‘Calixto Bieito’s *Don Giovanni* outrages the British Critics’

A review by Maria Delgado

Published in

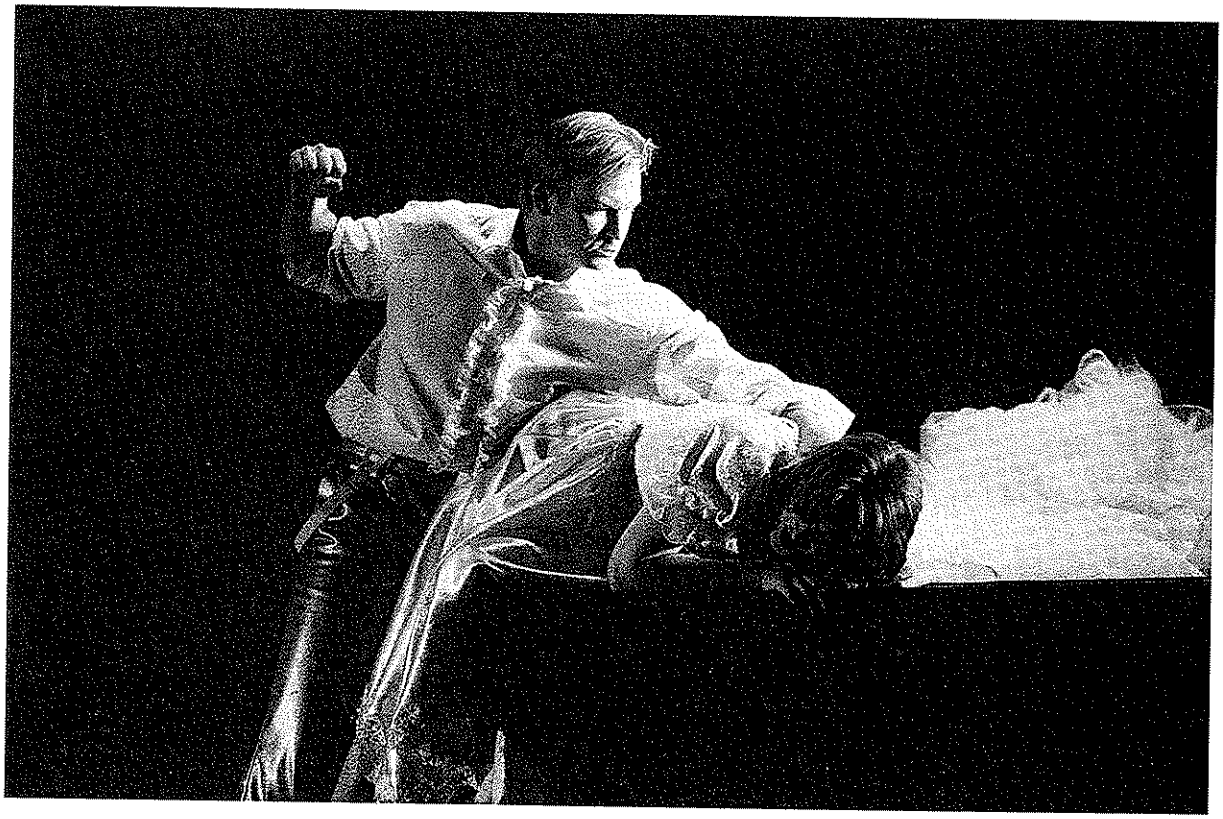
Western European Stages
Vol. 13, no. 3, Fall 2001, pp. 53-58.
ISSN: 1050-1991.

Calixto Bieito's *Don Giovanni* outrages the British Critics

Maria M. Delgado

Don Giovanni remains the most contemporary of operas; its retelling of the Don Juan myth positions it alongside that other Spanish-inspired work, *Carmen,* as a potent symbol of the perils of sexuality run riot. Whereas *Carmen* articulates discontents around the predatory female, *Don Giovanni* chronicles the excesses of a masculinity that knows no boundaries. Over the past fifteen years, conceptualist directors have allowed *Don Giovanni* to provide a prism through which to view the turmoils and strains of contemporary urban life. As such Peter Sellars's 1989 staging resituated Mozart's 1787 opera in New York's Spanish Harlem with Ottavio as a cop, Donna Elvira as an abrasive punk, Donna Anna as a junkie and Giovanni as a de-romanticized lawless drink-fuelled rapist and drug dealer accompanied by a sycophantic easily-bribed Leporello. More recently Graham Vick chose to end his tenure as Director of Productions with a controversial parting statement at Glyndebourne, which envisaged a grotesque image of the haute-bourgeoisie cruelly reflected onto the Glyndebourne audience in all their finery. *Don Giovanni* is without doubt one of the most challenging pieces in the repertoire, demanding some sort of an understanding of a rigid class structure that appears painfully distant today and the continuing relevance of a parable of the perils of individual excess and hedonism cultivated during the puritan climate of the Counter-Reformation. Its continuing popularity is testament to Mozart's musical craftsmanship and da Ponte's depiction of the Don as the archetypal "love to hate" figure.

Calixto Bieito comes to the English National Opera following three controversial productions in 2000: a contentious *Barbaric Comedies* at the Edinburgh Festival [See *WES* 12:3, 61-70], a frenetic *Così fan tutte* for Welsh National Opera set in a mirrored café of deceptive illusionism and terrifying frivolity and *Un ballo in maschera* for Barcelona's Liceu located in mid to late 1970s Spain, negotiating a passage from dictatorship to



Leslie John Flanagan as Masetto and Linda Richardson as Zerlina. Photo: Alastair Muir

democracy. The latter production polarized critics and audiences alike with its brutal male rape and its bold opening scene set in a vast public men's urinal (suggestive perhaps of the male toilets at the Spanish parliament) where a circular band of conspirators against the king (perhaps evoking the coup against the Spanish government attempted in 1981), faces masked from public view, debate the guest list for the forthcoming masked ball. *Don Giovanni* too is set by Bieito in contemporary Spain. In *Un ballo in maschera,* specific visual references, including the choice to have the judge wheelchair-bound, and the fortune teller, Ulrika Arvidson's den converted into a iniquitous Fellini-esque nightclub filled with whores, sailors, and transvestites, suggested a Spanish transposition. For *Don Giovanni* Bieito locates the action in Barcelona's Olympic Port, a symbol of the city's prosperity and glamour in the 1990s as the run down port made way for a new postmodern landscape of sleek glass towers and chic restaurants and designer bars. Bieito's regular designer Alfons Flores here provides a cavernous wasteland lit by high searchlights (so distinctive of the Olympic area's Passeig de Barceloneta) with the distant lights of the city piercing the dark upstage. Two rows of perpendicular columns rising from the wings suggest both a wide road and a possible highway. It is in this nowhere land suspended between old and new, between sea and land, where Bieito positions the action: a cold, bleak locale where all are susceptible to the harsh glare of the tall probing searchlights. Even innocuous specks of dust, impenetrable to the naked eye, dart before us in flagrant defiance.

Into this space of furtive surveillance a solitary car makes its way towards the audience. Its driver is a disheveled Leporello and its backseat inhabitants Donna Anna and Giovanni; the latter making his first appearance rather appropriately with his trousers round his ankles. Nathan Berg's Leporello is a nylon tracksuit clad football fan who Bieito conceives as "the kind of working-class taxi driver who has a football ticket at Nou Camp," the home of Barcelona's world-famous soccer club (*Guardian*, 30 May 2001). The Barcelona football club logo clearly discernible on Leporello's tracksuit and his trampling of a Real Madrid flag (the arch rivals of FC Barcelona) point to both his allegiances and his aggression. This is in Bieito's view less the docile servant than a close friend, irrevocably bound up with Giovanni since they both embarked on their military service. Bieito's conception of Giovanni and Leporello does, on one level, invert the social classes of the work, but the bonds of friendship seem to suggest a dependency that goes further than male camaraderie. For Gary Magee's short, swaggering Giovanni is not an aristocrat protected by the trappings of class but rather a cocky drug-pusher that feeds Leporello's addiction, thus effectively keeping the latter under his control. Leporello is shown repeatedly accepting drugs from Giovanni and the master-servant relationship is emphatically drawn through the prism of an economic dependency that effectively redefines the class structures of Mozart's work.

Bieito's cinematic affiliation is well documented. *Barbaric Comedies* featured visual nods to Bigas Luna and Buñuel and *Don Giovanni* too articulates Bieito's cinematic homages. Bieito himself has drawn parallels with Alex de la Iglesia's apocalyptic 1995 film *Day of the Beast* (Guardian, 30 May 2001) but the tone of unrelenting violence shows a debt to Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Flores's minimalist set evokes something of the urban nihilism of *West Side Story* (1961) and the irreality of Coppola's *One from the Heart* (1982). The conception of the Don clearly owes much to Sellars's groundbreaking late 1980s production—immortalised in the 1991 Decca/Polygram distributed video—which also visualized Giovanni as a rough streetwise drug pusher who appeases Leporello through regular fixes. But Sellars's busy, oppressively cramped George Tsypin-designed set, replete with graffiti strewn boarded up shops, empty apartment blocks, strewn glass, and a fluorescent cross lit church, has here been replaced by the horrifying emptiness of an urban wilderness where Giovanni and Leporello prowl in search of the kicks offered by casual sex, drink and drugs. Leporello's most apparent cinematic antecedent is the cult taxi driver created by actor-director Santiago Segura, José Luis Torrente, a foul mouthed, racist football-obsessed coward whose drunken misadventures on the streets of Madrid provided Spain with a home box office smash in the late 1990s. In the year where the sequel opens in Spain, Berg's Leporello (in build, attire, and hair style), first appearing draped in football scarves, bears more than a passing reference to the eponymous anti-hero created by Segura. The number plate of the car Leporello and Giovanni first appear in—CO-TORE 1—as well as suggesting that it is the Commendatore's property, may also function, through its echoing of Torrente's name, as an ironic aside to Segura's offensive protagonist.

While Sellars conceived Donna Anna as a

but the
endency
for Gary
an aris-
ut rather
s addic-
nder his
ccepting
ant rela-
e prism
ly rede-

ll docu-
ial nods
nni too
Bieito
la Igle-
e Beast
nrelent-
Clock-
list set
of *West*
ppola's
n of the
dbreak-
in the
which
se drug
regular
ramped
graffiti
blocks,
ch, has
ness of
eporello
ual sex,
nt cine-
ated by
orrente,
coward
reets of
office
the se-
n build,
aped in
g refer-
led by
ello and
well as
roperty,
of Tor-
s offen-

ina as a

Phillip Ens as the Commendatore, Nathan Berg as Leporello, and Garry Magee as Don Giovanni. Photo: Alastair Muir

heroin addict who infamously shot up while singing "Non mi dir," Claire Rutter's characterization of the seduced aristocrat suggests a rather more complicit "maiden." Her fleshy Donna Anna, in tight miniskirt and top, suggests a good time girl, fooling the decent Ottavio until the death of her father drives her to revenge. Here we see a code of honor that drives her to push Ottavio to realize that which she fears she may not be able to achieve alone. Her copulation with Ottavio during "Non mi dir," which so disgusted *The Times's* opera critic Rodney Milne, actually suggested her deranged grief and desperation to secure the Don's death whatever the price to her dignity (2 June 2001). Sex drives all the characters to realize their ambitions or whims. It is not just Giovanni who is driven by obsessive lust. Linda Richardson's playful Zerlina demands oral stimulation through the petticoats of her frilly wedding dress. And even the morally righteous Ottavio appears to derive dubious pleasure through a blow-up doll. All the characters seem tainted by the very same vices they denounce in Giovanni himself.

It is the production's strength that Bieito makes the drama more about the tormented middle-class characters who surround the Don rather than the Don himself. As such, Claire Weston's Elvira is an plump teenager who bounces clumsily on stage in her first appearance juggling carrier bags from a shopping spree designed as retail therapy to help forget her past liaison with the Don. Faced with Giovanni and Leporello, who swallow an assortment of illegal substances held in an unsightly yellow sports bag, she alternates between falling once more for his flattery and supercilious attention and crumbling to the floor in weepy frustration. Seeking solace in the binge eating of chocolate, she shows herself as much an obsessive as Giovanni and Leporello. Her eating disorder, and her frenzied pursuit of the Don, always accompanied by the shopping bags which offer her refuge and protection, suggest a fragility which eventually leads to murder.

Zerlina too is hardly the victimized idealistic peasant girl of many romanticized productions. Here she too is a willing flirt who toys with Giovanni as her wedding ceremony is being captured on video by an eager guest. Leslie John Flanagan's Masetto betrays once more Bieito's love of kitsch which was so visible in his stagings of *Così fan tutte*, *Barbaric Comedies* and *Un ballo in maschera*. Masetto's snugly fitting gold trousers, shoes and flamboyant wedding shirt and jacket confirm the dictum that money shouts and wealth whispers, pointing to a tasteless ostentatiousness which is further confirmed as the snooker table and bar are whisked on for the wedding party, set in a rundown club where all seek solace in drink and disguise. For Giovanni encourages the guests to don fancy dress and as such Ottavio, Elvira and Anna all appear masked and camouflaged: Anna significantly feigning pregnancy in a gesture which perhaps reveals her most latent fear; Ottavio's superman jacket ironically commenting on the role he is expected to play.

The scene also serves to underscore the fascination with the place of illusion and optic games which all Bieito's stagings betray. In *Life is a Dream* (1998) Carles Pujol's gray sandy set was overlooked by a giant gilt-framed suspended mirror, providing a dazzling image of an elusive world which can never be controlled and in which the audience are as much a part as the performers. In *Un ballo in maschera,* set in the space of transition between absolute dictatorship and a more benign democracy, no one can be sure of the loyalty of those around them and the masked ball which closes the opera allows crimes to be perpetrated without fear of disclosure. Giovanni too allows a disguise as Leporello to permit him to escape the baying blood of those antagonists beginning to close in on him. Increasingly in Act Two, we are given the sense of an animal being rounded up by his hunters as the wreckage of Giovanni's actions lie across the stage in chaos. Layers of Zerlina's wedding dress (the veil notably appropriated by a drunken Elvira who stumbles across the stage unsteadily in search of the elusive Don), bottles, discarded clothes and sleepy bodies litter the floor. Mistaking Leporello for Giovanni, the angry Masetto ties the former up, throwing the contents of a dustbin over his head in an image of Beckettian squalor. Giovanni's home is a filthy bedsit where Leporello tosses ingredients undiscerningly into a frying pan as the Don greedily devours breakfast cereal and masturbates before battery operated belly dancers fluttering mechanically across the floor. Sellars's staging had the last supper as a McDonalds' feast of takeaway hamburger, fries and milkshake. Bieito gives us convenience food taken to extremes as Leporello agitatedly opens bags of crisps across the soiled cramped kitchenette. The Commendatore emerges from the boot of the car, which opened Act One as a ghostly presence, a hallucinatory drug-induced vision shared by Leporello and Giovanni. But for Bieito *Don Giovanni* can only be a revenge drama where the Commendatore is just another figure in the

equation rather than the avenging angel. He paves the way for the other characters to kill Giovanni by reducing the Don to a quivering wreck. Revenge is executed by Zerlina, Masetto, Anna, Ottavio, Leporello and an unwilling Elvira, who use the final sextet to tie up and ritually stab the object of their obsession as a brutal image of society ridding itself of that which it simultaneously craves and detests: an ending which is justified in the secular setting of Bieito's staging. The world Mozart presents in Don Giovanni is hardly a sanitized one; Bieito shows it in all its ugly tawdriness, refusing solace in the romantic associations of the myth.

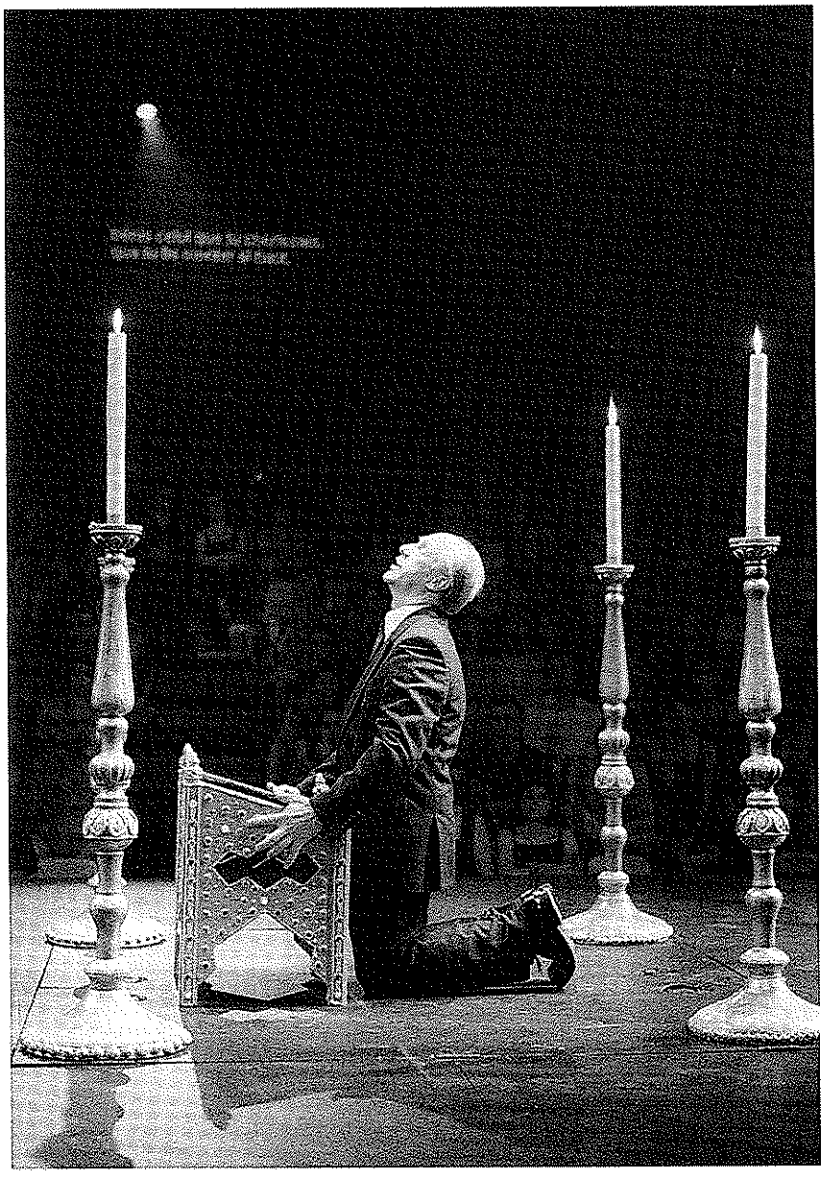
Gary Magee's Giovanni is no sex symbol, but rather an opportunist who crashes through life in search of any hedonistic pleasure that can come his way. It is this trait that proves so irresistible to the bourgeois women who are his regular prey. Claire Weston's obsessive Elvira may appear more infatuated with the rebellious Don, Claire Rutter's intense Anna appears to share his sexual drives, drives she fights to control and detests. Magee's performance is pitched at a frenzied level from the start—there is little sense of progression or development in this characterization of the anti-hero—rather a sense that the increasing violence and drug induced haze in which the two male protagonists exist can only lead to self-destruction. This is the death drive writ large and executed with brutal physicality by the young cast fielded by English National Opera who charge, writhe, squirm and bolt across the stage with impressive agility. The vast expanse of the Coliseum may not have proved the most appropriate space for these young voices exposed on such a bare set—which should sit easier at the theatre of one of the staging's co-producers, Barcelona's Liceu theatre, where the production will open on 30 November 2002. Diction is often a casualty and with the exception of Paul Nilon's moving and beautifully sung Ottavio, the performances lack real projection.

Amanda Holden's translation is also problematic. Such a contemporary view of the work requires a new translation that reflects the new environment. Holden's translation often jars with the setting, and fails to cement the relocation of the work adequately. In the absence of what he saw as a good enough English translation Sellars chose to stage *Don Giovanni* in Italian. Bieito, like Sellars, has a fundamental understanding of opera as an anti-naturalistic medium, but the discordance between words and music is here not merely provocative or stimulating but rather pained and incongruous. The Italian performances in Hannover and Barcelona may well allow for a more eloquent juxtaposition between da Ponte's Italian and Bieito's controversial innovation.

It is often said that the real drive behind any opera performance lies more with the conductor than the director. Bieito's hallmark is the sheer pace which he invests into his *mise-en-scène* where he often eschews the trappings of naturalistic locale in favor of a stark bare space where extreme lighting effects delineate atmosphere and color. Arguably, his style is much better suited to this work, as opposed to *Così fan tutte,* where he failed to capture the work's poetic and classical structure. Such a furious, fast and frenetic staging as this demands an equal energy in the orchestra pit. Sadly, Joseph Swenson, in his debut as conductor for the company, fails to deliver, with the result that the energy of the staging and the performances are left high and dry by some lackluster tempi which fail to keep up with the pace on stage. It can only be hoped that this dislocation will be avoided in future revivals.

It is hardly surprising that such a bold staging should arouse the hostility of the British press. *The Times's* Rodney Milnes denounced the production as "crude, nonsensical and boring," bemoaning the excess of movement and noise which in his view, drowned out the music (2 June 2001). For the *Daily Telegraph's* Rupert Christiansen, despite the "aggressively modern setting, frenetic hyperactivity, expletive-peppered translation and episodes of simulated copulation and crotch-fondling, Calixto Bieito's production feels horribly *passé* and downright embarrassing" (2 June 2001). Even less vitriolic reviews like that by the *Guardian*'s Tim Ashley judged the production "a stream of imagery accompanied by Mozart rather than an interpretation of Mozart" (2 June 2001). *Don Giovanni* remains perhaps something of a *cause célèbre* in the operatic repertoire where any would-be innovator tampers with Mozart's lyrical tunes at their peril. But it's really not enough to rail against an opera production which contains masturbation, sex and drug-induced frenzies. The Spanish critics were far more measured in their responses, recognizing that the particular Barcelona setting might have been lost to an English audience unable to spot the specific cultural references (Leporello's tracksuit, the left-hand drive of the car, the distinctive lights of the Olympic quarter). *El Periódico*'s Joan Anton Cararach judged the staging exemplary in its ability to bring out the complexities of a musical score, which goes beyond the libretto (2 June 2001). *La Vanguardia*'s Marino Rodríguez, while

recognizing that Bieito had adapted the work somewhat to suit his vision of the piece, never judged this inappropriate (2 June 2001). Ramon Pla i Arxe, writing also in *La Vanguardia*, observing that perhaps the notoriety around Bieito's production may have resulted in some premature prejudging, saw the production as a welcome move forward for Bieito, who demonstrated greater assurance than in *Ballo in maschera,* partly because he was working with superior dramatic and musical material (15 June 2001). *El País*'s Agustí Fancelli may have been harsher on Bieito's reworking but similarly recognized that it produced great theatrical coups (2 June 2001). In recognizing that the staging provided an element of distance from both the music and text, Fancelli may have well recognized that the work's preoccupation with class and bourgeois sensibilities remains an elusive issue to capture in the twenty-first century. By inverting the status relationships where the middle-class obsession with decency and moral values is compromised by their attraction to a petty gangster as this Don, Bieito has found fertile territory with which to reposition this eternal myth in our own sordid and just as hypocritical times.



Declan Donnellan's production of *Boris Godunov* at Avignon. Photo: Philippe Delacroix