

MOZART AND THE CRY OF DON JUAN

A Dialogue Between the Artist¹ and the Psychoanalyst

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An actor is returning to his dressing room, the curtain has just been lowered on the final scene of Molière's *Don Juan*². The moment is a pleasant one: He is alone, at ease, still covered in makeup, and he is making the passage back from the stage to civilian life.

His thoughts turn to the performance. As usual he was listening for the audience's silence, "my compass" he is surprised to hear himself mutter.

Suddenly he stops, halted by the memory of the feeling of dispossession that had taken hold of him and the rest of the theater in the first moments of the meeting between the Commander and Don Juan. Only now, in its aftermath, is he able to digest what had come over him: the silence in the room had become an overpowering noise, the presence of the spectators suddenly too present, the audience's attention somehow too intensely focused.

He had found himself on the edge of the abyss of his own text, fearing he might plummet into it upon the uttering of each word. The sound of his own voice seemed to be resonating in an unusual way. Would he get lost?

Then an impulse passed through him, like a kind of vibration jarring him away from whatever had been weighing him down. He felt a surprising intuition: It came from the gap that had opened between the audience and himself. He was stunned...

Then Don Juan's cry, marking the end of his encounter with the Commander in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, slowly begins to resonate in him. It is there, he hears it. It is like a sonorous continuum endlessly emanating from a larynx that has been reduced to a syrxinx by the absence of any form of implosion, explosion or cut.

At that moment, Don Juan and Mozart emerge from the wings and the Psychoanalyst joins them. They have waited a long time for this out-of-the-ordinary actor.

The time has arrived when an undreamt-of dialogue will take place, a dialogue from which the true Story of Don Juan is destined to emerge – Story written with a capital S because there is no room for the everyday ones in this particular scene.

Somewhere near the middle of November 1787, Mozart and his wife Constance are returning to Vienna after attending the performances of his *Don Giovanni*.

His mind is going back over the critique he had read in the Prague newspaper *Oberpostamtszeitung* on November 3rd:

"Monday 29, the Italian opera troop staged the much anticipated opera by Maestro Mozard (*sic*), entitled *Don Giovanni*. Musicians and aficionados alike agreed that Prague had never heard anything like it. Herr Mozard himself directed. When he arrived in the pit, he was greeted with three ovations, and yet another upon his departure. Furthermore the opera itself is extremely difficult to execute, and thus all

¹ This essay is primarily about the music of Mozart, but may be of interest to those engaged in other kinds of artistic activity insofar as it is an attempt to explore the enigma of creativity as such.

² Don Juan will be written in italics when referring to the title of the work itself, but without italics in reference to the character of Don Juan himself.

in attendance admired the beautiful rendition in spite of this and the fact that the rehearsal period had been short. Everyone, both on stage and off, made every effort to thank Mozart...the audience was particularly numerous as further proof of this universal approbation.”

Safe in his carriage, Mozart grins at the success of his *Don Giovanni*...³

But then he becomes shrouded in doubt: Why, after all, had he chosen this legend of the libertine seducer?

It had been well-known for over a century and a half, following its first literary appearance as *El Burlador de Sevilla*, a comedy written by the Spanish monk Gabriel Téllez, under the pseudonym Tirso de Molina. It had then crossed over into the theater, (in particular Molière’s *Don Juan* of 1665), and finally into ballet (Gluck) and opera (Gazzaniga’s *Don Giovanni o sia il convitato di pietra* was created in Vienna a short time earlier, in February 1787).

His thoughts turn to the circumstances surrounding its composition.

It had all started in December 1786, when the *Nozze di Figaro* was performed in Prague, seven months after its creation in Vienna. Upon learning of its success Mozart returned there in January 1787 to attend one of the performances at the Nostitz Theater, directed another performance, gave a piano recital, and so on. The public was so enthusiastic that a new opera was commissioned. He immediately contacted the librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte, and they chose the story of *Don Giovanni*.

The first performance of the new work was scheduled for October 14th, on the occasion of the marriage of the Archduchess Maria-Teresa, niece of the Emperor, to Prince Anton Clemens of Saxony. Mozart arrived in Prague in October for rehearsals, having already written the first two acts over the course of that summer.

He remembers how amazed the players were at the richness of his composition. But the rehearsal period had not been sufficient, so the *Nozze di Figaro* was staged instead.

“Perhaps *Don Giovanni* was not the best choice of operas for a wedding after all,” he later confided to some colleagues.

Il dissoluto punito, ossia il Don Giovanni (The Punished Libertine, or *Don Giovanni*) would have to wait until the 29th of October for its Prague debut. He hears it still, even now...

Donna Anna’s first aria (Scene III, Act 1) leaps to his mind: “*Or sai chi l’onore, rapier a me volse*” (“Now you know who sought to rob me of my honor”).

He is overcome by the impulse that traverses this music from note to note, as both the human and orchestral voices reveal something to him that nonetheless appears to be forever eluding his grasp. It is like a kind of pulsation, nourished by the long notes, but that surreptitiously drops them only to return to them once more. The way each note and chord makes heard something new about the one before it is spellbinding.

“What a wondrous world is music,” he tells himself, “where each note as successor makes heard, in its own predecessor, something the latter did not know! As if it were a never-ending flux that is perpetually enticing us toward some Elsewhere.”

But then his thought makes a firm re-entrance onto the scene. He becomes preoccupied with what Donna Anna told her fiancé Don Ottavio: Don Juan “wanted to steal her honor,” he is the “betrayal who took her father from her.”

³ In his *Anekdoten* (1798), Rochlitz reports that Mozart once declared that “this opera, though written for the people of Prague instead of the Viennese, was above all written for myself and my friends.”

He had not paid much attention to the libretto until that point. But now he was struck by the forceful clarity of Donna Anna's words: She knew who Don Juan was and so did Don Ottavio, since she had told him as much. Henceforth he was put on notice: she knew that he knew that she knew.

There was one way and one way only, Vengeance, to appease the voracity of the eye that incessantly reminded them of the spectacle of "the wound in his poor chest..." of the "ground covered with (his) blood."

She tells him. She exits. Don Ottavio remains alone, reduced to what she is demanding. Their shared knowledge becomes an eternal prison.

"It's incredible..." Mozart wonders, "Why do the meanings of words shed their gravity when the music starts?"

Spurred by the sheer pertinence of this question, the psychoanalyst furnishes the surprising response:

When Donna Anna used the power of the meaning of words she *de*-supposed the being of the other, fixating him with her commandment to "*Be what I demand.*" However when she began to sing, the music of her voice *pre*-supposed the existence of a force in the listener pressing him to instead "*Become what you are.*"

"Words are indeed diabolical," he sighs.

This thought immediately cuts short the impulse of the Symbolic being transmitted to him by the appeal to existence he had heard in the sound of Donna Anna's voice. The thought of the libretto returns to haunt him. He can't stop thinking of it, would his *libertine (dissoluto)* make *him* seem like a betrayer too? Would the freer spirits who frequented the Italian theater in Vienna be in attendance in a few months when *Don Giovanni* was staged there? He envisions several changes with the Viennese and their Emperor, to whom he is bound, in mind. He feels the full weight of the darkness that fell on the last day of Don Juan's life, the "*Notte.*" Would this first word of Da Ponte's libretto end up having the last word over Mozart? Would music abandon him?

He no longer speaks, and the burning silence that transfixes him casts a pall over his stage companions as well.

But then the Cry of Don Juan begins to speak for itself:

"Thought makes you believe that I seek to signify something, but it's not true – the vowel "Ah" eludes all meaning."

"I have not come," it continues, "to imprison someone within the limits of meaning. When I speak in the voice of Don Juan it is not a cry of horror that I am uttering.

Indeed if you are willing to listen to me, you may come to hear that I am forever revealing in different ways the fact that each new cry does not make heard the same thing as the one before it. Each new cry interprets otherwise the one that preceded it – no two cries are identical.

Whenever I appear, something infinite begins to resonate that opens onto a signifier which subdues the meaning in words.

In fact the only reason why thinkers have always said I dissipate silence is because I am ill-seen and ill-heard by them.⁴

They cannot reach the Truth that is saying itself through me as its intermediary. They cannot be touched by the silence I provoke and sustain in order to enable it to ring true.

⁴ TR: *mal vu* and *mal entendu* convey the ideas of being "misunderstood" and "not rightly seen," as well as those of "speaking evil" and "hearing evil," hence the attempt to translate this as "ill seen" and "ill heard."

If you seek the place from whence I speak, and the truth I am here to tell, you must question the silence that sets the hand of the potter in motion. Is it not in fact responding to this unheard (of) call when it engages in the gesture of creating the hole that is the *Human Thing* itself,⁵ such that the vase as lost object becomes a pure signifier instead of an object of utility?”

Something unheard of in the unexpected presence of this cry reshuffles the deck, and our four stage companions who heard it become animated once more.

Mozart, who begins to speak before he can think, immediately draws a connection between this fleeting passerby and something he once said to some friends of his in order to explain what takes hold of him in certain moments when he feels compelled to make compositions out of the things flooding into him:

“An idea would grow and I would nurture it until everything became increasingly clear, and what was originally a morsel, even a long one, would in my mind become almost entirely complete. So much so in fact that I am then able to picture it in my mind at a mere glance, like a beautiful painting or sculpture. What I mean is in my imagination I never hear the various parts arrive one after another in the order they are meant to follow. Instead I hear them all together at once. These are truly delectable moments of discovery and creation, when everything unfolds within me like a very lucid and lovely dream. The most beautiful thing of all, however, is hearing things thus, all at once.”⁶

The psychoanalyst, surprised perhaps by what the silence of the cry reveals through what it veils, draws a connection between Mozart’s inspiration and the one at work in the creation of a witticism (*mot d’esprit*).⁷

In his view, the moment when the sound of music floods into the listener is close to the moment when the witticism produces a stunning of thought.

Thus the instant when a word or phrase (*mot*) is reworked into a witticism (*mot d’esprit*) is comparable to Mozart’s “mere glance,” when “picturing in the mind (*esprit*)” *makes heard* “everything all at once.”⁸

Furthermore this silent sounding of spirit, wit and intellect (*esprit*), unheard by the ears, is related to what Lacan dubbed the “invocatory drive” on March 4th 1964, in his view the drive that was the “closest to the experience of the unconscious”⁹ – a comment that also beckons us to read the works of Alain Didier-Weill.¹⁰

⁵ In reference to what Freud dubbed *das Ding*, the thing, my argument here is contending the *Thing* is the void, the inaccessible as such. It is the locus of pure signifyingness (*signifiance*) that is always revealed in ways that are unexpected, but which always, as it were, hit the nail right on the head (“fait mouche” Lacan, December 9, 1959). Like music, it can be neither grasped nor comprehended.

⁶ As witnessed by some of his contemporaries. See for example www.aei.ca/~claudej/Mozart.html. Josepha Duschek’s remark included in Philippe Soller’s *Mystérieux Mozart* (Mysterious Mozart, Plon), corroborates with this testimony: “No sooner did he begin then his imagination depicted the whole work to him in its entirety, lively and clearcut...the work was finished in his head before he sat down to write it” (p. 182).

⁷ Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, S.E. VIII, (1905).

⁸ It is a time that belongs to the Other that authenticates whether a word or phrase (*mot*) has in fact become a witticism (*mot d’esprit*).

⁹ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 96 (in French).

¹⁰ See Alain Didier-Weill *Les trois temps de la loi* (The Three Beats of the Law), Seuil 1995, and *Invocations*, Calmann-Lévy, 1998.

He remembers the seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*¹¹ when The Truth spoke through Lacan's mouth:

From out of this hole in meaning, a genuine muffling of thought,¹² the prehistoric Other invokes a second person, a "You of devotion," who becomes the receiver of the unheard of call of the spirit or wit (*l'esprit*) by saying "yes" to it.

Then in a second moment, this invoked receiver is transformed into an emitter of speech, invoking Alterity in its turn. This was the moment when the Overture to *Don Giovanni* was written, and is equally the moment when the wit of the witticism is generated.

Mozart was not expecting the psychoanalyst would one day enable him to realize that the inestimable value of the moment when thought is ground to a halt stems from its being the initiatory moment of all creativity.

Then he turns to the memory of his beloved Constance.¹³ Why is he suddenly thinking of her? Clearly, he now understands, because it was she who enabled him to write the overture to his *Don Giovanni*, by grinding his own thought to a halt for a short time before it was written. Whereas previously he had thought she was the one who had to follow him, he now realizes he is the one who had in fact had to follow her. What at that time had occurred without his knowing it?

On the night of October 27-28th, he had asked her to make him some punch, to put him in better spirits, and to talk to him, in order to keep him awake. She had told him the stories of Aladdin and Cinderella, which had made him double over with laughter.

The hours went by, yet nary a note of the score was written. At 3:00 a.m. she suggested he take a short nap, and left him to sleep until 5:00.

The moment he awoke, driven by forces unseen, without stopping or making the slightest mistake, he wrote the entire score. When the copyist arrived, a mere two hours later, *Don Giovanni* had its Overture.

He is haunted by the question as to whether there might be some possible connection between his inability to produce the overture earlier in the night, and his fits of laughter.

As for the laughter itself, he admits he doesn't normally find his wife Constance's stories so funny. Aladdin and Cinderella are enjoyable enough, but not to the point that they should make him die laughing. In fact his bursts of laughter were in response to the eruptions that ensued from the call of the spirit of the Other (*esprit de l'Autre*), whom he had been expecting all along but without knowing precisely when it would "cast [him] down from the height of its appearance."¹⁴

Like a child hearing for the first time the force of this presupposition of his own subjectivity to come, who accepts it and replies by creating a smile on his face; Mozart was already responding with laughter to this promise he had been waiting for, and that had been waiting for him.

The calm he evinced that night, and the fact that he was able to sleep for two hours before having written down a single note, were based on this trust he had already given. If he had not already put his faith in the spirit of music, he could never have forgotten to think long enough to fall asleep.

¹¹ Lacan, Seminar of December 9, 1959 (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Seminar VII*).

¹² Surely the best way to depict the death drive as the disappearance of knowledge in discourse.

¹³ From amongst the many that are available, the version of the creation of this Overture given by Mozart's wife Constance, as reported in her biography by W.A. Mozart of Nissen, (her second husband), that I have chosen to rely on here.

¹⁴ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 56.

Incredible as it seems to him, he is certain nonetheless that he could not have failed to produce the music for the Overture as late as October 27th out of sheer negligence, but instead because he was waiting expectantly for music's renewed, silent invocation which had yet to come. What was it that had deafened him to its call?

This silence of Alterity that he heard when he wrote the music to Don Juan's cry was most likely muffled by the presence of the "justice officials" whom he had unwittingly summoned for the Finale.

Now he understands why the punch and Constance's voice had not produced the desired effects. These officials were watching over and restraining him. Without even knowing it, he had been held (back) under surveillance.

By bringing them onto the stage immediately after Don Juan's cry had broken free, he had believed that its secret *minstrel song*¹⁵ would resonate with them too. Unfortunately he had overestimated them.

He hadn't believed they were completely reduced to their roles as police officers and officials administrated solely by what they saw and heard, assigned to the mission of finding and identifying the body.¹⁶ The power these officials possessed had in effect "officiated away" the cry's appeal.

Luckily the whole affair came to a sudden end thanks to the intuition of Constance, who, as a speaking being adorned with the feminine, knew a thing or two about the field of signifyingness from which the impulse to creativity may arise.

Something mysterious touched him that night through Constance's presence. His conscious thought was drained away enabling him to sleep, and when he awoke the music to the Overture was revealed...

He suddenly feels he should rework the music accompanying the final meeting between the Commander and Don Juan. Why? Had he insufficiently rendered the terrible confrontation between them? Was some other thing left out?

In his mind's ear he hears the elements of the score and in the voice of the Commander: the long, repetitive and octave-straddling notes ("*Giovan-ni,*" "*invitati*"); the funereal quarter-eighth-quarter rhythm; the lapidary conclusion "*Ah, tempo piu non v'é,*" ("Oh, time is up") carried by a descending chromatic melody of whole-notes whose rhythm seemed to swallow up time, and finally the reciting tones that silenced all debate.

But what he then hears the most forcefully of all is the appeal conveyed by Don Juan's cry itself, which he had forgotten. This is Don Juan's cue to at last take center stage, in order to make heard that his cry was a response to something that revealed itself to him, when the Commander announced himself to Leoporello, in the form of an other law (of music).¹⁷

The musical wager Mozart made here is a strange one – on the one hand because it was foreign to the then reigning law of tonality, and on the other because

¹⁵ See Dominique Bertrand: "*Penser la musique: la part du diable*" (Thinking Music, The Devil's Share), p. 57.

¹⁶ Mozart in fact stages the division between the body we possess, plain for all to see and transportable by carriage – the body the justice officials are charged with unearthing – and the body of the drive (*corps pulsionnel*), invisible as such, but which the cry reveals.

¹⁷ That would later be depicted by Schoenberg in 1923, 1926, 1941, 1946, 1947 and 1948 as (the rules of) "12-tonal composition." See Arnold Schoenberg, *Le style et l'idée* (Style and Idea), Buchet/Chastel, 2002. pp. 155-193.

Darius Milhaud¹⁸ was apparently the only one to have heard its presence, tucked away in the Commander's retort: "*Chi si pasce di cibo celeste.*"¹⁹

At issue is a twelve-note series that Milhaud then used in his 1952 opera *David* as the basis for the music accompanying the appearance of the Prophet Jonathan, who reproaches David for allowing himself to be corrupted by the flesh.

In the guise of these few notes a singing voice was able to *incognito* smuggle (*passer*) its contraband – a dimension of spirit (*esprit*) that did not judge Don Juan for his behavior, because it was not bound by the limits of meaning – the sense it takes leads elsewhere.

Indeed, Don Juan is convinced that what he was in fact seeking, through his nocturnal conquests over women, was this passerby in the night, and that his transgressions of the limits of the concrete law were in reality aimed at guiding him in the direction of their limitlessness (of the feminine itself).

Clearly therefore, Don Juan is who was needed in order for this discovery, the only one that counts as such, to be heard.

Thankfully it left a signifying trace of its passage, a silent composition knotting orchestral and human voices: something *never heard before*...



The twelve notes are numbered.

Mozart can hardly believe it himself: he unearthed a music that knotted, in the same time and the same space, both the law of tonality and a law that dissents it through dissonance.²⁰

The psychoanalyst grins, because Mozart reminds him of the artist he sometimes encounters, the subject of the unconscious, at work in the production of a witticism (*mot d'esprit*) – a creation which simultaneously condenses a well worn word or phrase (*mot*) with something unexpected, yielding something never before heard.

The actor also begins to realize this is the truth of the dramatic feeling he had experienced, and the way in which its dimensions exceed the framework of the theater itself.

Finally Don Juan joins them, proclaiming how this innovation diverted him from the path of the discourse on guilt, and guided him in the sense of an other world inhabited by the limitlessness of pure sound, a place that gives rise to newness itself because it adheres in the dimension of what has *not yet* (*pas encore*) been defined...

Furthermore, he insists, his cry is his way of saying "yes" to being the receiver of this otherworldly appeal – freed by the dissonance that the emitter he would become had uncovered – in order for him to make it heard to whosoever might be prepared to listen to it.²¹

¹⁸ My thanks to J.-M. Vivès for making me aware of this.

¹⁹ "Non si pasce di cibo mortale. Chi si pasce di cibo celeste." (Those who partake of heavenly food do not need the mortal stuff.)

²⁰ Before then, dissonance had been forced to return to the limits of consonance as it sought to make heard something escaping the law of tonality. In his Second String Quartet (1907-08), Schoenberg challenged the authority of this sovereign law reigning in Western music. Through this unprecedented act he made heard, it must be surmised, the unlimited field of Alterity in music.

²¹ As per the logic of the invocatory drive.

This Don Juan the “wit” is thus no longer a guest invited to dine on commandments, because he has been invoked to partake in the unseen and unheard (of), both of which are freely revealed by this Stranger, the series of twelve-notes.

Nothing is as it was before. Don Juan is no longer the *dissoluto punito* we’ve all come to expect.

The division to be heard in the voice of the Other that the Commander became for him originates in his own subjective division itself. Overcome with angst, he appeals to the power of words: “*Che vuoi?*” (“What do you want?”).

Let the Commander carry on then with his strategy of silencing this appeal through the weight of his words, of changing the rhythm of his versification, of ratcheting up the pressure through accelerating tempos and diminished seventh-chord reciting tones – his gait may even remain belabored by its funereal quarter-eighth-quarter rhythm.

For his part, Don Juan is already Elsewhere. He is not hiding anymore. Instead he is transmitting, to whomever might receive, what the true meaning of a signifier is – he offers the Commander “his” hand freely, though he is clearly tinged with anguish (*angoisse*).

The tension that then immediately fills his being issues in a stifled “*Oi-mé*” (Oh! Heavens) conveyed by a diminished seventh chord, and then comes his cry, which sounds and resounds beyond the horizon, signifying anything and everything...

The curtain lowers on our dialogue here to the sound of Rilke’s appeal to hearing the voices of otherwise mute things, conveyed in a letter he wrote to his muse Lou Andreas-Salomé on August 8th, 1903:

“When I turn to other people they don’t know how to advise me and can’t understand me. The same (debilitating) situation occurs with books which don’t help me either, almost as if they too were still a bit too human... Only things speak to me. Rodin’s things...”

“That could have been Lacan we were hearing,” the Psychoanalyst says, and thus cuts the scene short.

Paris, May 2005

Voix

3 4 5 6 7 9 10 11 12

Orchestra

1 2 # 8

Chi si pa-sce di ci-bo ce-les-te