One point of entry to Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* is to consider Beethoven’s sentiment, expressed late in life, that the sacred art of music “ought never to permit itself to be degraded to the position of being a foil for so scandalous a subject.” Beethoven’s indignation grew from his own religious view of the artist. “There can be no loftier mission than to come nearer than other men to the Divinity,” he wrote to the Archduke Rudolf in 1823, “and to disseminate the divine rays among mankind.” Despite the opera’s divinely punitive ending—with Don Giovanni sent to hell for his crimes and the other characters pledging to keep to the straight and narrow—there is much to offend in the opera. To appreciate Beethoven’s point, you needn’t go any further than Leporello’s Catalogue Aria. Here the servant proudly enumerates his master’s conquests: in Italy six hundred and forty, in Germany two hundred thirty-one, in France one hundred in France, and in Turkey ninety-one, “ma in Ispagna son già mille e tre!” He conquers country wenches, chambermaids, and city ladies, countesses, baronesses, marchionesses, and princesses: slender ones in summer, plumpish ones in winter, and older ones to round off the list. But “sua passion predominante è la giovin principiante,” Leporello sings: “His overriding passion is for virgins.” Here as elsewhere the librettist Lorenzo da Ponte skates on the far side of sexual innuendo to approach vulgarity. “Provided she wears a skirt, you know what he’s going to do!”

The way Giovanni speaks of those 2,065 women is at least as stunning as their number. “It’s all part of love,” he says. “If a man is faithful only to one, he is cruel to all the others. I, a man of boundless generosity, love every one of them.” Surely the view is either a cynical lie or a great delusion. Either way, it keeps him from looking back. But there is another possibility, which in fact explains his successes much more credibly than either deceit or self-deception. Namely, that what he says is true: that seduction is a misnomer, that his love is selfless, and that constancy to one would deprive all others. Søren Kierkegaard
takes this view in *Either/Or*: “I should rather not call him a deceiver. To be a seducer requires a certain amount of reflection and consciousness, and as soon as this is present, then it is proper to speak of cunning and intrigues and crafty plans. This consciousness is lacking in Don Giovanni. Therefore, he does not seduce. He desires, and this desire acts seductively.”

Whether the claim is preposterous or plausible—and penetrating Don Giovanni’s real motivations is not as simple as it first seems—Lorenzo da Ponte has hit upon the secret of all great lovers: sincerity. This is Don Giovanni’s tone—and, one might add, the tone of all successful imposters, con-men, holy martyrs, and flatterers. Da Ponte’s fellow Venetian, Giacomo Casanova, maintains the tone of sincerity for the length of his twelve-volume memoirs to explain his own conquests, which occur on average about once every thirty pages. Ingenuous and immediate, Casanova seems to tell us everything, including his setbacks and humiliations, his illnesses and debilities, each time he is impotent, and the shame he feels in sleeping with prostitutes. Throughout the work Casanova repeats a single theme: that he is neither a seducer nor a deceiver. He writes: “I venture to say that I was often virtuous in the act of vice. Seduction was never characteristic of me; for I have never seduced except unconsciously, being seduced myself.” The “professional seducer,” he adds near the end of his memoirs, “is an abominable creature,” a “true criminal,” and the “enemy of the object on which he has his designs.”

To early Protestants, sincerity meant transparency: their words matched their hearts. But professional liars also mastered sincerity to wear as a mask. To succeed you must be believed, and to be believed you must be sincere. With the thunderous opening chords of the overture, Giovanni’s damnation seems sure, and yet at numerous specific moments we cannot discern whether his sincerity is honest or a ruse. Nor can the other characters. The peasant-girl Zerlina is on the way to her own wedding when Don Giovanni takes her hand, tells her she is destined for higher things, and promises marriage. Only a timely intervention by Donna Elvira keeps Zerlina out of Leporello’s catalogue. For her part, Donna Elvira is already on the list and eager to declare to everyone she encounters just what a monster Don Giovanni is; nevertheless, late in the opera, she is still ready to believe that Don Giovanni truly loves her. Judging
Giovanni’s sincerity is altogether more urgent for Donna Anna. In the opening scene, a cloaked intruder forces his way into her room, either rapes her or tries unsuccessfully to rape her, and stabs her father as he rushes to her aid. It is of course Don Giovanni, though she does not know it at the time. When she encounters him only days later, he asks with affecting concern, “Who was the villain that dared to upset the calm of your life?”

Asking whether Giovanni’s sincerity is honest or a ruse is another way of asking if he genuinely believes what he says or if the sincere tone is used to hide a scheming interior that we never see. If he believes his words, then perhaps Kierkegaard is right and he is a sheer force of nature: unreflective, true to his desires, and at least in this one respect without censure. If he does not, then he is a master of deceit and da Ponte is in on the game. In either case, his sincerity is powerfully convincing. Part of the strange spell of Mozart’s Don Giovanni is how easy it is to disregard the fact that its principal character is a would-be rapist and killer. The libretto possesses a cavalier bluntness, and yet even its brutalities can seem strangely untroubling. “L’ha voluto,” Don Giovanni says to Leporello just after the Commandante’s death. “He asked for it,” is the way Leporello takes it, but the Italian might as easily mean, “She asked for it,” with reference to whatever has just happened in Donna Anna’s bedchamber. From start to finish, Don Giovanni’s actions are on full view, and still he seems more a likeable rogue than a criminal. Instead of condemning him we’re more likely amused or intrigued. Why is this? His sincerity may very well account for his successes within the drama, but it cannot fully explain our own fascination with his exploits. In my view, this effect lies with the music.

For every character in the opera, Mozart fashions a characteristic musical style. Social rank was the most obvious marker of identity in the eighteenth century, and owing to use and tradition particular musical styles came to be associated with particular ranks. Mozart made full use of such associations, writing opera buffa for the servant Leporello, opera seria for Donna Anna and Donna Elvira, a pastoral style for the peasant Zerlina, and a martial style for the Commandant. Don Giovanni is the one character without a characteristic style. This only makes sense. He is a chameleon who assumes the shades of his surroundings, slipping into buffa when he is with Leporello, a virtuoso
seria style with Elvira, and a folk-like simplicity with Zerlina. When Giovanni swaps his clothes with his servant the better to woo a luscious maid, Mozart offers its musical equivalent by hiding the orchestra behind a whispered pizzicato and giving the accompaniment to a simple mandolin.

Just as da Ponte never reveals what Don Giovanni is really thinking, Mozart keeps resolutely to the surface in his musical depictions. The music does not comment upon Giovanni’s actions, much less pass judgement or condemn. In fact, it backs him up at every turn. This is the musical version of sincerity: it gives us no reason to doubt the truth of Giovanni’s words. Mozart certainly had the ability to offer such comment had he wanted. A celebrated instance that he surely knew comes in Gluck’s Iphigénie en Tauride, when Orestes, terrorized by the Furies for having killed his mother, at last announces that peace has returned to his heart. But accompanying him in the orchestra is a churning, tumultuous rumble. “He is lying!” Gluck called out during a rehearsal in which the orchestra played the passage too softly. “He has killed his mother!” There are no such moments in Don Giovanni.

For this reason it is not enough to say that Mozart’s music abets the attempted seductions on the stage. It reaches beyond the wavering virtue of the drama’s characters to draw us into Giovanni’s tainted moral universe. The real seducer in Don Giovanni is Mozart, and the seduction is not a fiction. This is what Beethoven must have meant in deploring the work.

Consider the moment in the Second Act when Donna Elvira, who until now has spared no occasion to curse her lover as a traitor, appears at a window and, believing herself alone, sings that her heart still trembles for him. Her musical line—hesitant, broken, not properly a melody—conveys the nature of her thoughts. Don Giovanni is below, and he seizes his chance to beg forgiveness and declare that he also still loves her. This he does in the very melody she has sung. As the tonality shifts from A to E major, a related but brighter key, which quickens the attention without drawing attention. The musical line is the same, but in Giovanni’s hands its silences prompt Donna Elvira to reply. This is Giovanni’s gift: to read instantly the heart of his target and then speak as a kindred spirit. When he comes to the payoff line—“Discendi, o gioia bella,” “Come down, my joy!”—the key again modulates, this time to C major. The
melody that at last blossoms has grown from the musical material of Donna Elvira’s thoughts but now, spoken aloud as it were by Don Giovanni, it is altogether more sumptuous. Where the shift from A to E is subtle, that from E to C is bold. The new key of C, relatively remote to E, is unexpected though not jarring, and while still bright, it is considerably warmer. The modulation that prepares Giovanni’s line enacts his command. The strings descend stepwise. The effect is ravishing.

All of this happens while Don Giovanni and Leporello continue to talk out of Elvira’s hearing, which Mozart sets in a rapid buffa style. Mozart’s astonishing dramatic control is on full display here. Giovanni mirrors the others’ musical styles with such sincerity that we begin to believe him.

The opera contains many such instances of Mozart’s seductions. “ Là ci daram la mano,” the aria in which Giovanni promises to marry the peasant-girl Zerlina, narrates her surrender in a sequence that exercises strong musical persuasion.13 “There we shall join hands, there you will say yes,” he sings of his country house in a tune of childlike innocence. “Look, it is not far, come my sweet, let’s go.” The slow duple meter is soothing and gentle, and, just as with Donna Elvira, Giovanni’s simple stanza creates the musical expectation for a reply, which Zerlina readily gives: “I want to and yet I don’t; my heart has misgivings; I should, indeed, be happy, but he might be bluffing me.”

The music depicts Zerlina’s indecision in a series of faltering, downward steps in the next exchange. “Come,” Giovanni coos, “I will change your life.” She stammers, “But I pity Masetto . . . Then quick, I am no longer strong.”

Now Mozart begins to work on us. In the second stanza we return to the opening innocent tune, but Giovanni has to sing only two lines instead of four to get Zerlina to answer. This doubles the pace of the conversation and stirs a sense of anticipation. Mozart adds a nice dramatic touch by gracing Giovanni’s lines with a flute and grounding Zerlina’s with a bassoon. We feel them coming together even if we do not consciously register why. 14 And as the meter shifts to a pastoral 6/8, they do come together, singing in duet to the end.15

It is not fully evident just how well Giovanni has fashioned his voice to match Zerlina’s until her later penitent aria to Masetto, in which she claims to have been tricked. “Batti, batti” is cast in the same reassuring duple meter with
a similarly innocent tune, and at the end Zerlina moves to the same pastoral 6/8 for her conclusion, singing, “Let’s make up, my dear! We want to pass our days and nights in joy and gaiety!” There’s no reason to doubt her sentiments, judging by the words or the music, but from now on Masetto is suspicious—and so am I. “He didn’t even touch my fingertips!” Zerlina tells Masetto. Really? The entire duet was about joining hands. The problem with sincerity is that the more it convinces, the less you are willing to be convinced. This is why Giovanni’s pleasingly reassuring tone is so corrosive. To avoid being a dupe you have to become a cynic.

Mozart remains faithful to Giovanni’s unfailing sincerity throughout the opera, but in one extraordinary moment the composer allows the contradictions of this tone to show. It comes in the tour de force setting of three orchestras playing three dances in three different meters. When Donna Anna and Donna Elvira come disguised to Don Giovanni’s ball and briefly pair off to dance, an onstage orchestra plays a minuet, the most aristocratic dance of the eighteenth century. When Don Giovanni seizes Zerlina and dances her straight out of the room, a second onstage orchestra plays a contredanse, a form with roots in English country dance. Leporello grabs the peasant Masetto in clownish parody, and a third orchestra strikes up a sprightly ‘German’ dance.

Wonderment over Mozart’s technical feat and the sheer fun of trying to hear each orchestra may distract from the larger point. Until now, Don Giovanni has kept the different versions of himself distinct in the minds of his hearers. This is the instant when he is caught: Zerlina screams from offstage; Giovanni blames Leporello for the attempted assault; and Elvira, Anna, and Ottavio pull off their masks to sing, “Deceiver! Deceiver! . . . Soon the whole world will know of your hideous crimes and heartless cruelty.” Here the music remains true to his separate stories, and the clash reveals them to be fundamentally incompatible. And yet it is difficult to call the scene an unmasking. Yes, Zerlina has seen with horror what Giovanni’s promised “marriage” really means; and yes, Donna Anna positively identifies him as her father’s killer. But the deepest questions about Don Giovanni—whether he is an ingenuous lover or a practiced seducer—remain unanswered, and Mozart gives us no clues.

Despite his criticism of Don Giovanni, Beethoven was intrigued enough
by the opera to copy excerpts into his sketch books to learn its secrets. Nevertheless, he disapproved. The music seems crafted deliberately to entice and ensnare listeners, and on a fundamental level it is silent about Giovanni’s character. In the sacred cantatas of Bach, the music portrays all manner of wickedness vividly and compellingly, but it never tempts the listener to become a sinner. Mozart’s Don Giovanni takes a different approach. In a letter to his father, Mozart boasted: “I can imitate and assimilate all kinds and styles of composition.” Therein lay Mozart’s genius and, as Beethoven well knew, his unwholesome powers.

Endnotes

2. Quoted in ibid., p. 118.
3. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte, ed. Georg Schünemann and Kurt Soldan, Don Giovanni (New York: Dover Publications, 1974), I:v, pp. 62–75. The English translations are my own although I have also frequently referred to that of Avril Bardoni, which appears in the booklet accompanying the recording of Don Giovanni by the Drottningholm Court Theatre Orchestra and Chorus, Arnold Östman, L’Oiseau-Lyre, 425 943-2.
4. Ibid., II:i, pp. 233–5.
7. Ibid., II:iii.
8. Reverend John Tillotson, seventeenth-century Archbishop of Cambridge, defined sincerity as “constant plainness and honest openness of behaviour, free from all insidious devices, and little tricks, and fetches of craft and cunning: from all false appearances and deceitful disguises of ourselves in word or action.” Sincerity, Tillotson continued, described concord between word and thought, a state in which “our actions exactly agree to our inward purposes and intentions.” (Quoted in Leon Guilhamet, The Sincere Ideal: Studies on Sincerity in Eighteenth-Century English Literature [Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1974], 15-16.)
10. Ibid., I:iii, p. 34.
13. Ibid., I:ix, pp. 93-8.
14. The foregoing discussion of this aria owes much to the presentation by Professor Thomas Kelly in the Boston University Core Faculty Seminar, February 2, 2005.
17. Ibid., p. 147.

**ANALECTS OF THE CORE**

Franz Fanon: I do not come with timeless truths. My consciousness is not illuminated with ultimate radiances. Nevertheless, in complete composure, I think it would be good if certain things were said.

Voltaire: When man was placed in the Garden of Eden, he was out there ‘to dress it and to keep it’, to work, in fact; which proves that man was not born to an easy life.