

Don Giovanni – San Diego Opera: Far More Than Fifty Shades

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Don Giovanni – San Diego Opera



Occasionally the worlds of opera and film overlap, and such is the case this weekend when both Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* open. The former will certainly continue to withstand the test of time (it was first performed in 1787); although the latter is breaking box office records, it will eventually fade after its trilogy is played out.

Both productions raise the issue of whether the titular character is a seducer or a rapist.

In the case of Mozart's production, Ildebrando D'Arcangelo plays the title role with aplomb. D'Arcangelo has performed at many major venues, from La Scala to Covent Garden to the Hollywood Bowl, so his San Diego debut is a treat.



Bass-baritone Ildebrando D'Arcangelo is Don Giovanni. Photo by Cory Weaver

The Don brazenly strides across Europe, with his servant by his side gamely trying to keep up the ever-thicker book of his master's 2000+ amorous conquests. The servant Leporello is superbly played by Egyptian bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam, who has performed before in San Diego and delightfully in Chautauqua.

Ottavio (performed ideally by tenor Paul Appleby) opens both acts; as the lover of Donna Anna he is one of several foils to the Don. Donna Anna is portrayed by the American soprano Ellie Dehn. The costumes (David Burdick) are lush and vibrant, adding a surprisingly effective dimension. Indeed, there are a total of 34 people behind the scenes devoted to costumes alone. Nicholas Muni's marvelous set design features a deeply raked stage with sliding panels, trap doors and translucent portraits to evoke various settings. Muni also directed the production (and composed the supertitles). The penultimate scene is breathtaking, a testament to and consummation of Muni's able directorial skills.

Thomas Hase's impressive lighting leverages some of the effective work he did early in the season for *La Bohème*.



Raked stage, translucent portraits, trapdoors and superb lighting. Photo by Cory Weaver.



Tenor Paul Appelby is Don Ottavio and soprano Ellie Dehn is Donna Anna. Photo by Cory Weaver

At the opera's premiere in Prague, the cognoscenti were intrigued with the sexual nature of the plot and impressed with the females' more emboldened stature. Swirling about in the air were the recent revolutions in America and France, which were monumental forces in championing individual freedom. Through the centuries, audiences have developed a loving disdain for the character of Don Giovanni, he who pursues his wishes without regard for the damage created in his wake. But more deeply, the Don could be said to be fighting for the liberation of people from the yoke of religious strictures that especially bind women to narrow roles of propriety. Only slightly were these strictures beginning to erode after the Age of Enlightenment.

And while *Fifty Shades of Grey* enjoys its status as the biggest opening box office for a female director, *Don Giovanni* will carry on down the ages as one of art's greatest achievements.

The San Diego Opera itself has moved from the edge of fatal financial disaster back to its rightful position as one of the country's top opera institutions.

<http://www.sdopera.com/Operas/Giovanni>