, including Molière’s Le festin de Pierre (1655) and Goldoni’s Don Giovanni Tenorio (1736), and a ballet, Dom Juan ou le Festin de Pierre, with music by Gluck (1761). Several operas were also written on the subject including a pastiche, La pravità castiga (1730), composed for the Lenten season of the opera theater of Franz Anton von Sporck in Prague, and subsequent works by Eustachio Bambini (1734), Vincenzo Righini (1767), and Giuseppe Gazzaniga (1787). The last of these, with a libretto by Giovanni Bertati, served as the model for Mozart’s own opera.

The enduring popularity of the Don Juan legend coupled with the success of Mozart’s opera, continued to spur the creativity of composers well into the nineteenth century, including Franz Liszt’s Réminiscences de Don Juan and the unfinished Fantasy on Themes from Mozart’s Marriage of Figaro and Don Giovanni, Chopin’s Variations on “La ci darem la mano,” and variations on the same theme by Beethoven. In his Diabelli Variations, Beethoven also quotes Leporello’s aria “Notte e giorno faticar” in variation 22. Allusions to Mozart’s Don Giovanni also appear in a number of operas including Offenbach’s The Tales of Hoffman and Rossini’s Il turco in Italia.

- Sarah England, Ph. D. candidate, Musicology