

Don Giovanni, or the Portrait of a Man Who Does Not Know Anxiety

On Kierkegaard's Reading of Mozart
in *Either/Or*

*Don Giovanni, ou le portrait
de celui qui ne connaît pas l'angoisse*

ドン・ジョバンニ、あるいは不安を知らぬ者の肖像（日本語原文）

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*EDITIO ANGLICA · E RECENSIONE QUINTA · AUGUSTUS MMXXVI —ENGLISH EDITION,
FROM THE FIFTH RECENSION · AUGUST 2026*

Abstract

In the essay on music in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard called Mozart's *Don Giovanni* a work of genius among works of genius. Why did the philosopher who would later write that anxiety is “the dizziness of freedom” love, to this degree, the story of a man who knows not the least particle of anxiety? Collating the Japanese translation from the Danish original with Hannay's and the Hongs' English versions, Hirsch's German edition and the French complete works, this essay takes that question as its entrance and considers, from a

psychiatrist's standpoint, what manner of being it is that has no spirit: Don Giovanni as the incarnation of the sensuousness that Christian spirituality itself cast out; a figure who cannot be expressed in language but only in music — against Molière's Dom Juan, a man of words; a desire that has no object and lives an eternal present, in strange symmetry with anxiety, which has no object and lives toward what is not yet. A closing endnote, drawing on Snell and Bremmer, sets the figure beside Homeric man before the unification of the soul. Against this phantom of immediacy, anxiety appears at the close not as an enemy to be driven out but as a gift — the ground of spirit that supports the self's being a self.

How to cite

Matsuishi, T. (2026). Don Giovanni, or the portrait of a man who does not know anxiety: On Kierkegaard's reading of Mozart in *Either/Or* (English edition). *Bulletin of YRIDEI*, 1, Article 3, pp. 1–8. <https://matsuishi-lab.org/bulletin/en/don-giovanni-en.html>

日本語原文：松石竹志「ドン・ジョバンニ、あるいは不安を知らぬ者の肖像——キルケゴール『あれか、これか』によるモーツァルト読解をめぐる」『横浜基礎研究所紀要』第1巻（2026）、論文3。 <https://matsuishi-lab.org/bulletin/don-giovanni.html>

[PDF \(A4, pp. 1–8\)](#)

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Introduction · Out of the Darkness of the Overture

For anyone who loves classical music there are two works that tower above the rest: Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* and Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*. What follows is an essay on the former. Given my trade — I am a psychiatrist — it would be better still if I could tie it to that; on the ground of pure music criticism I should not stand a chance.

Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* opens with a chord in D minor that cuts the air.

Heavy, imperious, without mercy. That first blow of the orchestra foretells the footsteps of the Commendatore, who will return later as a statue; the shadow of death lies in wait at the very opening of the overture. Don Giovanni himself, however, takes no notice of such omens. By the time the overture has ended he has already slipped into another woman’s bedroom.

And it is precisely there that the reason lies for Kierkegaard’s infatuation with him.

In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard develops a long essay on music under the title “The Immediate Erotic Stages, or the Musical-Erotic”^[1], and calls Mozart’s opera a work of genius among works of genius. The praise is out of all proportion. The same man who would later write, in *The*

Concept of Anxiety, that anxiety is the dizziness of freedom^[7] loved to this degree the story of a man who knows not the least particle of anxiety — why?

In approaching that question I have used, besides the Japanese translation made directly from the Danish^[1], Hannay’s English version^[2], the Hongs’ Princeton edition^[3], Hirsch’s German collected edition^[4], and the French collected edition^[5]. Kierkegaard’s style, set in the particular linguistic context of Danish, carries the risk that reliance on any single translation will lead the reading astray.

Taking that question as its entrance, this essay attempts — to put it grandly — to consider what manner of being it is that has no spirit.

◆ Chapter One · The “Devil” That Christianity Produced

Don Giovanni is a product of the Middle Ages: this is Kierkegaard’s paradoxical thesis.

In ancient Greece the sensuous was part of the harmony of the cosmos. Aphrodite was a god; Eros was the force that moved the universe. The sensuous was not “excluded” to somewhere outside; it was dissolved into the world as a matter of course^[Nota].

But the moment Christianity set “spirit” at the centre of the world as its highest principle, the situation changed. The higher spirit rose, the more violently, by way of reaction, the “principle of the flesh” — expelled from spirit altogether — was strengthened in the depths below. What is cast out does not disappear; it is purified and made mighty precisely because it has been cast out^{[1][8]}.

Don Giovanni falls into place once we take him for the incarnation of that discarded sensuousness. He is the shadow thrown by the spirituality of medieval Christianity^[1]. That is why he shines most brightly outside the monastery wall, in a society where the knight’s sword and the name of God pass back and forth in the same air.

Recall the opening of the opera. Night; Don Giovanni fleeing Donna Anna’s bedroom; the old Commendatore trying to stop him. Swords cross and the Commendatore falls. But Don Giovanni’s eyes are already somewhere else. There is not even the shadow of remorse. He sees nothing but the “now.”

Leporello laments: another scandal. But Don Giovanni does not so much as have the consciousness of having caused one. He simply moved as desire led him.

◆ Chapter Two · Why He Must Be Music

The core of Kierkegaard’s insight comes down to a single point: Don Giovanni cannot be expressed in language^{[1][8]}.

What is language? It is that which articulates time. “Yesterday,” “tomorrow,” “perhaps,” “back then” — the moment one uses words one hangs suspended between past and future. To speak of a thing in words is to view that thing at a distance, and that is already the beginning of reflection.

Don Giovanni has no such reflection. He is not a “speaking individual” but “the voice of sensuousness itself”^[1]. His essence exists nowhere but in the instant in which melody and rhythm set the air trembling.

Near the finale of Act I, listen to the champagne aria that Don Giovanni sings, “*Fin ch’han dal vino*” (While they are still warm with wine). At a speed that leaves no room to draw breath, the words run on, abandoning their meanings as they go. “Bring ten of them to tonight’s party — girls from the square, girls off the farm, anyone at all.” That melody is neither a plan nor a seduction; it is the musical eruption of desire itself.

The contrast is Donna Elvira. She is the woman Don Giovanni abandoned, and yet she goes on loving him and goes on accusing him. Her aria “*Ab, fuggi il traditor*” (Flee from the traitor) is built out of words. There is memory in it, and anger, and warning. To set oneself upon an axis of time, to look back at the past, to address another — this is the music of a reflecting spirit.

Elvira, then, has language, has reflection, and therefore has anxiety. Don Giovanni has none of the three.

Mozart’s genius made this difference audible. When Elvira speaks, Don Giovanni falls silent, or mocks, or cuts in from the side and takes the melody from her. As though refusing to be carried along by the logic of words, he moves always at the speed of music.

Molière’s play *Dom Juan* (1665) offers an instructive counter-example here. Molière’s Dom Juan seduces by eloquence, refutes faith, plays the hypocrite — he is through and through a man of words. In Kierkegaard’s framework, whoever has language has reflection already, and whoever has reflection has lost immediacy. It is for just this reason that Molière’s Dom Juan *can* be drawn as an embodiment of evil; and conversely, that Mozart’s Don Giovanni can appear as nothing but immediacy itself, and not as evil at all. Both take the Don Juan legend for their material; but the difference of medium — spoken play and music — issues directly in a difference in the ontological level of the figure.

◆ Chapter Three · A List of One Thousand and Three — Desire Has No Object

The “catalogue aria” is surely one of the best-known scenes in this opera, or in any opera whatever.

Leporello produces an enormous ledger and reads it out to the abandoned Donna Elvira. “My dear lady, this is the catalogue — the list of the women my master has loved. In Italy six hundred and forty; in Germany two hundred and thirty-one; a hundred in France; ninety-one in Turkey; but in Spain — one thousand and three” (*Madamina, il catalogo è questo*).

But here lies the paradox. Don Giovanni, who has “loved” so vast a number of women, in fact loves no one.

What he seeks is not the individual woman but the universal, “womanliness as such”^[1]. Fair or dark, thin or stout, great lady or farmer’s daughter — every one of those on the list is no more than a single note within a melody. The note dies away; the melody goes on. Desire does not fasten upon its object, but moves on and on to the next like a storm.

There is here a structure that stands in strange symmetry with “anxiety without an object.” If anxiety is dizziness before something that is not yet, Don Giovanni’s desire is indifference toward what has already gone by. If anxiety is a wound opened toward the future, his desire is a perfect circle closed upon the single point of the present.

The number one thousand and three is not a record of conquest but evidence that desire is by its essence repetition^[8]. The storm is not the same storm, and yet it goes on being a storm.

◆ Chapter Four · The Philosophy of the Serenade — One Who Lives Only the “Now”

The serenade in Act II, “*Deh, vieni alla finestra*” (Come to the window), is among the tenderest and most beautiful passages in the opera.

In the darkness of night Don Giovanni sings to a mandolin accompaniment. “Come to the window, my beloved. Let

me soothe your tears; if you will not come out to me, I shall go away somewhere else.” The voice is gentle, sincere; it sounds like a declaration of genuine love.

But beneath the window Donna Elvira is standing. He is wooing Elvira’s maid, and taking care that Elvira should not notice.

Is he lying, then?

Probably not. He is simply faithful to the fact that at this very moment he desires the woman on the other side of the window. The words he spoke to Elvira in the past, and the words he will speak tomorrow to some other woman, do not exist for the man of the “now.” His sincerity is in a certain sense pure — only, it is a sincerity with no thickness of time in it.

Anxiety, said Kierkegaard, is the wavering of spirit before a possibility that is not yet^[7]. For Don Giovanni the axis of the “not yet” does not exist at all. He lives an eternal present. This is not release from freedom; it is that no spirit exists in him large enough to possess freedom.

◆ Chapter Five · Zerlina’s Wavering — Seduction as a Force of Nature

The duet “*Là ci darem la mano*” (There we shall give each other our hands) is a scene of seduction, and yet the most beautiful in the history of opera. At the risk of being misunderstood I would say flatly that it is the music that makes people happiest.

To Zerlina, who is betrothed to Masetto, Don Giovanni sings: give me your hand, and let the two of us go away from here. Zerlina wavers: “I should like to, and I should not — I might be deceived” (*Vorrei e non vorrei*). But at the last the two voices melt together — “then let us go” (*Andiam*).

Why can she not resist?

Because Don Giovanni is not performing any skilful “persuasion.” He does not use logic. He piles up no

grounds. His existence itself, the bearing of his voice, the magnetic field of his desire, works upon her like a storm. There is no sense in saying to a storm, “your claim has no foundation.” A storm does not argue. A storm simply is.

Here Kierkegaard saw “the absolute power of immediacy” [1][8]. It is a power prior to reflection, prior to language, prior to demonstration. When Zerlina at last puts out her hand, she has not been persuaded; something deeper has moved.

That is why Mozart wrote this scene not as recitative but as an aria. The two melodies appear at first by turns, then overlap, and at the last become one — that musical union is the victory of an immediacy into which reason has no room to enter.

I am put in mind of a film I once saw of Karajan rehearsing *Don Giovanni* with Samuel Ramey in the title role — the recording and film that proved to be Karajan’s last. The rehearsal had gone smoothly until that point, and Karajan stopped him again and again: to stumble *here*, of all places. To express “the absolute power of immediacy” appears to be a difficult passage for the singer as well.

◆ Final Chapter · The Statue Comes — But He Does Not Repent

The finale gathers everything in this opera into a single point.

The statue of the Commendatore he killed appears at Don Giovanni’s supper. The floor shakes, flames rise, a chorus of low voices sounds. The statue grips Don Giovanni’s hand and presses him three times: repent; there is still time. Three times Don Giovanni refuses. “No! No!” And he is swallowed by the fires of hell.

Is this arrogance? Is it obstinacy?

In Kierkegaard’s eyes it is neither. Arrogance is to refuse while knowing. But Don Giovanni has, to begin with, no self with which to repent. To the final instant he lives nothing but the “now.”

To repent, one must remember a past act, collate it with one’s present self, and ask after the manner of one’s future self — that is, one must place oneself within time and take up a standpoint from which to look at oneself again. Reflection is required^[8]. And of that he has none.

So he does not repent. It is not a matter of strength of will but of the structure of his spirit.

Even at the instant the fires of hell swallowed him — he did not know anxiety.

◆ Afterword · Let Us Take Anxiety to Be a Gift

Richard Strauss’s tone poem *Don Juan* (1889), which takes the same Don Juan legend for its material, is based on Lenau’s unfinished poem and depicts the process by which the torrent of desire turns at length into weariness and disillusion. The trajectory from the radiant leap in E major at the opening to the exhausted vanishing of the close tells us in sound that Lenau’s Don Juan pursues an ideal woman and gathers disappointment upon disappointment — that is, that he already has reflection and is therefore capable of growing weary. It is a beautiful piece too, but a sad one. To speak of Karajan once more: I remember that he placed this *Don Juan* in the middle of the programme of what proved to be his last concerts in Japan. Whoever has reflection must grow weary. That Mozart’s Don Giovanni knows no weariness is because he lacks the thickness of spirit that reflection is. Strauss and Mozart take a protagonist of the same name for their material, and draw figures ontologically altogether different.

The music of Don Giovanni rides upon sounds thrusting up from hell, and still one is simply overwhelmed by the beauty of the melody running above them. Kierkegaard himself wrote that Mozart is the happiest of men, because he wrote *Don Giovanni*^[1]. That is praise, and it may at the same time have been envy.

But Kierkegaard asks, in the end: would you wish to be Don Giovanni?

He is beautiful. He is overwhelming. But he has no “self.” There is no ethical choice in him, no leap of spirit. He can never make his way out of the aesthetic stage. A storm does not decide where it is going. A storm merely blows.

Human beings have anxiety. It is painful, certainly. But it may also be taken as the proof of being a subject that chooses freely. When a possibility that is not yet comes into view, one feels dizziness. It was Kierkegaard who called that dizziness the dizziness of freedom^[7]. Don Giovanni, presumably, feels no dizziness; but that is not because he stands upon firm ground, rather — one might say — because he cannot perceive height at all.

If we let our thoughts play over this phantom of sensuousness without reflection, we may find ourselves able to take up our own anxiety once more — with somewhat altered eyes.

Anxiety is not an enemy to be driven out. It is the ground of spirit that supports, from far below, the self’s being a self.

And yet this ground — the unified self — is not something humanity possessed from the beginning. Classical philology teaches that Homeric man had as yet no unified “mind,” but lived a plurality of souls, moving as *thymos* moved him, and that the unified soul is a historical formation which came into being only at the end of the fifth century BC ^[Nota]. If that is so, then anxiety is a gift because it is the gift that comes with the posture of spirit humanity has only lately acquired — the unified self. But that posture need not always be held taut. For as long as we give ourselves up to *Don Giovanni*, we let reflection go for a while and return, for a moment, to that ancient undifferentiated soul — the soul that moves as *thymos* moves it and lives as melody itself. It is no bad thing to go back there now and then. When the curtain falls we can take up the gift of anxiety again — with a hand grown a little lighter.

(F i n i s)

NOTA 卷末注

Appended to the sentence in Chapter One, “In ancient Greece the sensuous was part of the

harmony of the cosmos,” and to the closing paragraph of the Afterword.

The “ancient Greece” that Kierkegaard has in view here is the classical picture, subsequent to the establishment of the concept of a unified soul. Classical philology indicates that Homeric man had as yet no unified “mind”: feeling (*thymos*), intellect (*noos*), and impulse (*menos*) stood side by side as mutually independent “organs”^[9]. Bremmer formulated this as a plurality of souls — a free soul and body souls — and argued that the unified soul is a historical formation of the end of the fifth century BC, against a background of spreading literacy and the rise of individualism^[10].

Looking back at the present essay from that standpoint, the figure of Don Giovanni — without reflection, living only the immediacy of the moment — resonates strangely, beyond Kierkegaard’s intention, with Homeric man before the establishment of a unified interiority. His contrast with Elvira, who places herself within time by means of language and memory, is as though the historical process by which the soul was unified in Greece — from plural immediacy to reflecting interiority — were being rehearsed upon a single stage. If anxiety dwells only in a reflecting spirit, then the very possibility of anxiety presupposes this historical coming-into-being.

The conceptual-historical development of this point — the coincidence in time between the medicalization of fear and the establishment of the unified soul — is left to §1-0 of the author’s “A Conceptual History of Anxiety” (*Bulletin* IX).

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Note on quotations. English renderings of Kierkegaard follow Hong and Hong, *Either/Or* (Kierkegaard’s Writings III–IV), and Thomte, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Kierkegaard’s Writings VIII). Phrases set in quotation marks in the Japanese original are in most cases the author’s

condensations rather than verbatim citations, and have been rendered accordingly.

Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, in various languages

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