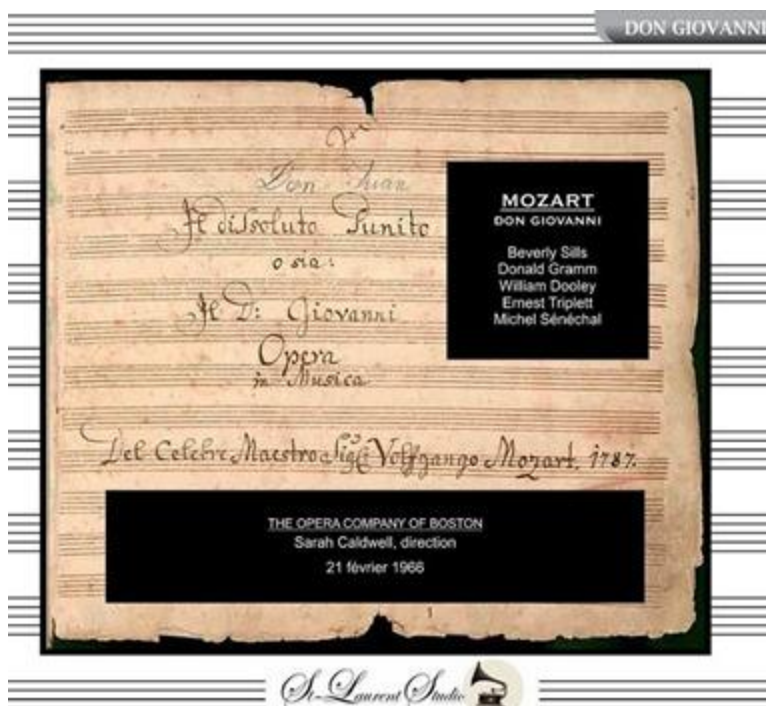




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**CD REVIEW: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - DON GIOVANNI (W. Dooley, D. Gramm, B. Sills, M. Sénéchal, B. Lewis, L. Hurley, R. Trehy, E. Triplett, M. Boatwright; St-Laurent Studio Opera Vol. 7 YSL T-270)**



**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756 – 1791): *Don Giovanni*, K. 527**—William Dooley (Don Giovanni), Donald Gramm (Leporello), Beverly Sills (Donna Anna), Michel Sénéchal (Don Ottavio), Brenda Lewis (Donna Elvira), Laurel Hurley (Zerlina), Robert Trehy (Masetto), Ernest Triplett (Il Commendatore), McHenry Boatwright (la Statua); Chorus and Orchestra of the Opera Company of Boston; Sarah Caldwell, conductor [Recorded 'live' in performance in the Boston Opera House on 21 February 1966; [St-Laurent Studio](#) Opera Volume 7 YSL T-270; 3 CDs, 155:51; Available from [St-Laurent Studio](#) and [Norpete.com](#)]

An oft-quoted axiom argues that repeating the same action with the expectation of different results is symptomatic of insanity. If there is any degree of diagnostic veracity in this assertion, opera is in its very essence a permanent state of mental defect. The real insanity of opera is that, with directorial prerogative guiding and misguiding the production of the art form, it is logical to expect different outcomes when scores are enacted upon the world's stages. Why not expect Rheintöchter who spelunk in one

production and sport only bow ties and stilettos in another or Carmens who alternately have taurine fetishes or daddy issues? In Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's and Lorenzo da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*, there is enough craziness in the drama itself to render further doses of zaniness redundant. There is ample fodder for interpretive misconduct in the opera's plot of unrepentant philandering, vengeful statuary, and Providential retribution, but not even the cleverest or most shocking conceits can rescue a poorly-sung *Don Giovanni*. It is doubtful that even the colorful, innocuously irreverent Mozart knew people who actually conducted conversations in *secco* recitative: nevertheless, this fact did not discourage him from populating his Italian operas with folks whose sentences are punctuated by cadence chords, exacerbating the twisted reality of the genre. Existing in versions originating with the opera's 1787 première in Prague and its first performance in Vienna in 1788, as well as countless bowdlerizations resulting from two centuries of editorial meddling, the particular insanity of *Don Giovanni* is that, details of specific productions notwithstanding, one can reasonably approach any production or recording of the opera with anticipation of variety. Which arias will be included? Will the original Epilogue be performed, or will the curtain fall with Giovanni's presumed descent into hell? The only effective therapy for this mania is to sit back and allow the tide of Mozart's music—whichever portions of it are offered—to carry away every irregularity and uncertainty, and **Yves St-Laurent's** and **Jean de la Durantaye's** expert restoration of a 1966 Opera Company of Boston performance gives the listener a gift of a *Don Giovanni* sung with brawn and beauty by a cast including some of America's most significant artists. Perhaps *Don Giovanni* is a prime model of the inherent insanity of opera as an art form, but this *Don Giovanni* is a potent antidote to the dementia of many recent productions of Mozart's masterful score.

A heartening aspect of this *Don Giovanni*, dating from 21 February 1966, is its celebration of diversity in America's regional opera companies. Except in contexts in which the art itself prompts dialogue, why race continues to be a matter of discussion in opera in 2015 is painfully unfathomable. Why in the 1950s and '60s talented singers like Gloria Davy and Lenora Lafayette, the former engaged by the Metropolitan Opera for only fifteen performances and the latter never singing there at all, struggled for acceptance in their native country is more easily explained but no more easily justified. Founded in 1958 as Boston Opera Group by conductor **Sarah Caldwell**, a pioneering advocate for equality of the sexes on the podium and the first woman to conduct at the MET, the three-decade existence of the Opera Company of Boston was marked by a dedication to nurturing native-born talent and transcending conventional boundaries. Thus, first-rate international talent of the caliber of Magda Olivero and Renata Tebaldi rubbed shoulders with American singers like Richard Cassilly and Marilyn Horne. Opera Company of Boston also gave opportunities that were often not forthcoming elsewhere to artists of color, not least mezzo-soprano Shirley Verrett, a singer whose voice alone should have obliterated every racial barrier and ridiculous prejudice in the Arts. The present performance of *Don Giovanni* featured, under Caldwell's baton, African American singers as the flesh-and-blood Commendatore and his phantasmagoric effigy in an era in which singers of color were still excluded from many productions. The Opera Company of Boston's chorus and orchestra, though thoroughly professional and often more involved than their counterparts in the pits of the world's great opera houses, cannot be claimed to be the equals of the MET or Covent Garden choruses and orchestras, but the generally excellent sound achieved by St-Laurent and de la Durantaye places the choral singing, orchestral playing, and Caldwell's conducting in a flattering acoustic in which the felicities of their collaboration are audible. On the whole, Caldwell's tempi are satisfying, conveying the opera's dramatic propulsion without

trampling the singers. There are moments of sloppy ensemble, but this is a capably-conducted, viscerally exciting *Don Giovanni*.

It is unusual to split the duties of the Commendatore living and dead between two singers, but Opera Company of Boston's production engaged a pair of splendid artists to portray the intractable Don Pedro before and after his demise at the hand of Don Giovanni. In the opera's opening scene, the protective father is brought to life by baritone **Ernest Triplett**, a 1961 graduate of the New England Conservatory whose work in the Boston metro region was greatly admired. The nobility of his singing of the Commendatore in this performance confirms the legitimacy of the high regard that Massachusetts audiences had for him. The voice, deftly handled, makes a boldly heroic impression, this Commendatore's defense of his daughter's honor backed by the courage of his convictions: so sympathetic a character has Triplett created in a brief time that the daughter's sorrow and rage over the father's murder are shared by the listener. When the Commendatore returns in spectral form in Act Two, his crepuscular utterances are forcefully intoned by bass-baritone **McHenry Boatwright**. Though he sang in the 1956 première of Clarence Cameron White's *Ouanga* at the Metropolitan Opera House, presented by Pittsburgh-based National Negro Opera Company, Boatwright was never a member of the MET roster. Unfairly neglecting his superb singing in an extensive repertory, it is for his standard-setting Crown in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* that he is now best remembered. In the Commendatore's sepulchral music, his voice exhibits granitic strength. When Boatwright sings 'Don Giovanni a cenar teco m'invitasti e son venuto,' there is nothing to be done but to attend this Commendatore at table. As an instrument of divine justice, Boatwright's Commendatore is an ideal complement to Triplett's more sensitive reading: the character finds in death the victory and vindication that were denied him in life.

Though his brother John appeared often at the MET, baritone **Robert Trehy** never bowed on the MET stage. His singing as Masetto in this Boston performance makes this seem a glaring omission in MET casting. Admittedly, a poor Masetto seldom ruins a performance of *Don Giovanni*, but how greatly a good one can enrich a show. Trehy is here a very good Masetto, making much of his interactions with Zerlina, both in anger and in tenderness. He voices 'Ho capito, signor, sì!' manfully and is an atypically virile presence in every scene in which he appears, his voice more than equal to the requirements of Masetto's music.

Describing a singer as utilitarian has a negative connotation suggesting that the voice was more hardy than handsome, but a sunny timbre bolstered by an indestructible technique rendered soprano **Laurel Hurley** an utilitarian singer in the best sense at the MET, where she impersonated Zerlina to critical acclaim twenty-nine times in a decade. Here, she exudes glamour and femininity, joining Giovanni in a sultry account of 'Là ci darem la mano,' but despite her roving eye there is no question that her heart belongs to Masetto. Hurley sings 'Batti, batti, o bel Masetto' vibrantly, and her 'Vedrai, carino, se sei buonino' is agreeably beguiling. Hurley's voice shines in ensembles, and she projects Zerlina's every giggle and pout winningly.

It was not until 1982, when he impersonated the servants in Offenbach's *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, that French tenor **Michel Sénéchal** enlivened the MET stage, where he was heard as recently as the opening night of the 2005 – 2006 Season as Don Basilio in *Le nozze di Figaro*. Principally known beyond the borders of his native country as a

character tenor par excellence, Sénéchal was acclaimed in France as an accomplished exponent of high-flying parts such as Rameau's *Platée*, Rossini's *Comte Ory*, and Nicias in Massenet's *Thaïs*. In Boston's *Don Giovanni*, Sénéchal was regrettably deprived of Don Ottavio's 'Dalla sua pace la mia dipende,' the aria composed in Vienna for Francesco Morella, but he sings every note allotted to him with aristocratic grace, unerring stylishness, and a voice that sounds tailor-made for the music. Comforting Donna Anna and swearing to partner her in her quest for vengeance for her father's death, the tenor summons his trademark honeyed tones followed by more robust vocal mettle than might have been expected from him. His and his Donna Anna's voices blend unusually well, and Sénéchal is among the few recorded Ottavios who actually sounds as though he is so hopelessly in love with Anna as to be willing to suffer any impediment to their union. His appalled reaction to Anna's description of her assault by the libidinous Giovanni is passionate, and the ease with which he scales the heights of Ottavio's lines in ensembles is marvelous. Sénéchal's performance of Ottavio's aria in Act Two, 'Il mio tesoro intanto andate a consolar,' proves worth the wait (and makes the absence of 'Dalla sua pace' all the more lamentable), his breath control completely conquering music that defeats many tenors. In the opera's final ensemble, Sénéchal depicts an Ottavio whose capitulation to Anna's wishes is a token of his devotion rather than an indication of weakness. Vocally, Sénéchal is not the most opulent Ottavio on records, but he is among the most stylish and theatrically effective.

One of America's most adventurous singers, the meteoric career of Pennsylvania-born soprano **Brenda Lewis** included creation of Birdie Hubbard—the soprano's own birth name was Birdie, incidentally—in Marc Blitzstein's *Regina* and the title rôle in Jack Beeson's *Lizzie Borden*, as well launching the newly-established Houston Grand Opera in 1956 as Richard Strauss's *Salome*. Her assignments at the MET are evidence of her uncommon versatility: remarkably, her rôles there included Puccini's *Musetta*, Johann Strauß II's *Rosalinde*, Wagner's *Venus*, Mussorgsky's *Marina*, Barber's *Vanessa*, Berg's *Marie* (perhaps her most prized portrayal), *Salome*, and even Bizet's *Carmen*. Her sole MET *Donna Elvira* was sung in a 1953 non-broadcast performance, so this recording of her Boston *Donna Elvira* is an especially welcome souvenir of an outing in the Mozart repertory in which she made her professional début and enjoyed notable successes at her artistic home, New York City Opera. Lewis charges into the performance like a hungry tigress on the trail of meat, her incendiary 'Ah, chi mi dice mai quel barbaro dov'è?' exploding like fireworks. The voice is shrill and the coloratura not entirely comfortable, but the impact of the aria is like that of a lightning strike. No less dynamic is her voicing of 'Ah! fuggi il traditor!' In the Act One finale, Lewis sings her lines in 'Bisogna aver corraggio' and 'Protegga il giusto cielo' with real distinction. In the Act Two trio with Giovanni and Leporello, her articulation of 'Ah taci, ingiusto core!' is surprisingly touching. Unfortunately, like Ottavio's 'Dalla sua pace,' the Act Two aria that Mozart composed in Vienna for Caterina Cavalieri, 'Mi tradi quell'alma ingrata,' is omitted in this performance. Lewis's vocalism in the opera's penultimate scene and Epilogue is feisty. There are enough moments of stress and untidiness in Lewis's singing to remind the listener of the difficulty of *Elvira's* music, but this intelligent singer puts every exertion to use in her depiction of a woman scarred to the bone by love.

Milwaukee-born bass-baritone **Donald Gramm** sang Leporello, one of his most admired portrayals, twenty-four times at the MET between 1966 and 1981 and recorded the part for DECCA with colleagues including Dame Joan Sutherland, Pilar Lorengar, Marilyn Horne, and Gabriel Bacquier. From the first bar of his jocular 'Notte e giorno faticar,' Gramm provides a stream of comedic immediacy that flows through the performance.

He interacts with Giovanni with the annoyance of a man tired of being ignored and abused. He seems legitimately horrified by the death of the Commendatore, and his broadly droll 'Madamina, il catalogo è questo' is not devoid of humanity and subtle empathy for Elvira. In the duet with Giovanni at the beginning of Act Two, 'Eh via, buffone, non mi seccar,' Gramm sings artfully, and he makes Leporello's aria 'Ah, pietà, signori miei' far more memorable than many singers have done. His work in 'O statua gentilissima del gran Commendatore' and the Epilogue is treasurable: here, for once, is a Leporello who manages to be funny without compromising the quality of his singing.

It is not for her performances of Mozart rôles that **Beverly Sills** is most remembered, but she was no stranger to *Don Giovanni*. As early as 1953, she sang Donna Elvira at San Francisco Opera under Tullio Serafin's baton, a part that she reprised in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Later, in addition to the Opera Company of Boston performances that produced this recording, she sang Donna Anna for New York City Opera both in New York and on tour, including a 1966 revival in which her Ottavio was the young Plácido Domingo, with Baltimore Civic Opera, at Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes, in Lausanne opposite Gérard Souzay's Giovanni, and in a 1966 concert performance in Manhattan's Lewisohn Stadium that was her first appearance with the Metropolitan Opera. At the start of this Boston performance, Sills's singing imparts the full spectrum of Anna's terror, grief, and indignation. Her voice stands out in every ensemble in Act One, her performance gaining momentum despite a few stretches of dullness in recitative until she unleashes a furious gale of histrionic intensity but aptly Mozartean singing in 'Don Ottavio, son mortal!' and 'Or sai chi l'onore.' The luster of her top As is stunning, but the most sensational trait of her performance is the towering dramatic profile that she creates without overstretching the voice. The ascending lines of the masquers' trio in the Act One finale are sung with tremendous poise. Sills is utterly in her element in 'Non mi dir, bell'idol mio,' singing the roulades better than almost any other soprano on records, the voice smaller than those of many Annas—of her generation, at least—but the characterization no less imposing. In the aria and in the opera's final scene, Sills succeeds in making Anna the moral spine of the performance rather than an indecisive harridan who toys with Ottavio's affections for her own amusement (or, as in many productions, for no apparent reason at all). That Sills sings well in this performance is hardly surprising: that she sings *this* well is phenomenal.

Native Californian baritone **William Dooley** debuted at the MET in 1964 as Tchaikovsky's Onegin opposite the Tatyana of Leontyne Price, and his Mozartean credentials at the MET encompassed a number of turns as Conte d'Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro*, both in New York and on national tours. A member of the generation of gifted American baritones who furthered the legacy of Lawrence Tibbett and Leonard Warren, Dooley was in Boston a Don Giovanni of technical solidity and vocal excellence. In many ways, his concept of the rôle combines elements of the much-appreciated interpretations of fellow Americans Sherrill Milnes and Samuel Ramey, amalgamating lecherous appetite with good-natured machismo. His Giovanni seems a reluctant murderer, but there is no doubt of the voracity of his amorous audacity. Dooley's Giovanni sounds embarrassed by the near-hysterical Elvira's sudden appearance, but his 'concern' for her, feigned to convince Zerlina of his nobility of spirit, is almost as sincere as the saccharine verse on a greeting card. The suavity of Dooley's line in 'Là ci darem la mano' could charm a leopard out of its stripes—or a Zerlina out of her determined resistance. There is little menace in this Giovanni's seducing, but Dooley's performance of 'Finch'han dal vino calda la testa' simmers with testosterone-fueled fervor. He duets with Leporello arrestingly, and joins Leporello and Elvira in their trio with

disquieting charisma. His traversal of 'Metà di voi qua vadano' is brilliantly conspiratorial. Dooley's Giovanni meets his end unflinchingly: create hell on earth, he evinces, and the only possible destiny is infernal, and to struggle would be pusillanimous. In the course of the performance, Dooley encounters a few phrases that test his resources, but he clears every obstacle with the freedom of an Olympic pole vaulter.

That *Don Giovanni* is one of the greatest operas not only of the Eighteenth Century but in the whole history of the genre is an assessment that is unlikely to prompt dissent, but how many performances of the opera in the past quarter-century have unreservedly affirmed this? Opera Company of Boston's 1966 production of *Don Giovanni* assembled a cast whose individual and collective efforts gave Mozart's score the kind of treatment that it deserves. That treatment is the foremost triumph of St-Laurent Studio's recording of the 21 February performance. In an age in which far more time is spent—wasted, really—debating how Mozart's operas ought to be sung than preparing singers to sing them, how refreshing it is to hear a performance of *Don Giovanni* in which impeccably-trained singers simply let Mozart dictate how their voices should be deployed.