

TRACING ZERLINA'S ANCESTORS

Mihaela BUHAICIUC¹

Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to identify in the theater and opera early literature the ancestors of Zerlina's character from the opera Don Giovanni by W.A. Mozart. By doing so, I emphasize the importance of in-depth knowledge of opera characters prior to any attempt to performing them.*

Key words: *Zerlina, Don Giovanni, Da Ponte, Mozart, ancestors .*

1. Introduction

No characters of any operas create more vividly the impression of being real people of the time as Mozart's figures do in his operas: the Count and the Countess, Suzanna and Figaro, Zerlina and Masetto, Leporello and Despina, to name a few.

Mozart's imagination went beyond the *en-voque* stereotypes of opera buffa and created not simple figures going through conventional, superficial aspects of their current daily life, nor social types integrated in the eighteen century political frame, but human beings, each of them feeling, speaking and behaving under certain circumstances very much as any other human being would, whether in the eighteen century or the twenty first.

Did Mozart have his favorites? He did, indeed. He was a sympathizer of the peasants and the servants. He himself was one of them. Therefore, the roles he allocates to his servants are significant parts. They care the action and the intrigue. They bring on-stage the humor through different comic elements. They tell the story. One may find in them the

composer himself. In Mozart's operas, the low-class characters seem to be those with the common sense, those who oversee the situation, those who objectify and adjust their situation so it meets their interest. These people are sincere. They behave how they feel. They have more life-wisdom and humor than their counterparts: the high-class personages. Their definition for life is reality. Their morals is perhaps different than aristocracies' but they do distinguish between good and wrong, evil and divine. They perhaps don't have a wide knowledge, but they have belief.

Lorenzo Da Ponte furnished the libretto for Mozart's opera. Its title is: *Il dissolute punto, ossia il Don Giovanni – The Libertine punished or Don Juan.*

Writers and poets have been used the ancient Don Juan legend starting with the early seventeenth century: Tirso De Molina, Molière, Shadwell, Goldoni, Bertati, Byron, Lenau - whose poem inspired R. Strauss - and Shaw, among others. Most of authors keep the characters and the action related to the original play: Tirso De Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*, written in 1630.

¹ Faculty of Music, *Transilvania* University, Braşov.

Some character names are changed accordingly corresponding to the place of the action. For instance, Molière's protagonists are French: Charlotte and Pierrot, Bertati's characters are Italian: Maturina and Biagio.

2. Tirso de Molina's Tisbea

Zerlina's first ancestor is De Molina's Tisbea. By her demeanor and actions, Tisbea becomes the most intriguing and interesting female character in *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*. She represents the traditional mythical type modeled on the disdainful shepherdess figure of the sixteenth century pastoral stories. She is beautiful, but not sociable, aloof from many male admirers. Her real fascination sits in her individuality. What captures our attention are the contradictions in her character and the powerful passion, which boils under her beauty. We notice her delight in the sufferings of her suitors; delight, which comes not from her indifference, but from her trust in herself and her belief that she, controls the situation. Tisbea finds it difficult to resist Don Juan's pursuing. Abandoned by Juan, after he promised to marry her, Tisbea degrades beyond desperation. Juan's betrayal pushed her to attempt suicide. Tisbea's outrage and excessive violence come from a conscious downfall, not from self-pity awareness as a victim of Don Juan's perfidy. She continues to live but conducted by a new motto: all men are not to be trusted. Even more disturbing thought for her, to which she has not found the answer remains: in given circumstances, can she trust herself?

3. Tirso de Molina's Aminta

Another peasant character, which I have been initially taken as one of Zerlina's ancestors in De Molina's *El Burlador de*

Sevilla y convidado de piedra. is Aminta. Unlike Tisbea, Aminta is psychologically less complex. She is a naïve country girl, who is flattered and overwhelmed by Don Juan's attentions. Generally, Aminta seems more honest than any other woman in the De Molina's play. She simply gets annoyed when Batricio, her fiancé, reacts unfavorably to Don Juan's arrival. Aminta protests when Don Juan enters in her bedroom at night. Although flattered by his words, Aminta's good sense tells her not to trust him. She accepts his offer for marriage but only after the Don convinces her that Batricio has abandoned her.

Aminta could possibly represent Zerlina's direct correspondent in De Molina's play. One of the reasons could be the fact that the wedding scene from the play, No.7, corresponds with scene No. 5 in Da Ponte's libretto. Nevertheless, Aminta is not created as a sharp and interesting peasant girl. Tisbea embodies those features. In the whole setting of the play Aminta remains a pale figure, unlike Tisbea, whose characteristics are clearly portrayed. This is the main reason for which Tisbea is considered the first Zerlina in the literature.

4. Andrea Cicognini' Rosalba

The earliest Italian version of *Don Giovanni* plays is *Il Convitato di pietra* written probably in 1632 by Giacinto Andrea Cicognini. His play is based on the De Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* and follows closely the action, which takes place this time in Italy: Naples and Castile. Cicognini keeps most of Tirso De Molina's characters. We find Tisbea in Rosalba, a fisher woman, who saves Don Giovanni from the sea. She is added to Don Giovanni's catalogue of conquests, fact not mentioned in Juan's list from *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*. Although she follows the action,

which Tisbea cares in De Molina, in Andrea Cicognini's play, Rosalba does not resemble Tisbea's personality, being portrayed as a weak figure in the play.

5. Carlo Goldoni's Elisa

Another Italian version of *Don Giovanni* written one hundred years later, in 1736, is Carlo Goldoni's *Don Giovanni Tenorio* or *The Dissolute Man*. The action of the play takes place in Castile and in the surrounding countryside. The noble characters are similar in features with those from earlier plays, except Elisa, a Castilian shepherdess and Carino, her lover. In Goldoni's play, Elisa is as complex, strong and interesting as Tisbea is in De Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*.

Elisa appears on stage in the second act with her lover Carino. They swear each other fidelity for life. In the next moment, when left alone on stage, Elisa encounters Don Giovanni. Her mind and heart are changed once again. If Tisbea was more reserved in her manners, yet sincere, Elisa is a betrayer. Her purpose is to only enjoy herself and obtain a better social position. She pretends to love anyone who would offer her a better status. Elisa even begs Don Giovanni to marry her as soon as possible with the excuse that tomorrow she might have another offer.

In comparison with Tisbea's attempt to commit suicide, Elisa's simulation of dying is only a trick to keep her lovers around.

6. Gazzaniga-Bertati's Maturina

With eight months before Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was performed, Giuseppe Gazzaniga presents in 1787, in Venice *Il Capriccio Drammatica*, an opera in two acts. The first act is a prolog to *Don Giovanni, o sia il convitato do pietra*, which itself is a

drama giocoso in one act. Bertati's libretto is very close to Da Ponte's. Zerlina's and Masetto's correspondents are Maturina and Biagio. The two young peasants are having their wedding, to which Don Giovanni shows up. Attracted by his charm, his words and convinced by his promise to marry her, Maturina accepts Don Giovanni in her house. What she is not aware of yet is that this Don is aggressive, even more than Da Ponte's Giovanni. In this play, Don Giovanni slaps and beats Biagio in front of Maturina's eyes. Even after Biagio is beaten, Maturina considers Don Giovanni a potential husband, who might offer her a change in her life. Unlike Tisbea and Elisa, Maturina is not as direct in her thought and feeling deliverance. She does not communicate directly to her stage partners. We understand her feelings from her actions. The contradictions in her character are not well defined. Hermann Albert makes a remark in his book *Mozart's Don Giovanni* regarding the singers of Maturina and Biagio in Giuseppe Gazzaniga's opera, *Il Capriccio Drammatica*. The soprano, who plays Maturina's role, also sings Donna Anna; and Biagio's interpreter also performs the Commander's part in the same performance. Maturina never meets Donna Anna in this opera.

7. Molière's Charlotte

Molière's *Don Juan ou le Festin de Pierre* was written in 1665, only thirty-five years after Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*. Molière's play was not based directly on De Molina's work. In fact, I have found the two plays very different. Molière's Don Juan is more sophisticated. He represents a "thoughtful" - seducer rather than a man of action. Molière has embodied in his protagonist the type of the libertine and the religious skeptic, who

likes to follow his own rules in life, assuming all risks and discounting any costs. We find Zerlina in Molière's Charlotte, a peasant teenager, whose fiancée does not understand her love for him. As Tisbea, Charlotte is full of contradictions. She loves Pierrot, but if she is displeased from any reason, she'll go for someone else. She is not begging for attention. However, she gets it. When this comes from Don Giovanni, Charlotte feels embarrassed, not because he's just another man, but a noble one. His interest and attraction to her does make her feel quite special. Caught in Giovanni's game, Charlotte enjoys herself. When asked to seal the engagement with a kiss, Charlotte protects her honor refusing him.

8. Mozart-Da Ponte's Zerlina

The next *Don Giovanni* appears in Mozart's opera with the same name, first performed in 1787. Mozart's characters bring together different elements from earlier versions of the story. Da Ponte's libretto is a synthesis of Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* and Molière's *Don Juan ou le Festin de Pierre*. The personage of Don Giovanni retains the passion of De Molina's character as well as the sophistication of Molière's Don Juan. Nevertheless, Mozart's protagonists are closer to Molière's figures.

Mozart's women are portrayed with great sympathy often with indignant pity. The sentimental public sees them as innocent victims. In his book *The Theater of Don Juan*, Mandel assimilates Zerlina to Ximena from Bertati's play.

Lorenzo Da Ponte gives Zerlina an innocent grace and a natural impulsiveness as a simple country girl. Musically, Mozart highlights her features: beauty, sensuality, and sometimes conflicted. Da Ponte and Mozart did not create Zerlina as a super

woman, outdoing dramatically Donna Anna and Dona Elvira. Nevertheless, she complements their function and highlights Don Giovanni's. Each character has its own psychological development throughout Mozart's opera, so does Zerlina. She changes moods and feelings. Her will is weak due to her youth. But her lesson is learnt. Her occasional humoristic element in the scenes with Masetto is the ingredient needed in Giovanni's drama, added as a last cherry on the cake's top.

Zerlina's character balances dramatically the action. Her music is painted with Mozartian clarity and beauty.

9. Conclusion

The names of the peasant girls seduced by Don Giovanni in the plays briefly discussed here are symbolic. They represent the ones, who come out of the crowd and whose interest is to rise above it. Molière has expressed this clearly in Charlotte's name, which literally means "pudding". In Spanish, Tisbea's name has a sweet light resonance and inspires trust. Elisa's name, too elegant for a provincial denotes her sharp demeanor. The close-back vowel "u" in Maturina's name suggests a slight different conduct than Tisbea's and Elisa's. Zerlina's name has the most feminine expression. She embodies the woman, who reasons by feeling.

Created by Da Ponte and brought to life by Mozart, Zerlina remains in the universal literature a symbol of woman's simplicity, innocence, determination and sensuality.