

CALGARY OPERA



DON GIOVANNI

STUDY GUIDE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Land Acknowledgment.....	2
About Calgary Opera.....	3
Discovering Opera.....	4
What to Expect at the Theatre.....	6
Characters.....	8
The Story.....	9
About the Composer.....	11
About the Librettist.....	12
The Divine Dramedy.....	13
Don Giovanni In Context.....	15
Reflection Questions & Suggested Lesson Plans.....	16

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge that we live, work and play on the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut’ina, the Iyârhe Nakoda Nations, the Otipemisiwak Métis Government of the Métis Nation within Alberta Districts 5 & 6, and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta.

ABOUT CALGARY OPERA

Founded in 1972, Calgary Opera is one of Canada's most innovative and ambitious professional opera companies. With over 50 events during the 2024-25 season, curious listeners of all ages can experience the wonder of opera all throughout the school year, whether as grand events at the Jubilee Auditorium or in diverse community experiences throughout our city and beyond.

Since 2007, we've offered an annual school tour production, performing for young audiences around Southern Alberta.

For over 25 years, we've offered the in-school music program Let's Create an Opera, reaching over 60,000 students.

This season, we are thrilled to partner with Elder Saa'kokoto and the teachers and students of Sundance School for Let's Create an Opera, which will culminate in an original children's opera performed in English, French, and Blackfoot.



Throughout its 52-year history, Calgary Opera has championed new works and Canadian artists and stories. We have produced:

- 8 new works, including the internationally acclaimed opera "Filumena"
- 27 new productions (new versions of existing operas), and
- 8 Canadian premieres.

Calgary Opera's mission is to serve its entire community with innovative and inspiring stories told through the bold medium of opera. We're thrilled you'll be joining us!

To stay connected and learn more, sign up for our newsletter [here](#).

DISCOVERING OPERA

Opera is a vibrant and ever-changing artform that combines the dramatic intensity of the theatre, heightened through music and singing.

- Operas can be long or short, with any number of people involved.
- Operas can be sung in any language.
- Operas can tell stories about any time, place, person, or issue.
- Operas are still being written today.

Operas are created by the cast, crew, and artistic production team including:

- composers, who write the music
- librettists, who write the words or “libretto”
- directors
- conductors
- singers
- instrumentalists
- dancers
- set, lighting, special effects designers
- costume and makeup designers
- fight and intimacy coordinators
- choreographers
- stage managers and technical crew
- and the audience



**Each person brings who they are as a person to the creation of an opera.
Their individual contributions shape the performance.**



Operas are not typically autobiographical, although they do use stories and music to express the personal struggles and ideals of the creators. They often also comment on important social concerns of the creators' time.

Sometimes stories from cultures not of the creators' own were used to convey universal themes. In these cases, the creators relied on imagination and empathy to enter the emotional world of someone whose specific experiences they never lived through.

When this is the case, there are also important ideas to reflect on, including:

- Who is telling whose story?
- How are they telling it?
- For what purpose?

In recent years, opera creators prefer to share their own stories or to collaborate with those whose stories they would like to tell. As such, opera also presents an important opportunity to think critically about art, as well as to go beyond the opera itself and learn more about the history, language, traditions, and stories of those represented.



UNDERSTANDING THE MUSIC OF OPERA

We understand music on its own terms by making music! By singing its melodies and harmonies, playing it and especially by improvising, we bring the music into our ears, bodies, and spirits.

To increase our musical understanding, we begin by learning by heart the melodies and rhythms we encounter. As the music of more artists becomes familiar, we begin to encounter unfamiliar music with more musical understanding.

Whether you've heard an opera once or a hundred times, there's always more to discover.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE

Whether you're brand new, or have been a subscriber for years, you're welcome at the opera. Here's how you can get the most out of your visit:

WHAT TIME SHOULD I ARRIVE?

We recommend you plan to arrive at the venue 45 minutes prior to the show start time. This will allow for time to find parking and take your seat without risk of missing any part of the performance.

WHAT TIME DOES THE SHOW START?

Invited Dress Rehearsals at the Jubilee Auditorium start promptly at 7:00 pm.

WHERE IS THE THEATRE?

Visit our [Getting Here](#) page for more information about our venues.

WHERE DO I PARK?

Visit our [Getting Here](#) page for more information about parking at our various venues.

ARE FOOD AND DRINKS ALLOWED INTO THE AUDITORIUM?

Drinks are now allowed in the auditorium, provided they are in plastic containers.

Food is available for purchase in the lobby during intermission, although it may not be consumed in the theatre.



WHAT ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE AT THE THEATRE?

The Jubilee Auditorium is fully wheelchair accessible (with the exception of the 2nd balcony) with ramps available at the north entrance. Assisted listening devices are available at the coat check. Please view our [Accessibility](#) page for more detailed information about accessibility features.

WHAT IS A DRESS REHEARSAL?

A dress rehearsal is the final on-stage rehearsal of an opera before it premieres to the public. A dress rehearsal includes nearly full production values (with costumes, sets, lights, orchestra), but the show is still a work in progress.

Some of the seats are blocked off so that the production team (director, stage manager, lighting designer, choreographer, music staff, and others) can watch the show from the theatre, take notes, and communicate with the backstage crew. Should anything need adjusting, the rehearsal might be stopped or a part repeated to make sure that it is perfect.

WHAT DO I WEAR?

You'll find people at the opera wearing a variety of styles, from jeans to jewels. Although many people enjoy dressing up when they go to the opera, there's no mandatory dress code.

HOW WILL I KNOW WHAT THEY'RE SAYING?

Surtitles will be projected above the stage, which translate the Italian words into English as the singers are performing. This is similar to watching a film in a foreign language with subtitles turned on.

DO OPERA SINGERS USE MICROPHONES?

In almost all operas, microphones are not needed. Instead, opera singers use their voices and bodies to naturally amplify the resonance of their vocal folds; they can be heard above the orchestra in large halls without amplification. In some operas, microphones are used for specific effects, like in the final scene of this production of Don Giovanni.

To learn more, visit calgaryopera.com/faq.

CHARACTERS

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Don Giovanni A nobleman and notorious womanizer	don joe-VAHN-nee	baritone	Don Giovanni's actions are guided by two primary beliefs: First, the only worthwhile purpose in life is the pursuit of pleasure; and second, no matter how many people he hurts, his misdeeds will never catch up to him. But when he messes with forces beyond his control, Don Giovanni must finally face the consequences of his actions.
Leporello Don Giovanni's servant	leh-poh-REL-loh	bass-baritone	Caught between his duty to serve Don Giovanni and his own sense of morality, the clever servant Leporello provides both comic relief and common-sense commentary throughout the opera.
Donna Anna A noblewoman from Seville	DON-nah AHN-nah	soprano	After Don Giovanni tries to assault her and kills her father, Anna is hell-bent on revenge.
The Commendatore An elderly nobleman, Donna Anna's father	com-men-dah-TOR-eh	bass	In the opera's opening scene, the Commendatore rushes to the aid of his daughter, Anna—only to be struck down by Giovanni's sword. Yet his pursuit of justice will extend even beyond the grave.
Donna Elvira A noblewoman from another city	DON-nah el-VEE-rah	mezzo-soprano	One of Don Giovanni's former lovers, Elvira is torn between wanting to be reunited with him and wanting to see him brought to justice.
Don Ottavio A nobleman, Donna Anna's fiancé	don oh-TAH-vee-oh	tenor	The good-hearted Don Ottavio is engaged to Donna Anna and eager to marry her, but he understands that revenge (both for her father and for herself) is her highest priority.
Zerlina A peasant woman	tsehr-LEE-nah	soprano	Although she already is engaged, the flirtatious young Zerlina falls prey to Don Giovanni's advances. When Elvira intervenes, Zerlina realizes that Giovanni is a predator who must be stopped.
Masetto A peasant, Zerlina's fiancé	mah-ZET-toh	bass-baritone	Masetto is a kind-hearted young man who wants only to marry Zerlina, but his low social status makes him an easy target for Don Giovanni's casual cruelty.

Used with permission from The Metropolitan Opera
Full Don Giovanni Study Guide [here](#)

Calgary Opera attracts world class talent to perform for our audience, including local singers and McPhee Artists who apprentice at Calgary Opera. For more information about the performers who bring these characters to life, please visit us [here](#). ³

THE STORY

Based on the legend of Don Juan, the story centers on one day in the lives of the young noblewoman Donna Anna and her fiancé Don Ottavio, who join forces with Donna Elvira to seek revenge on the man who injured each of them.

ACT I Leporello waits outside a house for his deceitful, arrogant, and lecherous master, Don Giovanni. Cries are heard as Giovanni rushes out of the house pursued by Donna Anna, who struggles to unmask him. Donna Anna's father, the Commendatore, tries to defend his daughter, but he is killed in the ensuing duel. Anna mourns her father and makes her fiancé Don Ottavio pledge to avenge his death.

The next morning, Giovanni and Leporello encounter Donna Elvira, who is trying to find the man who betrayed her. Realizing who she is, Giovanni makes a quick getaway. Leporello shares with Elvira a gratuitously long list of Giovanni's conquests, telling her that she is neither the first nor the last.

The young couple, Zerlina and Masetto, are celebrating their wedding day when Leporello and Giovanni crash the party. Giovanni forces the wedding party to leave while he flirts with Zerlina. Anna and Ottavio arrive and ask Giovanni for his assistance in finding the man who killed the Commendatore, unaware of his identity. Elvira returns to warn all of them of Giovanni's character, but he makes another quick exit. Suddenly, Anna recognizes Giovanni's voice as the murderer. She tells Ottavio the full story and once more pleads that he avenge her. Ever faithful, Ottavio admits his peace and hers are intertwined.

A party begins at Giovanni's home with all of the wedding guests. Anna, Ottavio and Elvira appear at the house in masks and are invited in. At the party, Giovanni leads Zerlina to another room. She screams and everyone rushes to rescue her. Giovanni blames Leporello. Anna, Ottavio and Elvira remove their masks and accuse Giovanni, who manages to escape.

20 min intermission

ACT II Leporello criticizes the immoral ways of his master. Giovanni threatens him with force, and Leporello quickly agrees to continue helping Giovanni on his next seduction. Giovanni switches clothes with Leporello to seduce Elvira's maid without getting caught. Elvira mistakes Leporello for Giovanni, who has been serenading the maid. Elvira is led away by Leporello.

Masetto appears, armed and with villagers to find and punish Don Giovanni. Giovanni (who is still disguised as Leporello) offers to help them, but tricks Masetto instead into a swift beating. Zerlina enters and comforts her beloved.

Leporello (who is still believed by Elvira to be Giovanni) is confronted by Anna, Ottavio, Zerlina and Masetto. A panicked Leporello reveals his true identity before escaping. Ottavio asks the others to look after Anna as he looks for Giovanni to take revenge.

After fleeing, Leporello joins his master in a cemetery where they notice a statue of the Commendatore. Suddenly, a voice from the statue warns Giovanni of his impending doom. Leporello is terrified but Giovanni thinks it is a joke. Giovanni invites the statue to a banquet and it accepts.

Privately, Ottavio and Anna speak with one another. He offers to marry her the next day, but she is still in mourning for her father and asks to delay one year.

At the banquet Elvira appears and begs Giovanni one last time to change his life and marry her, but he dismisses her. She is heard screaming, and everyone looks – the statue arrives at the banquet to ask Giovanni to repent. Giovanni refuses and opera concludes in a dramatic finale that warns: we all must face the consequences of our actions.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

Who is the composer? The person who writes the music of an opera.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in Salzburg, Austria January 27, 1756. His father, Leopold Mozart, was a famous musician and composer in his own right, but he came to realize that his greatest life's work would be his son, Wolfgang.

Wolfgang was a child prodigy: he imitated sounds and played melodies and chords at the harpsichord by age 3 and began composing more complex pieces soon after. Wolfgang's older sister, Maria Anna (called Nannerl) was also strongly talented. Leopold presented the two siblings in an extensive tour of the concert halls and royal courts of Europe. Whenever Mozart performed, the charm of his personality and his incredible genius conquered the hearts of music lovers.

By age 13, Mozart found work as principal violinist of the orchestra and organist of the court of the Archbishop of Salzburg where he worked for 12 years. He composed masterpieces of chamber music, choral works, and symphonies. When he moved to Vienna, the European center of musical activity at the time, he struggled to find steady work and started taking on commissions to write operas.

Beginning in 1766, Mozart composed over 20 operas, many of which include the most regularly performed operas to this day. Many of his other instrumental and vocal works contain the same power and drama that define his timeless operas.

Mozart died in 1791 at age 35 when feverishly writing his Requiem in D minor, which remained unfinished. He was buried in an unmarked grave at St. Marx Cemetery in Salzburg, Austria.



Adapted from Encyclopedia Britannica

Learn more by reading: *Mozart His Character, His Work* by Alfred Einstein; *Mozart and His Operas* by David Cairns; *Mozart the Freemason* by Jacques Henry

ABOUT THE LIBRETTIST

Who is the librettist? The person who writes the words (dialogue and lyrics) of an opera.

What does “libretto” mean? In Italian, libretto means “little book.” Early Italian opera houses printed off “little books” for audience members that had all the words written inside, so that attendees could follow what was being sung.

Lorenzo Da Ponte was an Italian poet and writer who lived from March 10, 1749 until August 17, 1838. Da Ponte was baptized in 1763 and later became a priest. Eventually he expressed doubts about religious doctrine and his pursuit of an adulterous relationship led, in 1779, to his expulsion from the Venetian state.



Taking up residence in Vienna (probably in 1780), he became official poet to the court of Emperor Joseph II and wrote successful librettos for many composers. In 1783, Da Ponte met Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and entered upon the finest period of his literary career.

Three masterpieces appeared in rapid succession—*Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), and *Così fan tutte* (1790). During the same period he achieved his greatest popular success with the libretto to Martín y Soler’s *Una cosa rara* (1787). Historians consider Da Ponte’s strengths to include his ability to draw out the drama and truth from any story (even well worn ones) and to successfully interweave tragic and comic elements that played on the hearts of audiences.

Left without support after Joseph II’s death in 1790, Da Ponte resumed his wanderings. After a period in London (1792–1805), he emigrated to the United States to escape his creditors, settling finally in New York, where he devoted himself to teaching Italian language and literature at Columbia College and promoting Italian cultural activities.

Adapted from Encyclopedia Britannica

THE DIVINE DRAMEDY

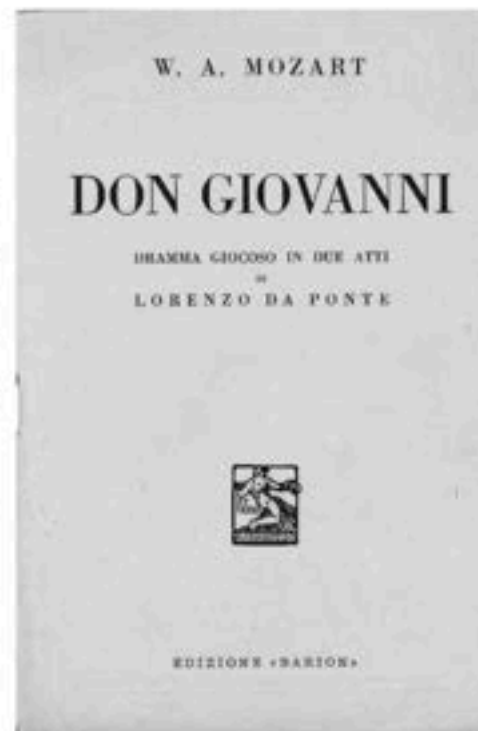
Don Giovanni, ossia il dissoluto punito: Dramma giocoso

So reads the title page of Mozart and Da Ponte's famed opera. What comes before the colon is easy enough to parse: *Don Giovanni, or the Villain Punished*. But what about that pesky designation of genre, "dramma giocoso"? In the most literal terms, "dramma giocoso" means simply "humorous drama" (or, to use a modern portmanteau, a "dramedy"), and indeed, the opera is by turns horrifying and hilarious. Yet to read this work as simply partly funny, partly serious, is to miss a fascinating history of genre, style, and the potentially subversive power of opera as an art form.

In the 18th century, Italian opera was divided quite neatly into two genres: opera seria and opera buffa. The translations are simply "serious opera" and "comic opera," respectively, yet far more went into distinguishing these genres than simply the relative comic value of their plots. Opera seria was the older genre of the two; its characters

were gods, mythological heroes, and the august figures of ancient Greece and Rome, and its narrative style tended towards the static, with a succession of solo arias and recitatives and very few ensembles or choruses.

Opera buffa, on the other hand, centered figures from the middle and lower classes of society. Drawing on naturalistic plots that eschewed the divine interventions common in opera seria, opera buffa explored (and exploited) humanity's foibles. Complex musical ensembles contributed to the humor of the plot, as did mistaken identities, the vagaries of love, and—most notably—clever servants outwitting their blustering noble counterparts. (For a fantastic example of opera buffa in action, check out the Act II finale of Mozart and Da Ponte's *Le Nozze di Figaro*.)



For much of the 18th century, these two genres were as distinct as the social classes that they depicted. Yet by the 1780s, revolutionary ideas were beginning to shake the very bedrock of this highly stratified European society. (A decade before, a group of rag-tag colonies in North America had even founded a country on the “self-evident” principle of equality for all.) So, what might we glean from this “dramma giocoso” if we think about it from the perspective of class?

For starters, there is nothing noble about the nobleman Don Giovanni. Utterly devoid of noblesse oblige, he is in every respect the antithesis of the wise, beneficent rulers of opera seria, such as the benevolent emperor in Mozart’s *La Clemenza di Tito*. Moreover, there are no mitigating circumstances to help us view his behavior in a more favorable light. Whereas opera seria characters (like the hero in Antonio Vivaldi’s *Orlando Furioso*) could be granted a temporary period of madness to explain certain unsavory deeds, Don Giovanni is a rational actor, forcing us to scrutinize his actions and judge him guilty.

Compare this figure to the servant Leporello. Although the comic servant character had existed since ancient Greek drama, Leporello is no mere fool or buffoon. Being a servant to the daredevil Don, Leporello has adopted a cynical practicality. He knows that the Don’s behavior is reprehensible, and he resents a social system that forces him to enable Don Giovanni’s toxicity. From the very first moments of the opera, Leporello is already imagining a different world order: He is sick of working “day and night,” and he’d like to occasionally be the gentleman himself. And he is by far the smartest character in the opera. Hiding under a table when the Commendatore comes to call may be funny, but it’s also a more intelligent response than Giovanni’s devil-may-care hubris.

The genre-bending nature of this “dramma giocoso” thus goes beyond merely merging opera buffa and opera seria. Instead, Mozart and Da Ponte actively subverted stereotypes of social class and operatic structure, creating a work of art that deftly reflected the revolutionary ideals of its age.

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Full Don Giovanni Study Guide [here](#)

DON GIOVANNI IN CONTEXT

While contemporary views cast little ambiguity on Don Giovanni's final judgment, certain passages—including the actions and motivations of Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, and Zerlina—have historically been interpreted problematically. Their suffering and trauma have often been downplayed, their means of resistance overlooked or ridiculed.

In Canada, 44% of women or 6.2 million women aged 15 and older have experienced some form of abuse in their intimate relationships, with women four times more likely than men to be afraid of a partner (Statistics Canada, 2018). According to the Calgary Women's Shelter, "abuse can be very dangerous, so usually victims resist it in ways that are not obvious. Others probably will not even notice the resistance, so they assume that victims are 'passive' and 'they do not do enough to stand up for themselves.' In fact, victims actively resist violence, and in real life, the so-called 'passive' victim does not exist." (Honouring Resistance, Calgary Women's Shelter)

As survivors' voices have come to resound more and more resolutely, we believe that opera creators dealing with the subject matter of intimate partner abuse must, first, do no harm and, second, find ways through the artform to challenge outdated assumptions. The director of this current production, Anna Theodosakis, has chosen a survivor-centered approach that emphasizes the camaraderie between the female leads and offers each more agency than in previous productions. Calgary Opera Artistic Director and Conductor Jonathan Brandani asserts that a close analysis of Mozart's score supports this interpretation. Through incisive rhythms, dramatic melodies, and bold orchestral accompaniment—features historically reserved for heroic characters—Mozart musically portrays each woman as determined, courageous, and resilient.

Operas of the past contain the same challenges, beliefs, hopes, power dynamics, tragedies, and insights that we grapple with today. We believe there is still much to learn from Don Giovanni and other powerful works of art that critique the best and worst of humanity and offer inspiring world-changing lessons for us all.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Use discussion and class activities to explore the questions the opera Don Giovanni poses to listeners of all ages:

What makes music heroic? (*Question credited to Eric Booth*)

- Listen actively to rhythm patterns in Donna Anna's and Donna Elvira's arias
- As a response to what you hear, use up to 8 notes or repeating patterns, to create your own rhythm that sounds heroic. Advanced students can add instrumentation that gives a heroic sound to the rhythm.

How can honesty empower others?

- How did Donna Elvira challenge the assumptions of her time to empower the women around her?

Is seeking revenge ever justified?

- Analyze the motivations and repercussions of Donna Anna's call for justice

What does the opera Don Giovanni suggest about the nature of consequences?

- What were your impressions of the final scene of the opera?
- Compare and contrast the story of Don Giovanni with the downfall of other characters in folk tales, literature, current events, or your own life experiences

Additional Lesson Plans & Resources:

- The Metropolitan Opera [Don Giovanni Study Guide](#) & Lesson Plans
- Edmonton Opera [Don Giovanni Study Guide](#) & Lesson Plans
- Manitoba Opera [Don Giovanni Study Guide](#) & Lesson Plans
- Minnesota Opera [Don Giovanni Study Guide](#) & Lesson Plans
- Calgary Opera's Don Giovanni [In Context](#) includes suggested articles, books, and academic resources on the life of Mozart, the #MeToo movement and opera, and the characters and story of Don Giovanni

For more information, contact:

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