

DON GIOVANNI: THE ABSOLUTE MAN AND THE PATIENCE OF GOD¹

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Something strange, and theologically significant, happens when you listen to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The peculiar phenomenon I have in mind has been reported by ordinary music lovers as well as by some of the most insightful critics ever to ponder the work of Mozart. What happens is this: Don Giovanni performs despicable acts of exploitation, seduction, and violence right before our eyes, and we enjoy every minute of it. It is not that we, the audience, are tricked into approving of the actions. They remain loathsome in themselves, and we are never invited to think of the Don as anything but a rogue. Nor is it that we merely anticipate with relish the final judgment which we know awaits the Don, with its reassertion of moral equilibrium: "This is the end which befalls evildoers, and in this life, scoundrels always receive their just deserts." Either of these possibilities might explain how watching the actions of a villain could please us, but neither of them is quite as singular as what occurs in *Don Giovanni*. The pleasure delivered by this opera is something else, something unique and central to this work so frequently hailed as "the perfect opera."

Beethoven, Kierkegaard, and a host of later writers have explored this question, but I would like to bring the theological insights of Karl Barth to bear on it. Although Barth's devotion to Mozart is well known, nowhere among his essays and remarks on Mozart's music did Barth address himself directly to the *Don Giovanni* phenomenon, which so exercised other thinkers. But surely, such a careful, lifelong student of Mozart must have some insight to offer on this interpretive crux. What follows in this essay is not an attempt to reconstruct Barth's own overall view of *Don Giovanni*, even though that task might just be possible, given the plentiful scattered references and asides to *Giovanni* themes and characters in his works. Instead, it is an interpretation of the opera using some Barthian categories, which seem directly relevant to it. There are two tracts of Barth's thought which are especially illuminating for this problem: his theological interpretation of Western culture in the eighteenth century in a preliminary chapter of his *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, and his account of divine patience in *Church Dogmatics* II/1. Before turning to those resources, though, let us state the aesthetic and theological problem posed by *Don Giovanni* more fully.

1. This paper is a greatly expanded version of the brief remarks made at an interdisciplinary panel discussion at Biola University on February 12, 2004, for the Biola Conservatory performance of *Don Giovanni* directed by Marlin Owen and Jeanne Robison. Those brief remarks were later published in the April 2004 issue of the Torrey Honors Institute's *Symposium*, and are available online at <http://www2.biola.edu/torrey/symposium/article/show/57>.

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One way to describe the phenomenon is to say that the audience is held in place by the music as they watch the action of the drama. There are two distinct forces at work, and the audience is pinched between them. Granted that *Don Giovanni* has a seamless coherence of word and music, without which any opera would fail as an artistic unity, there is nevertheless an uncanny dissociation at its heart, a dissociation between the story and the music. Mozart's music always transcends his librettos: *The Magic Flute* is a silly enough text; *Così fan Tutte*, a true *opera buffa*, is an extended comedy of errors and manners. In both cases, Mozart uses the staged events as excuses for deploying a music that soars miles above the text. But in *Don Giovanni*, the music asserts itself as a force that is over against the drama, commenting on it, dovetailing with it, and holding us before it. The whole time we are spectators of the events, the music enters our own space and seems to take the side of the spectators. What the music, from our side, says about the drama, on its side, is what is so haunting about *Don Giovanni*.

Beethoven noticed this. He seemed almost personally affronted by the way the duet "*La ci darem la mano*" ("Give me your little hand," or "You put your hand in mine") matched words of seduction with notes of ravishing sweetness. The duet occurs between Don Giovanni and the peasant girl Zerlina, who he is seducing on her wedding day. This is one of Giovanni's most reprehensible actions, carried out with forethought and deliberation. It is also, as the only seduction we see carried out on stage rather than reported after the fact, an important case study. What could be more monstrous than a decadent, promiscuous cavalier using his influence to convince a young bride from the lower classes to desert her groom on their wedding day for a quick sexual tryst? Watching Don Giovanni seduce Zerlina is like watching a bird of prey descend. He is the predator and Zerlina the victim, even when she ultimately consents with such gusto that she seems more eager than the Don himself to go with him and, as their agreed euphemism has it, "ease the pain of an innocent love." One critic notes of this "major reversal" that "in an attentive production, Don Giovanni should look a little taken aback at Zerlina's enthusiasm. Who's seducing whom?"² The question is intended as rhetorical, but the right answer remains that the privileged libertine is seducing the peasant, and his unleashing of her own reciprocating desire is simply proof of completed seduction.

Yet of all the pieces in the opera, this particular duet is irresistible, melting, satisfying, and piercingly sweet. What kind of artist uses his virtuosity to make a villain's two-thousandth seduction the occasion of a perfect song? Beethoven's solution was to rescue the music by abstracting it out of its place in the drama. This he did, shortly after Mozart's death, by composing a series of variations on

2. Stephen Brown, "What Mozart and Sid Vicious have in common," *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Times Online* for January 25, 2006. Available at <http://tls.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,25342-2009588,00.html>.

the duet, to be played by two oboes and an English horn.³ This certainly saves the beautiful music. But *in situ*, in *Don Giovanni*, the point is that the beautiful music, note for note and cadence for cadence, tracks the seduction and holds us before it. Mozart puts himself in the service of the seduction, casting his own music as the real star of *Don Giovanni*, and the reason the opera is a classic—in the role of seducer.

Kierkegaard is the critic who has written most forcefully about the seduction inherent in this musical phenomenon, and he, or the pseudonymous aesthete under whose name he wrote, drew a different conclusion from Beethoven. For the author of “The Immediate Erotic Stages, or The Musical-Erotic” in *Either/Or*,⁴ the opera is perfect as it stands (“*Don Giovanni* deserves the highest place among all the classic works”) precisely because the dramatic seductions and the musical seduction reinforce each other so thoroughly. In fact, Kierkegaard argues, this opera is a sort of revelation of the meaning of music itself, which is the presentation of the sensuous. All of the arts, all aesthetic undertakings, attempt to portray the sensuous, but all media are hobbled by their distinctive constraints: sculpture cannot capture its inwardness, painting must waste its efforts on particular contours, and poetry is most helpless of all because it must work through the mediation of words and language. Mediation is the problem, and the problem is solved by music itself, which alone can portray the sensuous with the required immediacy. In this way, music is not a medium at all, but the thing itself. And *Don Giovanni* is the realization of pure music because it places no medium between the audience and the sensuous, but inducts them directly into it. “In Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, we have the perfect unity of this idea and its corresponding form.”⁵

Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the opera is as ironically charged and idiosyncratically particular as one might expect of Kierkegaard or his aesthete pseudonym, and we need not pursue his ideas here.⁶ What is to be noted, however, is how he and Beethoven take opposite lines of interpretation regarding the coherence of the two levels of seduction: the libretto’s account of seduction and the music’s quality of seduction. Beethoven believes they are incongruously united, and in need of separation for the sake of purity and beauty of the music. Kierkegaard finds their meaning to be identical, with the perfection of the opera lying precisely in the ideal match between content and form.

3. Beethoven’s *Variations on “La ci darem la mano,”* are among his works which never had opus numbers assigned to them by his publishers, the *Werke ohne Opuszahl*, abbreviated WoO, # 28.

4. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

5. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, 57.

6. David Naugle has written a helpful and theologically aware paper on Kierkegaard’s interpretation of *Don Giovanni*, unpublished but available at http://www.dbu.edu/naugle/pdf/kierkegaard_don-giovanni.pdf.

Aside from these radical options of dividing or identifying the two forces, there is another way of addressing the interaction of the drama and the music in *Don Giovanni*. That way is to take into account the tension between the two forces and to treat them as if Mozart intended to develop them both, to put them in tension, and to bring them, perhaps playfully, in and out of the awareness of the audience. Furthermore, as long as we are gambling so much on the composer's intentions and banking on his competence as a *maestro* to accomplish them, we should not shrink from supposing, at least hypothetically, that the entire *Don Giovanni* phenomenon itself might be doing all of this in service of some descriptive task. The opera may have been given its particular qualities, incongruities and all, because it is successfully mirroring or expressing a reality that has those incongruities. At the risk of reducing everything prematurely to a too-easily labeled quantity, let us call it the world of Mozart. Even more specifically, we can identify it as the spirit which animated the age in which it was composed, or in more contemporary jargon, its culture.

This is where I believe Karl Barth can be an aid to listening. His far-ranging essay "Man in the Eighteenth Century" takes the era of Mozart with astonishing theological seriousness. Among the voluminous writings of Karl Barth, the book *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* stands out as a master work.⁷ Based mainly on his lectures in the early 1930s before his return to Switzerland, it is a large book which is nevertheless unfinished. Part I, on the background of nineteenth-century theology, begins with the very broad theme of "Man in the Eighteenth Century" (the chapter we will return to for an understanding of Mozart's work), and continues through chapters on major thinkers like Lessing, Kant, and Hegel. Barth intended to carry this section through a few more figures to a theological interpretation of Goethe, but was unable to carry out that plan. Likewise, Part II, which begins with Schleiermacher and takes up nineteen figures with Ritschl as the last in the series, was to have continued on to a conclusion in Ernst Troeltsch. Finishing with Troeltsch would have enabled Barth to drive home his argument about the pervasive anthropocentrism mounting throughout the entire period, and the way it ultimately eclipsed the ability to carry on with proper theology at all. However, perhaps the temptation to be didactic and to distort his subject by sacrificing it to "the scarlet thread of the right approach" would have been overpowering in the later chapters of the nineteenth century.⁸ Barth was very clear about avoiding this temptation, but his normally exemplary ability to recognize the "claim on our courtesy" which theologians of the past exert was, admittedly, beginning to wear thin by the time he reached the dismissive chapter on Albrecht Ritschl. As for the missing sections of Part I, their lack is lamentable. The background section was to have extended to

7. First published in German as *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1947), English. trans. by Brian Cozens and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1959).

8. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 6.

Goethe, and Barth gives all the signs that he might actually have been that long-sought creature, a theological interpreter of Goethe who is sufficient for the task. The intended symmetry is absent, and both halves are broken arches which never complete their trajectories, but the stonework along the way is all of the highest quality, and eminently usable.

Indeed, the chapter on “Man in the Eighteenth Century” is so much more than a typical history that it can only be compared to something like *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor’s perceptive account of the forms of consciousness, the moral ontologies, and the inescapable frameworks of reference that Western culture has inhabited.⁹ Compared to the bulk and doctrinal density of the *Church Dogmatics*, this chapter is a mere forty-six pages of cultural analysis. But if the project of the *Dogmatics* is to break through and invert, in the name of the God of the Bible, the titanism and anthropocentrism of late modernity, then this chapter is obviously the *Dogmatics* project in another guise.

In Barth’s view, the eighteenth century should not be thought of as the age of Enlightenment, even though that is obviously the period’s preferred self-designation. The age understood itself as the time when the clouds of ignorance were being dispersed by the bright beams of reason, and superstition and fear were giving way to “man’s optimistic effort to master life by means of his understanding.”¹⁰ Barth is not merely being cynical when he rejects this self-designation for the era: he does recognize that there is such a thing as the Enlightenment, and that numerous phenomena in various disciplines really are best described in those terms. The scientist or inventor of the eighteenth century certainly has grounds for pride. He is the astronomer who has accurately mapped the heavens, and the engineer who has constructed the steam engine and the mercury thermometer. He has learned to inoculate populations against smallpox, to heat buildings with steam, refine sugar from beets, and light streets with gaslight. He has laid one hand on the element of oxygen and with the other has grasped the force of electricity. He has fired rear-loading guns and flown in hot air balloons, all before 1790. But are we to understand the era in its entirety as being characterized by this movement? Do these breakthroughs in knowledge and mastery truly describe the state of human nature itself as it stands in the eighteenth century?

The man of the eighteenth century would then be the champion against prejudices and passions, against vice and hypocrisy, ignorance and superstition, intolerance, partiality and fanaticism; he would honour wisdom and virtue, reason and nature; he would seek his ‘pleasure’ by finding ‘happiness’ in the fulfillment of duty, and he would seem to

9. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

10. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 19.

see the supreme goal of the understanding (and therefore of man) as 'utility,' personal and general 'welfare,' and the supreme spiritual gift as the possession of 'taste' and 'wit,' and to see man also as a somewhat tepid, but always very assured and busy believer in God, freedom, and immortality.¹¹

Barth scans the culture of the eighteenth century and finds a host of things which simply cannot be reduced under the heading of Enlightenment: the romantic impulse, obviously, with its retrospective longing for "the Dark Ages." There is also the founding of the Freemasons in 1717, which is supposedly such an icon of the era, but takes the bizarre form of induction into a mystery religion. There is a general pursuit of magic and mystery on all sides. Along with all the scientists and men of reason, the eighteenth century has "its mystics and enthusiasts and pietists, its Rosicrucians and illuminati, its alchemists and quacks, its Swedenborg and Cagliostro and Casanova."¹² In the culture of theology, it is easy to see the characteristic rationalism on the one hand, but we would not be justified in ignoring the equally characteristic pietism on the other. If we believe there is such a thing as a spirit of the age, on what grounds could we rule so many phenomena as being out of step with it, rather than somehow instantiating it in a form we have not yet named? In view of all this, Barth asks, "Could we not with almost as much justice call it the century of mystery" as the age of Enlightenment?¹³

In order to find a common term that can comprehend all of this data without having to ignore half of it, Barth turns to political terminology and borrows the category of absolutism. In politics, the eighteenth century is well known as the age of Absolutism: the century began as the age of the Sun King Louis XIV, who liked to be painted as Apollo driving the solar chariot, and who (when questioned about the good of the state) quipped, "I am the state." The Prussian Frederick the Great dominates the middle of the century, a self-proclaimed "Enlightened Monarch," turning his nation into a perfect military machine and commanding his subjects to "reason as much as you like, about whatever you like, but obey." The century would end with the rise of the Absolute Emperor, Napoleon, emerging from the apotheosis of the Common Man in that Absolute Revolution, the French Revolution of 1789 (a date just over the horizon of *Don Giovanni*, which Mozart wrote in 1788).

Generalizing from politics to all things cultural, Barth describes absolutism this way:

'Absolutism' in general can obviously mean a system of life based upon the belief in the omnipotence of human powers. Man, who discovers

11. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 19.

12. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 21.

13. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 21.

his own power and ability, the potentiality dormant in his humanity, that is, his human being as such, and looks upon it as the final, the real and absolute, I mean as something 'detached,' self-justifying, with its own authority and power, which he can therefore set in motion in all directions and without any restraint this man is absolute man.¹⁴

The broader kind of absolutism can be traced in every cultural detail of the period. Salon culture with its furniture and table settings, haberdashery no less than women's fashions, the sciences, the visual arts, educational programs, architecture and horticulture: all evince "a striving to reduce everything to an absolute form."¹⁵ Eighteenth century man has a genuine love of nature, but nature at its best is nature humanized, clipped, planted, and "visibly idealized" such that streams become fountains, lakes become tidy ponds, woods become parks, and miscellaneous flora are ordered into a garden: "All these things reduced to harmony, which inevitably means geometry, more or less."¹⁶ One might expect that the discovery of how small our planet is in the system of stars would lead us to feel oppressed by a universe which, compared to the medieval system, is no longer on a human scale. But the general emotive response of the eighteenth century is the opposite: the very fact that human reason can discern, comprehend, and describe the vastness of the heliocentric system and the stellar reaches beyond it, proves the greatness of absolute man. Even the idea of a social club, Barth points out, is an eighteenth century innovation: the new idea that beyond the absolutely necessary institutions of human life, there could be free associations of equals who gather for an agreed purpose. A thousand kinds of clubs were formed, but there is one "single unifying intention, spirit and conviction underlying all this building of free associations of feeling and aim: the conviction that it was possible to create community. This is the exact parallel to the conviction that it is possible to educate."¹⁷ All of this is comprehended under the master idea of human nature considered as something absolute, complete in itself, and thus free to be set in motion to develop its own potential, stamping all that is not yet human nature.

Before turning back to *Don Giovanni*, we should look at one final cultural arena affected by the spirit of absolute man. That arena is music, which so characterizes the eighteenth century that we still call the music of this century, in particular the second half of the century, by the astonishing term "classical music." This music, still with us, is truly privileged information into the spirit of the century. Barth asks, "Is not this form of communication perhaps the most intimate we can hope for from a past age?"¹⁸ What Barth identifies as most characteristic of the age's music is the way all other possible demands of art were put at the service of the

14. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 22.

15. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 42.

16. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 41.

17. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 52.

18. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 55.

quest for technical mastery. An eighteenth century musician, whether composer or performer, would rather be called a *maestro* than a *genius*. Successful classical music is a skill, an ability to carry out difficult tasks according to strict rules. Even the moments of invention and discovery within this paradigm are not free improvisation as it is found in other media or other models of music, but a kind of invention of new rules as subsets and ordered re-combinations of the fundamental rules. Discovery, in classical music, is the discovery of previously unimagined and therefore delightfully surprising necessities. The musicians of this age carry out their artistic quest for mastery in “the sovereign attitude, which they had first of all towards the instrument producing the sounds and then to the abundance of possibilities inherent in these sounds.”¹⁹ They constantly sought an increase of possibilities, of more polyphony, more complex structure, almost as if they were intentionally increasing the challenge of bringing order out of the chaos they were making possible. For the spirit of the eighteenth century, “making music means subjecting the sound to the laws.”²⁰

Barth does not exempt music from the overall cultural presuppositions he discerns at work in the eighteenth century. It is the age of absolutism, and it produces absolute music. When, in line with the spirit of the century, human potential is set in motion to humanize, order, and reduce to geometry the world of sound, something emerges which even in our postmodern period and with acute intercultural sensitivity, we can hardly help calling universal. “Absolutism” and “absolute man” are thus not simply being used in this analysis as terms of reproach, but as actual descriptions of the cultural phenomena that produce sweet water as well as bitter. Barth’s evenhandedness is put to its most crucial test, though, with the question of how Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart fits the spirit of the eighteenth century. In a few evocative lines, Barth calls up Mozart as witness to a musical force higher than what he has described in his more general terms of mastery and law. This force “makes its appearance whenever the riddle of human existence appears over against full musical freedom. . . . When this happens the play of the sounds which have become entirely transformed into musical tone, which have been quite humanized, breaks like the sea against a rocky shore.”²¹ The shore is a limit, and a limit is precisely what has not been admitted in any of what has been said so far. In Barth’s analysis, the greatest composers of the century, including Bach, Handel, Gluck, and Haydn, play in the ocean of musical possibility without ever giving a sense that there is such a thing as a shore. Mozart’s exceptionalism lies in his awareness that the ocean of possibilities presented by absolute music was a real ocean, and real oceans only appear to be infinite. In fact, they have shores, boundaries, and limits. For humans, knowledge of this limit (of which death is the most universal symbol) is a source of sadness and horror. The absolute music of absolute man, “even and particularly when cutting his finest figure, stands in

19. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 57.

20. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 57.

21. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 59.

blissful unawareness.”²² According to Barth, only Mozart composed with awareness of this limit. By appealing to a barrier which Mozart knows about but does not step over, Barth is able to locate Mozart in the eighteenth century as a practitioner of absolute music, while also claiming him as an exception.

There is considerable benefit to understanding the eighteenth century not as merely the Enlightenment, nor as merely proto-romantic, but as the comprehensive age of absolutism. It is especially helpful in addressing the problem of *Don Giovanni*, to which we now turn. Without letting ourselves be limited to moralistic categories, we should nevertheless start by clarifying the particular immorality of the central character.

His immorality needs to be specified because Don Giovanni was, it is hardly controversial to remark, a very bad man. Mozart (and DaPonte, his librettist) provide us with a rich vocabulary for describing the Don's wickedness: he is a rascal and a seducer, practicing perfidy and fickleness, behaving as “a fine lunatic” dealing out chattering, flattery, and lies. He is called in turn a villain, a monster, a traitor, an ingrate, a soul of bronze, an audacious libertine, and an unworthy nobleman. It all sounds better in Italian: *Barbaro, birbo, bel matto, malvagio, empio, traditore*, etc. The Italian tongue apparently has such a wealth of invective that it can draw distinctions between a *scellerato* and a *briccone*, though in English both words come across as “scoundrel.” When he is dragged to hell, all the other singers join hands and gladly proclaim: “This is the end which befalls evildoers, and in this life scoundrels always receive their just deserts.” But in this opera, and especially within the matrix of Mozart's music, Don Giovanni is not just any bad man. His badness is of a particular sort.

It is true that Don Giovanni is in some ways a medieval man, or at least that the Don Juan myth is an archetype coughed up by the late medieval imagination like the Faustus legend. But if Don Giovanni has one foot in the late middle ages, his other foot is decisively striding out into the brave new world of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. He takes his stand in Mozart's own eighteenth century, in which the human race was self-consciously coming of age, assuming responsibility for itself, and demanding that the time had come for Man to receive his rightful inheritance from the heavenly powers. With Barth's categories in mind, it is easy to see the Don, from his first appearance, as the self-assured human subject in complete mastery of his own powers. In the opera, the age's titanism and absolutism are not dispersed among the various characters and situations. It is all concentrated in the personality of Don Giovanni, who is in every way the central character. His schemes propel the plot, his money funds the feasts, his singing drives the songs of the supporting cast. When he strides on stage, big things happen rapidly, but when he leaves the other characters sing long, reflective pieces.

22. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 59.

He astonishes the characters and the audience with his vitality, power, charisma, and reputation. He alone acts, and everyone else on stage reacts. He exerts such magnetic force that everyone can be evaluated on the basis of their relative inability to resist being drawn to him. To see his power as a seducer we do not even need to consider the painful cases of the three women toward whom he plays the predator. Since these instances of sexual predation are more likely to induce cringing in today's audiences, the point can be better made by studying the hapless Leporello. The opera opens with him complaining "Night and day I slave for one who does not appreciate it," runs through a series of comic betrayals in which Don Giovanni nearly gets him killed, and ends with Leporello announcing his intention to go and seek a better master—but only after the Don has shuffled off the mortal coil. Why does Leporello associate with the Don? Because Don Giovanni's power as seducer is that he is the Absolute Man, the titanic center of attention, the powerful personality that nobody can ignore. He is the Napoleon who moves the mighty wheels of the age, the headline-grabber who will not go away. Like Donna Elvira, we cannot decide if we hate to love him or love to hate him.

Absolute man is religious: he has been reborn (in the Renaissance) and illuminated (in the Enlightenment). He can do anything, and he does. One commentator has pointed out that "Don Giovanni paradoxically both denies and defies God."²³ An ordinary person must choose between sins: we can either deny the existence of God and therefore ignore him, or we can acknowledge his existence and shake our fist in accusation at him. But we cannot do both. One must believe in God in order to defy him, and choosing to rebel against him means losing the option of disbelieving in him. The greatness, the titanic enormity of Don Giovanni is that he does both. This is the pathos of the western mind dating from the eighteenth century: Living out its life on Christian soil, simultaneously denying its own parentage and hating it. Don Giovanni has a taste for infinity, for the infinite, for the unlimited repetition to infinity of his own life. This shows up in the fact that he has many girlfriends: an impossible number of them, thousands on thousands, multiple per night, without tiring, creeping around at 2 am looking for his next date. This is a comic way to portray Don Giovanni having it all, and I do not just mean all the women. I mean the flesh and the Spirit. He takes the flesh and multiplies it times infinity; that is his titanic modern way of grasping infinity. God-shaped hole in my heart? Nope. God is just infinity, and if I take sensual pleasure and multiply it times infinity, I have grasped God. I am the absolute man.

The opera *Don Giovanni* is a striking combination of serious opera and silly opera. It has within it a story of love and betrayal, of eternal damnation and ultimate consequences, and it also has buffoons, punch lines, jokes, and silliness. These things do not go together easily. They especially do not go together in the

23. Samuel Terrien, "Don Giovanni: Seducer or Blasphemer?" *Theology Today* 45, 3 (October 1988): 326-344.

context of the kinds of sins committed by Don Giovanni. Only the compositional magic of Mozart could possibly weave together tragic opera and comic opera so closely. Without that music, the opera would be impossible, because Don Giovanni is an impossible person living an impossible life. The entire work drives toward one question: Why won't Don Giovanni repent? In the end, Donna Elvira and the Commandant come to him playing respectively the roles of God's mercy and God's justice, both begging for the Don's repentance. Yet he does not repent. He sits at his feast cracking jokes, listening to Mozart's chamber music, inviting Leporello to whistle with a mouthful of chicken, calling wine and women "the substance and glory of humanity." Then he is dragged by demons to hell, which is not funny at all.

Other parts of the opera, however, are genuinely funny in spite of their subject matter. Take for example the Catalog Aria, in which Leporello lists (to Donna Elvira's dismay) the thousands of women seduced by Don Giovanni, listed according to nationality, body type, age, and other distinguishing characteristics. We are supposed to laugh at this nightmarish listing, and thanks to clever writing and charming music, we do. Mozart has worked an enchantment on us as we listen, using the magic power of his music to hold open a space where none should be. The orchestra and the voices play the trick on us, in scene after scene, of effortlessly diverting our attention from manifest wickedness to beauty and laughter.

All of this puts us right back at the opening problem, the same problem faced by Beethoven and Kierkegaard. Both of them decided that Mozart was making his own music complicit in the crime of seduction, enacting seduction itself by putting the audience under the spell of the Don. But there is another possibility, one which Barth's development of absolutism hints at, and which is developed more fully in Barth's treatment of God's perfections. The possibility is that Mozart's music does what it does because it is the sound of divine patience.

Barth's beautiful description of the patience of God is found in *Church Dogmatics* II/1.²⁴ There Barth says that "patience exists where space and time are given with a definite intention, where freedom is allowed in expectation of a response. God acts in this way. He makes this purposeful concession of space and time. He allows this freedom of expectancy."²⁵ The exercise of patience is not merely an action that God happens to take, but an action that reveals who he is:

We define God's patience as His will, deep-rooted in His essence and constituting His divine being and action, to allow to another—for the sake of His own grace and mercy and in the affirmation of His holiness and justice—space and time for the development of its own existence,

24. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, *The Doctrine of God*, G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, eds. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957). The section on patience runs from 406-439.

25. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 408.

thus conceding to this existence a reality side by side with His own, and fulfilling His will towards this other in such a way that He does not suspend and destroy it as this other but accompanies and sustains it and allows it to develop in freedom.²⁶

It is easy to see this allowance, this giving of space and time, as the theological basis of what Enlightenment thinkers like Kant would short-sightedly call “mankind’s emergence from self-imposed tutelage” and “the courage to use his own reason.” These human realities, especially “space and time for the development of its own existence,” can only exist because of the infinitely prior decision of God to be the patient God toward us. In his polyphonic treatment of the divine perfections, Barth has already described grace and mercy, but he shrewdly points out that even “gracious and merciful love” does not have to be, by any internal law, also patient love. Gracious love could, abstractly considered, be extremely impatient. The love of this God, however, the Trinity, the Father who sends the Son and the Spirit, is marked by the particular character of its origin. It is therefore patient love because it is from this patient God. Barth is also careful to distinguish it from any notions of weakness:

If the other New Testament term for this thought is *makrothumia*, the word ‘long-suffering’ is a bad translation if it suggests hesitation, weakness, indulgence, a stretching of the divine will. On the contrary, the term implies that God’s will is great and strong and relentless and victorious. It is this as a gracious, merciful will, and therefore it waits patiently, giving man every freedom and opportunity.²⁷

Finally, because God’s patience coheres with his wisdom, it cannot be thought of as anything but the best arrangement. Barth admits that divine patience, taken as an abstract concept, could easily be construed as “a needlessly cruel game,” “a cat-and-mouse-game” which prolonged suffering needlessly.²⁸ Viewed from the perspective of absolute man, God’s patience is bound to seem like that. This is especially true when the absolute man is Don Giovanni, so permanently impenitent in the face of repeated pleas from Donna Elvira and the Commandant in the final scene, pressing him from both sides with the promise of forgiveness and the threat of damnation. But if it is possible to view the situation from God’s side (and perhaps it is not strictly possible within the limits of the opera), God’s patience is not sheer openness, but purposeful openness. It is not “enough rope to hang yourself with,” but enough time to hear the voice that calls today, saying “harden not your heart.”

26. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 409-410.

27. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 410.

28. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 416.

The powerful songs, which continue to play even as the footsteps of the stone visitor draw relentlessly near, hold open a different kind of space than the space of sheer, formless possibility, or the space where seduction takes place. This incomparable music might depict the tension of the present moment in which we live, in which the divine longsuffering leaves us room for repentance. It may be that the voices and the instruments are an almighty power holding us in our seats as absolute man struts stupidly around on the stage, ignoring the inevitable judgment converging on him from the past and the future, from above and below. What if the music is the longsuffering of God crying out for absolute man to step out of center stage, to repent? What do we think the wise patience of God sounds like? Is it an ominous silence, or might it be a complex and beautiful music? Visually, we might picture God's patience as a blank canvas of sheer, untouched white. But the biblical sign for it is the rainbow. What is the aural analogue of this diffusion and distinction of the many colors? If God's longsuffering has a sound, and if the human ear could hear it, perhaps it would register on us like the irresistible music of Mozart. Barth seems to have thought so, and also believed that this was what set Mozart apart from the absolute music of his century:

Like his Don Giovanni, he heard the footfall of the visitor of stone.
But, also like Don Giovanni, he did not allow himself to be betrayed
into simply forgetting to go on playing in the stony visitor's presence.
He still fully belonged to the eighteenth century and was nevertheless
already one of the men of the time of transition.²⁹

29. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 59.



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