

Cincinnati CityBeat Print Friendly: <http://www.citybeat.com><http://citybeat.com/2004-07-14/onstage2.shtml>

Scoreless, yet superb

Young cast of agile and gifted singers lifts Don Giovanni

Review By Anne Arenstein

"Where's a trap door when you need it?" sings Leporello, Don Giovanni's hapless servant, trying to escape from several of the Don's angry victims. Of course, there are trap doors all over the stage at Music Hall in this revival of Nic Muni's 1999 production, and they are utilized to great effect. Mozart called his opera about the unrepentant libertine a "comic drama," and that's how director Jose Maria Condemni stages it. He has a superb cast of young, agile and gifted singers who meet considerable physical challenges and come up with a few surprises on their own.

One surprise might be that the Don doesn't score once in this opera. In the first scene, he murders a father who bursts in as a seduction is taking place; Giovanni and Leporello interrupt a peasant wedding, and the bride Zerlina is fair game. That dalliance gets one of the loveliest duets in all of opera, but it's quickly interrupted by another of Giovanni's frustrated lovers. The Don later tries to entice this woman's maid, but never carries it off.

Still, Don Giovanni is no candidate for Viagra and Teddy Tahu Rhodes' performance is almost perfect, with an erotic edginess that kept the women sitting around me glued to their binoculars. His bass-baritone has a lovely rich burnish, and his control verges on the amazing. The "Champagne" aria goes at breakneck speed, and Rhodes never lost the momentum. His second act serenade to the maid is exquisite in its warmth and lyricism. There are moments when his voice is covered by the orchestra or other singers, but it doesn't detract from his powerful presence -- all 6 feet 5 inches of it. He's remarkably agile, moves with elegance and grace, and leaps 5-foot tombstones in a single bound.

The Don's servant, Leporello, gets an equally physical performance from Michele Bianchini. His bass-baritone has more heft, and Bianchini uses it to underscore his character's comic weakness. The "Catalog" aria, in which he lists the Don's conquests throughout the world, is sung with delicious insouciance.

Soprano Alexandra Deshorties makes an impressive debut as Donna Anna, whose father is killed in the opening scene. She sings the role's difficult music with supreme confidence and grace, and her gorgeous tone makes her a more sympathetic character. Dana Beth Miller gives just the right edge of stridency to Donna Elvira, the abandoned lover. Her second act aria, "Mi Tradi," is at once an accusation and an anguished lament. Sara Fox is a delightfully sensual Zerlina, and Thomas Goerz is her jealous husband, Masetto.

The biggest ovations go to tenor Shawn Mathey in the thankless role of Don Ottavio, Donna Anna's fiancé. The character is a wimp, but he has two great arias, and Mathey sings both (one is usually cut) with breathtaking ease, grace, superbly executed trills and an exquisitely sweet lyric tone.

Conductor Xian Zhang led a brisk, well-paced reading of the score, keeping the episodes moving without pause between recitative and aria or ensemble.

Muni's set design reduces the stage to a large game board with an infinite number of trapdoors and a large mirror in the center. An incomplete picture frame hovers over the stage, and period paintings descend as characters enter. Walls slide in and out and a large walkway projects over the orchestra pit. Director Condemni's staging never overdoes the slapstick and, despite the number of trapdoors,

they're never slammed.

Don Giovanni isn't known for having complex characters, but Condemni inserts clever stage business to heighten their personalities. Donna Anna puts on her father's coat after he's murdered and refuses to take it off. Leporello hands Donna Elvira's maid a pen, and she writes down the numbers of conquests as he ticks them off. When Leporello, disguised as his master, woos Donna Elvira, Giovanni's prompting gets a little too involved. It all moves gracefully and is a successful mesh of music and movement. GRADE: A-

DON GIOVANNI, presented by the Cincinnati Opera, is presented again at Music Hall on Friday.

E-mail [the editor](#)

Previously in Onstage

- **Muddy Atlantis, Manic Maids** Cincinnati Opera presents double bill at Music Hall Review By Tom McElfresh (June 23, 2004)
- **A Premiere Season** ETC will stage a 2004 Tony and Pulitzer Prize winner, I Am My Own Wife By Rick Pender (June 23, 2004)
- **Sassy Send-Ups** Forbidden Broadway skewers shows and personalities Review By Rick Pender (June 23, 2004)
- **more...**