



## THE DON GIOVANNI SYNDROME KRYSTIAN LADA

---

Krystian Lada is a Polish stage director, librettist, and opera leader currently based in Belgium and working internationally in the fields of opera, music theater, and classical music. He is the Founder and Artistic Director of The Airport Society, an international cooperative of opera professionals and social activists. Lada studied Dramaturgy and Comparative Literature at the University of Amsterdam. In his artistic practice, Lada explores alternative forms of collaboration among artists, policy-makers, and citizens. His projects are informed by the feminist and post-colonial perspective on the classical repertoire and aim at developing new intersectional platforms for exchange among diverse social and cultural groups. Lada often involves local communities in his creative process, as well as on his production stages. He believes that opera – as an art form and as an institution – can be a vital engine for the inclusive evolution of society and can give a voice to underrepresented groups. He was nominated for the prestigious Polish award, Paszporty Polityki 2019 and 2020, in the classical music category for “his faith in the vitality of the operatic form and the courage to address the burning issues of today’s world in his stagings”. – Address: Oudeleeuwenrui 19 D2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium.

E-mail: [krystian@theairportsociety.com](mailto:krystian@theairportsociety.com).

As the first recipient of the Mortier Next Generation Award for exceptional talent in the fields of opera and music theater, I was welcomed to spend two months at the Wissenschaftskolleg. During this time, I invited some of my artistic collaborators – set and costume designers, architects, light artists, musicians, conductors, and dramaturges – to revisit several repertoire operas in the context of contemporary social and political debate.

The interdisciplinary nature of our collaboration allows us not only to see our respective fields of expertise and craftsmanship through other eyes, but also to challenge each other in order to investigate and transform our respective working methodologies and tools in this dialogue of differences. This process takes us to the DNA of operatic form in which all the involved disciplines intersect and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Very soon, I realized that this model reflects well the ambition that is at the core of Wiko's activities – an interdisciplinary debate as a strategy to accelerate the development of new ideas and new research strategies. What unites my artistic collaborators and me is the immanent desire of momentary codependence with the others and the prerequisite expectation that we are all willing to enter this interplay with other disciplines. Even though the traditional apparatus of opera production requires us to claim the sole authorship of but one of the aspects of final production (stage direction, set design, etc.), in fact our process is defined by a more fluid approach to the ownership of creative ideas. In this model, the dynamics of ecosystem and collective intelligence offer a pragmatic alternative to the monocentric concept of the individual artists-demiurges mastering their craftsmanship divorced from the collaborative context. The effect of one of the collaborative processes that took place in Grunewald between September and October 2019 is a concept of a new scenic proposal for Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, developed in collaboration with the Latvian architect Didzis Jaunzems and the Polish-Japanese designer Natalia Kitamikado.

When a lavish dinner party in the Commendatore's mansion is interrupted by the violent death of the host, the visitors and the servants find themselves mysteriously incapable of leaving the dining room. As time passes and they run out of food and water, panic and madness set in. The unsolved death of the autocratic paternal figure – the hitherto moral reference point – activates an as yet unknown force in the protagonists. Soon everyone in the room becomes infected with the *Don Giovanni syndrome* – an unlimited desire that magnifies their individual obsessions and phobias. As the masks fall off, the conditions inside the enclosure deteriorate into an apocalypse. The suddenly unbound forces of their desires consume the protagonists and compel them to abnormal mental states and compulsive behavior. Where the necessity of self-preservation overrides prudence, the true human condition unbinds: Mozart's *Don Giovanni* as a surreal thriller of the modern human condition.

In our concept, we depart from Kierkegaard's interpretation of Giovanni: not as an individual embodiment of a libertine or a punished rake, but as a *principle* – an allegory of omnipresent desire that intoxicates the other characters. We invite the audience to focus

on the dynamics among the six other protagonists on stage. They are torn between the mores of the old regime (hitherto imposed from outside) and the sudden awaking of libertinage *within* them – the main dramatic conflict of *Don Giovanni* as we read it. Therefore, the vocal part of Giovanni is shared among the soloists who portray the roles of Ottavio, Leporello, and Masetto. Don Giovanni doesn't appear as an individual protagonist – he is embodied by the music and in the behavior of the community on stage. We are aware that this strategy requires a bespoke casting for those parts and some musical adjustments in ensembles. To heighten the intimacy of spectatorship, all chorus parts are sung by the soloists.

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* lives only in his presence. His existence is a series of immediate Nows – not a story, but a catalogue. His opposition is the principle embodied by the Commendatore (and the Statue) – that of submission to the authority of linear time. The structure of Da Ponte's libretto is loose and episodic. The end of the old regime (Commendatore's death) marks the birth of a new subjectivity. Subjectivity bears freedom – freedom opens the space for ambivalence of experience and perception in its turn. The pre-French Revolution ideals are reflected in *Don Giovanni*. Departing from these premises, we construct the dramaturgy of our concept not around the causality of the events (linear time), but as a multitude of alternatives that coexist in the same symbolical time and space (subjective time). This effect is achieved by the visual repetition of stage actions and through the medium of a video screen above the stage. On the prerecorded video projections (taped with the soloists in the original set), the actions on stage receive their contradictory interpretations or descriptions from the subjective points of view of each of the protagonists (the Rashomon effect). This incongruence reveals the individual vulnerability of the characters. It allows us as well to contest and question the often misogynist perspective depicted in the libretto.

The production is to be performed in two acts, with a break between Act I and II. The hyperrealistic aesthetic of the set in the first act (dining room) morphs into an allegorical image of a claustrophobic atmosphere (cage) in the second. The symbol of societal mores – a dining room – is gradually consumed and burned by the speed of insatiate consumption that the protagonists cannot control. In the course of action, the costumes that initially define the social rank of the characters become the symbols of their long-suppressed phobias. The decay of the civilized elite leads to the triumph of the natural instincts and the prelapsarian state of animal. The acting style follows this axis – from the hyperrealistic to the allegorical.