

# Beethoven's *Fidelio*

Essay by Carol Crocca

Libretto by Joseph Sonnleithner and George Friedrich Treitschke (final version), originally based on one by N. Bouilly, in turn based on an actual event during the French Terror.

Beethoven's *Fidelio*, which had its first truly successful performance in 1814, appeared at a time when German opera was still defined by the 'singspiel': A musico-dramatic work with a German text .... in which spoken dialogue alternates with song, and sometimes with ensembles, choruses, or more extended musical pieces (Harvard Dictionary of Music). Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1791), much admired by Beethoven, is considered the culmination of the genre.

*Fidelio* is a transitional work, which preceded the advent of true German romanticism and the development of a German national opera in the 19th century. Although the first part of the first act portrays in singspiel style the ordinary domestic life of the family with which Leonore resides, disguised as a man, the opera soon moves far beyond singspiel in its dark and dramatic course.

As to its story, *Fidelio* follows the pattern of the French 'rescue opera,' in which the protagonist, threatened by dire circumstances, is rescued by an act of great personal courage and heroism. Beethoven, who considered writing an opera for many years, was much impressed with these French works, and especially those by Luigi Cherubini (1760-1842), whose influence on Beethoven's musical style is judged significant.

The opera had a tortured compositional history and was originally called *Leonore*. The first version premiered in 1805 and was not well-received. There were at least three versions, for which four overtures were written, some of them called "Leonore"; these overtures are not numbered in order of their composition (the third confusingly labelled No. 1), but the last, written for the final revision in 1814, is now the accepted one and is called, fortunately, the "Fidelio Overture."

Although Beethoven liked opera and was familiar with both the works and their composers, he had limited experience in writing for the stage – two ballets and some incidental music for plays. The initial versions of *Fidelio*, despite much beautiful music, reflected this. For the 1814 revision, the entire libretto was remodeled, with special attention to the final scene; repetitions were removed from the score, the key structure was altered, the orchestration simplified. David Cairns summed it up by saying that these changes reflected “the more flexible and dramatic conception of opera that Beethoven has acquired by the time he revised his score.” (Holden, p.44). It is the inspiring story of a genius in one genre struggling to master another and eventually succeeding brilliantly.



Thus, we have a masterpiece. Aside from Weber’s *Der Freischutz* (1821), considered the beginning of German Romanticism, and sometimes revived partly on historical grounds, it is the only major German opera between Mozart and Wagner still in the international repertory.

Beethoven was a famously irascible man, and Cairns has cited the possible circumstances of his life during the time he was writing the opera which contributed to its effectiveness:

Composition coincided with his abortive love affair with Josephine von Brunswick, and there is little doubt that his longing for a woman who would commit herself unreservedly to him gave added intensity to his portrait of Leonore, just as his self-identification with the lonely, persecuted Florestan – immured in the darkness of his cell, as Beethoven felt himself imprisoned in his growing deafness – contributed to the extraordinary force and vividness of the dungeon scene.

*Cairns, in Holden, p 43*

## Highlights

### Act I.

- The "canon" quartet, "Mir ist so wunderbar" ("It is wonderful to me"), Leonore, Rocco, Marzeline and Jacqunto.
- Leonore's aria at the prison, "Abscheulicher!" ("Abominable man!"), in which she reaffirms her faith in the power of love.
- The Prisoners' Chorus, "O welche Luft!" ("O what air!"), a celebration of freedom.

### Act II.

- Florestan's aria, "Gott! Welch Dunkel hier!" ("God! How dark it is here!").
- Florestan's aria, "In des Lebens Fruhlingstagen" (In the spring of life"), on seeing an angel (Leonore).
- Leonore and Florestan, duet, "O namenlose Freude!" (O joy beyond expression!), in gratitude for their deliverance.

Beethoven was an idealist. *Fidelio* plumbs the depths of human experience and love and freedom triumph. Again, as David Cairns puts it:

The grief and passion and heroism of the drama, the sense of feelings stretched almost to the breaking point, the central concept of human suffering in the context of divine providence, achieved their desired sound in 1814.

*Cairns, in Holden, p. 44*

## Reference

Cairns, David, in Holden, Amanda, Editor, *The New Penguin Opera Guide*, Penguin Books, London, New York, et al., 2001



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