

Analyzing the Artistic Characteristics and Vocal Performance of Don Giovanni and Zerlina's Duet “Là ci darem la mano” in the Opera Don Giovanni



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Abstract: “Là ci darem la mano” is excerpted from Mozart’s opera “Don Giovanni”, which premiered in 1787. This duet, featuring the baritone Don Giovanni and the soprano Zerlina, masterfully portrays the distinct personalities and emotional transformations of the two characters. The article delves into the background of the opera “Don Giovanni” and provides character analyses of the male protagonist, Don Giovanni, and the country lass, Zerlina. It further examines the artistic characteristics of the duet “Là ci darem la mano,” drawing on personal vocal performance experience for a comprehensive analysis and an overall assessment, followed by further contemplation.

Keywords: “Là ci darem la mano”; vocal performance analysis; artistic characteristics

1. Mozart’s Opera “Don Giovanni”

1.1. Background of the creation of the opera “Don Giovanni”

Mozart was influenced by numerous factors while composing this opera. In the 18th century, the Enlightenment Movement took root in France and Germany, unsettling the political landscape across Europe. The authority of the noble aristocracy was gradually being dismantled, giving rise to the emerging bourgeoisie. It was during this relatively free and equitable era that Mozart’s heart began to yearn for new life and new creations. At this time, Mozart himself was going through some setbacks in his personal life. His father had passed away, his mother was severely ill, and he was beset by severe financial difficulties. Amidst these circumstances, Mozart began the plot for this opera. In 1781, defying opposition, Mozart bravely freed himself from the life of a court composer, embarking on a path pursuing freedom and artistic expression. His operas were characterized by a strong sense of the era, praising humanity while also criticizing the decay, licentiousness, and rudeness of

the aristocracy, showcasing a new cultural ideology. He had a predilection for opera buffa, to which he made innovative contributions, including Don Giovanni, one of his greatest masterpieces.

The opera “Don Giovanni” is a Two-Act Opera Buffa created by Mozart in 1787, with a libretto by Da Ponte adapted from Byron’s novel of the same name. This opera blends elements of life and philosophy, focusing on the psychological portrayal of characters, setting a precedent for the development of music drama in the 19th century. It premiered in 1787, following Mozart’s successful work “The Marriage of Figaro.” Before Mozart’s portrayal of Don Giovanni, there were already many works that depicted him through music. The character of Don Giovanni first appeared as a negative figure in 17th-century Spanish drama. Mozart drew inspiration from various literary sources to create his version of Don Giovanni, surpassing his predecessors by infusing this legendary libertine with qualities of bravery and romance (Xiao, 2013). By blending traditional elements with a modern twist, Mozart gave Don Giovanni a serious and noble demeanor, paving the way for the development of rebellious personalities in the 19th century.

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1.2. Synopsis of the opera “Don Giovanni”

The story of Don Giovanni first appeared in the novel “Don Giovanni” by the Spanish writer Tirso de Molina. This novel focuses on the amorous adventures of the protagonist, a young man named Don Juan. It was later adapted by famous artists such as Molière, Mozart, and Byron. Each master portrays Don Giovanni from a different perspective, making him a famous figure throughout literary history. In Mozart’s version, Don Juan’s character is greatly enhanced and the storyline becomes more dramatic, receiving enthusiastic acclaim from the audience. Mozart used Tang Huang’s experience to satirize the distortion of human nature and the corruption of social customs under the feudal system, expressing the emotional changes deep in the human heart through music. In this opera, Mozart portrays the characters remarkably well, especially their complex and contradictory personality traits which leave a deep impression on the audience. At the same time, the music of this opera is extremely beautiful and melodious. The whole opera is full of passion and drama, leaving a profound impression on the audience (Huang, 2022).

The opera “Don Giovanni” has been highly regarded by audiences for its unique creative perspective and plot. Set in 17th-century Spain, it revolves around the story of Don Giovanni, a dissolute and cynical Spanish nobleman who relentlessly pursues physical and spiritual pleasure, using his privileged status to chase after multiple women without regard for consequences. In the opera, he becomes infatuated with Anna, the daughter of a commander, and attempts to violate her. When the commander arrives to rescue Anna, he is unexpectedly murdered by Don Giovanni. Then, his roving eye fell on the country girl Zerlina, and he tried to seduce her, defying his wife’s counsel and pursuing her relentlessly. In the end, Don Giovanni is dragged into Hell by the statue of the Commendatore, putting an end to his licentious exploits.

1.3. Character analysis of Don Giovanni and Zerlina in the opera “Don Giovanni”

Before Mozart composed his opera “Don Giovanni,” there were already numerous versions of the story. Don Giovanni’s character possesses a remarkable universality, allowing different authors to interpret it in various ways while preserving its distinctive traits. In Mozart’s adaptation, the character of Don Giovanni is significantly heightened. Throughout the opera, “Don Giovanni” abounds with sharp satire and comedic elements. Mozart vividly depicts the characters from different social strata, their distinct personalities, and a range of emotions with great skill and liveliness. Don Juan’s character is dualistic, exhibiting both negative and positive traits. He is shameless yet brave, witty, and skeptical of religion. Fundamentally, he is a negative figure but possesses some positive attributes. Despite his rakish nature and insouciance, Don Juan displays elegance and grace, fearlessly facing death. This dichotomy adds complexity to the opera. His innate aristocratic demeanor, laced with humor, blends elements of comedy and tragedy, accentuating the opera’s conflicts.

Mozart’s portrayal of Don Giovanni displays the complexity and duality of human nature. Gone is the simple-minded villain, replaced by a nuanced character (Sun, 2017). He embodies both human frailty and nobility. Guilty of heinous acts, he never shows remorse. Independent in spirit, he fearlessly quests for freedom and equality, defying injustice. concurrently, he empathizes with women, understanding their innermost thoughts, yet often resorts to violence or deceit to fulfill his desires.

In this opera, the protagonist Don Giovanni has individual encounters and intricate relationships with every character, making the female roles particularly crucial. Zerlina, a country girl, represents an ordinary woman from the lower social class. The play depicts her simplicity, charm, and kindness as a rural girl, while also revealing her shallowness and love for vanity, as she is lured by Don Giovanni’s smooth talk and becomes enamored with the aristocratic lifestyle. In the beginning, Zerlina appears at her wedding to Masetto, as the villagers joyfully sing and bless the

soon-to-be newlyweds. Don Giovanni and his servant Leporello happen upon the farm and lay eyes on Zerlina. Among the three female characters, Zerlina endures the least harm from Don Giovanni (Liu, 2021). The duet “La ci darem la mano” sets the stage for his attempted seduction of her. When Zerlina first appears, she is a lively and charming village girl, who joins the festivities. However, when Don Giovanni tries to lure her away, she defies her fiancé Masetto’s objections, determined to have a private encounter with the nobleman. These reveal a vain side of Lina that contrasts with her initial image.

2. Artistic Features of the Duet “Là ci darem la mano” in the Opera “Don Giovanni”

2.1. Plot summary of the duet “Là ci darem la mano”

In Act 1, Scene 3, as the village girls, including Zerlina and her fiancé Masetto, along with the peasants, sing, Don Giovanni and his servant Leporello arrive at the country estate. He sets his sights on Zerlina and, after intimidating Masetto into leaving, he persuades Zerlina with false intentions of marriage, attempting to lure her to his villa. At this moment, they perform a captivating duet, “La ci darem la mano”.

In this duet, Don Giovanni tries to persuade the soon-to-be-married Zerlina to run away from her wedding, his tender and persuasive words gradually winning over the hesitant bride. Just as she is swayed, countess Elvira appears in the nick of time, exposing Don Giovanni’s true nature and whisking Zerlina away to save her from his deceit.

2.2. Artistic characteristics of “La ci darem la mano”

The duet “La ci darem la mano” is in a moderate tempo, in A major, with a tempo change from 2/4 to 6/8 time. It follows a simple binary form. According to the musical rhythmic characteristics, the piece can be divided into two parts. In the first part, Don Giovanni’s harassment and seduction of Zerlina are depicted. Don Giovanni employs a series of tempting phrases such as “My castle is close by” and “I can change your fate” to achieve his goal. Zerlina, on the other hand, exhibits a transition from hesitation to no resistance, conveyed through lines like “I hesitate, my heart trembles, this may bring happiness, yet I fear his false affection”, “Masetto is pitiful”, and “I am almost powerless to resist”. Part two primarily narrates Don Giovanni’s successful seduction of Zerlina, followed by their departure together.

Example 1

The first section (bars 1-49), performed at a tempo of Andante, traverses a dynamic range from pianissimo (p) to mezzo-forte (mf) and back to pianissimo, reflecting Don Giovanni’s progression from tentative to bold and increasingly elated as he nears success, as well as Zerlina’s transformation from shy to helpless in resisting and then blossoming with love. In terms of rhythm, the section is written

in 2/4 time, with a “strong-weak” pattern that gives the music a steady and regulated quality, mirroring Don Giovanni’s suave and seasoned character. In terms of rhythm, Don Giovanni’s arias mostly consist of regular and steady eighth notes, or quarters followed by half notes, reflecting his character (Wang, 2016). For him, declarations of love and wooing are routine, hence the steady rhythms

also imply his arrogance and self-assuredness, as he smoothly and unperturbedly courts Zerlina. On the other hand, Zerlina's vocal parts feature more

syncopated eighth note rhythms, sixteenth notes, or half notes followed by quarter notes, closely mirroring her hesitant, and fluctuating emotions.

Example 2 shows a musical score for three parts: Soprano (S.), Bass (B.), and Piano (Pno.). The score is in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The lyrics are: "An - diam, an - diam, mio be - len a ri - sto - rar le / So lass uns oh - ne Wei - der Lust ent - ge - gen -". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a simpler bass line in the left hand.

Example 2

In the second section (bars 50-79), the tempo shifts to 6/8 time, which unfolds after the fermata in bar 49. Written with dynamic and a clear alternation of strong and weak beats, the 6/8 rhythm evokes a sense of danceability and joyful, inclusive musical sentiment even without lyrics. Rhythmically, it is relatively straightforward, suggesting the stability of the couple's love after successfully holding hands. Melodically, it predominantly features stepwise progressions, further conveying the bliss and sweetness of the romance. In m. 66, a fourth leap in

the Don Giovanni voice is followed by a sixth leap, gradually expressing his eager desire to take Zerlina away. In terms of expressive, the trill in m. 78 brags about the sweetness and brilliance of love. In terms of the piano accompaniment texture, mostly using parallel tenths, the performer must pay close attention to dynamics to avoid disrupting the singer's melodic flow. From m. 66, the climax of the music, several trills and triplets in thirty-second notes are added, and the performer must be meticulous with the clarity and uniformity of the notes.

Example 3 shows a musical score for three parts: Soprano (S.), Bass (B.), and Piano (Pno.). The score is in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The lyrics are: "fa - pie - tá Ma - set - to! Pre - / set - io wür - de s'ier - ben! Kaum / Io can - gie - rò tu - a ser - te. / Glück soll dich stets um - ge - ben!". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a simpler bass line in the left hand.

Example 3

The coda (bars 80-83) is a brief and contrasting section in which the same melodic figure is played pianissimo and then forte, first evoking the couple's sweet memories of their love and then affirming their determination and faith in it. The piece ends on a strong *f*, with Zerlina now in Don Giovanni's arms, and the two plunging together into the abyss of love.

3. Vocal Analysis of the Duet "Là ci darem la

mano" in the Opera "Don Giovanni"

This duet fully showcases the distinct personalities and inner emotions of the two individuals. It intricately portrays the rakish and cynical nature of Don Giovanni, as well as the psychological transformation from his pursuit of Zerlina to the development of love and subsequent decision to journey together. This necessitates singers to be mindful of technique execution during the performance, capturing the intricate emotional

turmoil and conflicting desires.

The characteristic of a duet, or involves two or more vocal parts singing alternately or overlapping. Thus, the harmonious interplay between the different parts assumes great importance (Jiao, 2016). It requires a balance of distinct layers that blend seamlessly while also showcasing the unique qualities and characteristics of each part. In performance, the main challenge of a duet lies in maintaining precise intonation and rhythm across all parts without influencing one another, while also conveying the individual melodies and the overall narrative of the song. This particular piece is a mixed duet, featuring a male and a female voice, depicting the intertwining emotions of the main characters, Don Giovanni and Zerlina.

In this duet, Don Giovanni wins Zerlina's heart with his charming words and flirts with her through their eyes. In the performance, Don Giovanni and Zerlina strive to match their vocal ranges, which is crucial for a successful duet, requiring harmony and cooperation between the two parts. Don Giovanni's range spans from E1 to E2, with his highest note being E2, while Zerlina's range extends from E1 to F2, with her highest note being F#2. Throughout the song, Don Giovanni's smooth talk and advances are depicted, gradually winning Zerlina's affection. baritone Don Giovanni deep and resonant by nature, requires conscious compression of soprano Zerlina's range within a fuller, more robust vocal area to maintain balance between the two (Zhao, 2021). Meanwhile, soprano Zerlina should aim for a full, solid tone, achieved through skillful use of the diaphragmatic and chest resonance, with breath control executed by the diaphragm. Maintaining the breath at the diaphragm produces a more solid sound, a crucial aspect of singing.

Additionally, more emphasis should be placed on the use of chest resonance during singing. Chest resonance tends to prevail in the lower register, where lower-pitched notes are produced. After achieving chest resonance (Yang, 2013), the vocal tone becomes fuller. It is crucial to maintain an

inhalation state while singing to allow the breath to flow smoothly into the chest and create resonance. This enables soprano Zerlina's timbre to blend seamlessly with baritone Don Giovanni, achieving a harmonious unity of sound. In the duet sections of the song, The Fusion of their voices is particularly significant. Volume should also be monitored, ensuring it is not too loud for a harmonious exchange. The shift from 4/4 to 8/6 rhythm enhances fluidity in the music, so it's crucial to convey a waltz-like feel in the three-beat sections, always staying aware of the constant drive forward in the melody. Two expressive parts intertwine, forming a dramatic duet with lyrical undertones.

Lastly, this duet portrays Don Giovanni gradually enticing Zerlina. At first, Zerlina remains resolute, but she is gradually ensnared and seduced by Don Giovanni, eventually succumbing to his charms and falling in love with him. Consequently, in the performance, the progression of Zerlina's emotions should be conveyed effectively.

4. Conclusion

The opera "Don Giovanni" exemplifies Mozart's masterful use of music to portray character depth and psychological intricacy. In Mozart's operas, a keen intuition and comprehension of the libretto are paramount for performers, demanding a profound understanding of the era's intellectual underpinnings. Through ingenious melodies, each character is distinctively characterized, reflecting their unique mental dynamics. Moreover, the nuanced psychological portrayal of both male and female roles poses a significant challenge, necessitating exceptional vocal prowess to capture the subtle fluctuations of each character's emotions. The use of ensemble in opera is highly rational and successful, contributing significantly to dramatic function and effect. Mozart's handling of the duet between Don Giovanni and Zerlina is particularly effective, balancing the two voices and sections seamlessly. This iconic and renowned duet, featuring a combination of baritone and soprano, elevates the genre to new heights in Mozart's creation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

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