

**Box 1**— Mozart's *Don Giovanni*: Act 1 MADAMINA, IL CATALOGO (The Catalog Aria) (Part 1) Joel Berglund (barytone); Leo Blech (conductor). RCA, Publication date: 1948.

My hypothesis is that the Don Juans of this world, are always less numerous than the manservants making a record of his amorous misdeeds. Which is why—once justice has been rendered to Don Juan—we may want to turn our attention to *Leporello*. Allegedly the name of the note-pad concertina made up of a long strip folded in zigzag, comes from him. And the long list of Don Juan's 2065 female conquests in different countries, related in Leporello's famous *catalogue aria* from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* (1787), was conveyed in a document like this: hence the *noun* *leporello*.

The premiere took place less than two years before the French Revolution (14 July 1789). It likely reflected the cultural and political climate of the time: expressing in the language of [opera buffa](#) the excesses of the privileged, as the sign of privileges in excess. A secondary male character who does his bit to put his mark/seal on an historical turn of events. Oddly, a similar kind of relation has been suggested between Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and the Italian librettist Lorenzo da Ponte, *alias* Emanuele Conegliano (or Lesbonico Pegasino, Arcadian name of the one & same da Ponte).

Where Mozart took the lion's share the glory as the composer, da Ponte saw the opera as an empty vessel for his art as a librettist. And the story goes that in the catalogue aria sung by Don Giovanni's manservant Leporello, the strew of odd numbers of mistresses on the servant's list—640, 231, 100, 91 and 1003—actually flag all three of the librettist's name in *code*. Of course, we will never know if any of this is actually true. But even as a rumour is strangely echoes the relation between Don Giovanni and Leporello. Artistic rivalry with contesting claims on aesthetic hierarchy.

What is at the top of the aesthetic hierarchy does not rule the ground, could be the perspective and precept we can derive from the opera *Don Giovanni*. Because there are *also* contesting claims. Leporello's claims are not passive and patient, but active and devious. The dominated are no



**Box 2.** Portrait of Bryn Terfel (bass-baritone)—“The baritone is back” credit: Henry Bourne. Bryn Terfel on the return of opera: ‘After a pandemic people will want to thrive and be in a theatre’ (The Daily Telegraph, 20<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

longer content to work and toil, while passively and patiently waiting for their redemption. They advance through whichever available means: and in the case of *Leporello* and *da Ponte* these means are the Media. What a treasure it would be if someone found an exemplar of the opera's 1<sup>st</sup> catalogue.

So, I dedicate this aria—*not* to Don Juan—but to the *Leporellos* of our time. I for one am one. Leporello is not a morally superior being. S/he's a scoundrel, though different from Don Juan. It is personage who acts, in the verbatim of Jean Baudrillard's book-title, *à l'ombre de la majorité silencieuse* (Eng. [in the shadow of silent majorities](#)), though themselves never *quite* anonymous. It suffices with a pseudonym—like Søren Kierkegaard's: Victor Eremita, A and B/Judge William, A.F., William of Afham, Frater Taciturnus, Quidam, Johannes de Silentio, Constantin Constantius, The Young Man, Vigilius Haufniensis, Johannes Climacus, Anti-

Climacus, H.H., Inter et Inter, Procul, Hilarius Bookbinder, and last—but not the least—Niclaus Notabene (not counting a dozen of unpublished pen-names found among his notes).

In my leporello I only have a few: Abu Laffia, Olf Notsig, The Brothers L'Orange and Thorbjørn Geilanger. Kierkegaard had 18 published pseudonyms in his leporello. But as with the numbers of Don Giovanni's conquests, there is a legitimate question on the nature of what is being published. Lorenzo da Ponte is an artist's name. Lesbonico Pegasino is for simplicity and pleasure (so-called Arcadian name). While Emanuele Conegliano goes back to a Jewish family in Piemonte—at two days walking-distance from Venice. A family that converted to Christianity and became Catholic.

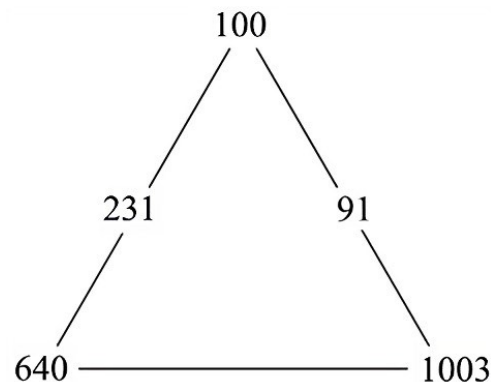
How shall I put it? At the rim—or frontier—between the private and the public there appears the realm of the *multiple*, at which we are expected *not* to be moral, but *civil*. In the absence of very clear rules of ethics, there are certain number of traffic-rules, for everyone to be able to enjoy liberty on this narrower/wider strip: it is a realm that, for instance, allows [compartmentalisation up to a point](#). Where people can alternate between *more than one* moral character. Like at Mozart's time—in Don Giovanni particularly—we do *not* accept that it veers to privilege the rich and famous.

More particularly, we do not accept the use of force, influence and money for a *few* to live out their liberties at the expense of the many. So, in the end, Don Giovanni/Dom Juan is not attacked for his license, but for his *ruthlessness* to others. From this vantage point the opera is indeed a modern piece. And, as already commented, the fact that it has its premiere in October 1787—less than two years before the French Revolution—is not wanton. What were they thinking from the opera lodges in Prague, when it was shown for the first time, given the civilian unrest in Europa/elsewhere?

For years the use of aliases/avatars has been common place, both on the Internet and among urban graffiti-artists on our streets, and in our backyards. Though not everyone has an alias/avatar—or, an encrypted signature—it is a mushrooming phenomenon that largely exceeds the numbers at Mozart's time. So, if we are *not all* Leporellos we likely must accept that *many* of us are. And if we include the rungs of mundane fame, the aspect of our living up to our names (rather than being ourselves, as it were) dramatically expands the ranks of Leporellos, in the shadow of civil society.

From this viewpoint opera has modelled something much larger than opera: a possibility that Daniel Snowman—in the book (2009) *The Gilded stage: social history of the opera*—indeed touches upon. Here, *opera* (which simply means *work*) appears as a *boiler* connected directly to the complex *flow* of cultural history; amplifying the growth, development and resident explanation of redacted lists, from names and people. Here opera, starting with the 17<sup>th</sup> century intermezzos, through Mozart's century, the [Gesamtkunstwerk](#) of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and later the [music theatre](#).

Leporello lives and acts in a twilight zone between illegitimate appropriation and public culture: between collecting and accounting. The stakes are high and the outcomes are open. Opera gives it to us. The archive manages it. The computer accelerates it. From this vantage point, opera could be pictured as a [Pandora's box](#). Which is a reason—perhaps—not to open the box and stay with what happens on stage. And say to those who of the catalogue aria as politically incorrect today, that if we are better *than* Don Giovanni, we are certainly *not* better than Leporello. But if so, what do we take away?



**Box 3**—Emilio Matricciani (Polytechnical School of Milano) asks [Did Lorenzo da Ponte play with numbers in Leporello's catalogue?](#) In *Le nozze de Figaro*/Figaro's wedding he did so quite obviously (Figaro's paces add  $5 + 10 + 20 + 30 + 36 + 43 = 144$ , or  $12 \times 12$ ).

What do we learn *directly* from bodies singing, the costumes they are wearing, the way they move and interact, the props, the scenography, the directorship and the compound musical performance? From this vantage point opera is not a representation of society, but *caesura* at the [thematic core](#): the stop, pause, or break where trauma sides with the permutability of options, and the chance to reconfigure of our priorities in life. From this vantage point, opera is a model of art-school that assigns—rather than assumes—*voice*. It could *also* be a model of the archive—without which opera would not exist—where the leporello is allowed to evolve in its own time and pace, and also to transmute.