Beethoven's *Fidelio* distorted beyond recognition at 2015 Salzburg Festival

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The Salzburg Festival, established in 1920 in the Austrian city that was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's birthplace, is one of the best known European summer music events. Each year the new productions of classic operas are highly anticipated.

Recently, many of these restagings have provoked controversy. Over the past several decades, the European opera scene has been increasingly characterized by an aesthetic approach that goes by the German term *Regietheater* ("director's theater"). New productions of works by Mozart, Giuseppe Verdi and other classics of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are regularly reconceived from every point of view except the musical. The setting is changed, the time is often updated by centuries and even plot elements are modified on occasion.

This idea of breaking apart what was originally conceived as a unity of text and music does not generally produce positive results. Even in terms of the problematic history of *Regietheater*, however, it must be said that this past summer's Salzburg production of Ludwig van Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, was a travesty and the passionate boos at the premiere were deserved.

Fidelio is animated by the ideals of the Enlightenment. It was composed in the midst of the upheavals and the upsurge unleashed by the French Revolution. It stands alongside Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, with its world-famous choral finale, as a moving musical expression of "liberty, equality, fraternity."

Director Claus Guth and the others responsible for the latest Salzburg production are not interested in this theme. Guth has imposed an entirely different conception. As we shall explain in more detail below, the director turns away from the realities and struggles that engaged Beethoven, substituting a purely psychological and neo-Freudian conception. The result is an oddly schizophrenic production at best, with the glorious music and theme of *Fidelio* undermined if not contradicted by a set and a directorial artistic idea that belong to a different opera.

Some further background is necessary to make the issues clearer, especially for those relatively unfamiliar with the operatic form, music of the nineteenth century and Beethoven's musical legacy in particular.

Beethoven (born in 1770) first composed *Fidelio* over an 18-month period in 1804-1805. Still a relatively young man, he had already been recognized as a worthy successor of Joseph Haydn and Mozart, and was entering a period of even greater creativity, one that would shape the music of the new century and beyond.

His *Fidelio* dates from this "middle period," a term that has sometimes been interpreted too rigidly, but still sheds light on the composer's evolution. In the years following 1803, as he fought to come to terms with his growing deafness, Beethoven sought new means of expression that corresponded to his own battle to overcome the crisis that threatened everything that was most important to him.

This crisis, however, was not simply a personal one. The composer struggled to create despite his deafness because he had something to say about the times in which he lived. He produced masterpieces such as the Eroica Symphony (Symphony No. 3), works that came to define his role as a bridge between the Classical and Romantic periods and as a towering pioneer of Romanticism.

In the compositions of this middle period, Beethoven transcended the Classicism of such figures as Haydn and Mozart. He built on and developed their achievements—such as the sonata form with its contrasting themes. The musical "inventions" of recent decades—especially the string quartet and symphony—were now infused with a new content, with stormy expressions of turmoil and suffering that had not usually been associated with the Classical period. The new meaning necessitated other changes, including the growth of the orchestra and also the lengthening of the compositions themselves.

The emergence of musical Romanticism—associated not only with the name of Beethoven but also with those of Franz Schubert, Felix Mendelssohn, Frédéric Chopin, Robert Schumann and others—closely tracks the six decades of revolution and counterrevolution beginning in France in 1789 and ending with the Europe-wide revolutions of 1848. Whatever the specific outlooks of the composers, this period of upheaval left its mark on their music, as it also did in art and literature. In the case of Beethoven, the concern with social, political and philosophical questions was especially strong.

The composer's famous denunciation of Napoleon and his tearing up of the dedication of his Eroica Symphony to the newly crowned French emperor in 1804 reflected anger at the betrayals of Enlightenment ideals, but not an abandonment of them on the composer's part. According to his secretary, Beethoven tore up the symphony's title-page, exclaiming about Napoleon's decision to declare himself emperor, "Now, too, he will tread under foot all the rights of Man, indulge only his ambition; now he will think himself superior to all men, become a tyrant!"

In Beethoven's numerous attempts to find a subject for an opera, it is therefore not surprising that he focused on a French libretto entitled, "Leonore, ou L'amour conjugal."

The tale was suited to that of a "rescue opera," of a kind that was gaining popularity at this time, and whose theme was radical-political. A faithful wife disguises herself as a man in *Fidelio* to obtain access to a prison where her husband faces execution on the orders of a tyrant. She frees him with moments to spare, and the opera ends in a paean to justice and liberty that calls to mind the famous Ode to Joy in the Symphony No. 9. As Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon puts it, the opera "was an ideal vehicle for the expression of Beethoven's Enlightenment beliefs."

The opera, first called *Leonore*, was premiered in 1805, but then reworked extensively. An 1806 production was temporarily halted by the censor. The final version, the one that is heard today, did not receive its triumphant premiere until 1814, when it was renamed *Fidelio*, after the name chosen by Leonore as she attempts to free her husband, Florestan. The 17-year-old Schubert was reportedly in attendance.

Beethoven's opera has come in for its share of criticism in the last two centuries. This has centered on *Fidelio* 's libretto, not its glorious music.

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Its melodramatic quality has been noted, a feature connected to the fact that its characters remain relatively static over the course of the opera. Such stock characters are fairly typical of the period.

Beethoven once remarked on the greater difficulty he experienced in writing for the human voice, as opposed to symphonic composition. It is true that few composers, with the exception of Mozart (and, much later, Richard Strauss), excelled equally in both opera and orchestral works. *Fidelio* has been called a "symphonic" opera.

The opera is written in the *singspiel* style of the period, in which arias and ensembles are separated by spoken dialogue. *Singspiel*, as in Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and *The Magic Flute*, was usually associated with comic opera, and it was difficult to integrate it fully with the tragic story of Leonore and Florestan.

These weaknesses, although not to be dismissed, amount to little when weighed against the musical accomplishment of Beethoven in this opera. He may not have had the dramatic talent of Mozart or Verdi, but his inspired music makes the story come alive, and convinces the listener of the importance of the characters and their struggle.

Furthermore, this is not just a matter of the primacy of music over words, a characteristic of the operatic form. The primacy of music permits us to sometimes overlook inferior libretti. In the case of *Fidelio*, however, the libretto—despite its weaknesses—cannot be overlooked, but rather finds powerful expression through the music.

There are many examples of this. In Act I, for instance, Leonore's aria in two sections, beginning, "Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin?" ("You monster! What are you up to?"), vividly depicts her combination of outrage, fear and determination as she observes the nobleman and prison governor Pizarro plotting to execute her husband. This expressive music embodies Beethoven's feeling for tragedy and struggle.

This is followed by the magnificent chorus of prisoners, as some of them are allowed out in the open air, "O welche Lust!" ("O, what a joy!"), and, as they soon after return to their cells, "Leb wohl, du warmes Sonnenlicht" ("Adieu, warm sunshine"). The prisoners' chorus calls to mind the equally renowned Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves, "Va, pensiero," from Verdi's *Nabucco*, composed some four decades later. Both communicate pathos, steadfastness and courage in the face of oppression.

Florestan makes his first appearance in the opening of Act II, in a lengthy two-part aria giving voice to his own feeling of despair and resignation, but followed by a vision of rescue by his wife. Also remarkable is the trio that follows, as the kindly jailer Rocco allows Leonore, who is successfully masquerading as Fidelio, to give some bread and water to the desperate Florestan, "Euch werde Lohn in bessern Weltern" ("You shall be rewarded in better worlds").

The finale finds Leonore revealing her identity, and pulling a gun and threatening to shoot the executioner. Florestan and Leonore sing a love duet and this is followed by a chorus of prisoners and townspeople, who hail the outcome and then sing the praises of Leonore.

Beethoven's *Fidelio* stands out as a classic expression of Enlightenment ideals in musical form. It has been performed some 230 times at New York's Metropolitan Opera (although it has unaccountably been missing from the repertory since 2006). The opera has also been mounted on countless occasions around the world. A DVD of a 1978 production at the Vienna State Opera under conductor Leonard Bernstein can be viewed on YouTube.

A comparison of the 1978 production with the latest one at Salzburg is indeed revealing, and the 2015 production is also available on YouTube. A review of the Salzburg effort in the *New York Review of Books* quotes from an interview with Guth and set designer Christian Schmidt. The *NYRB* explains that they see *Fidelio* as a "psychological drama," or, in Guth's own words, "a mosaic of solitudes in which everyone is a prisoner of their very own reaction structure." Schmidt claims his set design, consisting of little more than a giant black rectangle, a parquet floor and white wooden paneling, is partly motivated by "Freud's idea of the 'salon of the unconscious.' "

Thus, the story of an actual fight for liberation against tyranny is turned into its opposite, the hopeless struggle within an internal prison. Apparently to depict a mood of despair and incoherence, the director has replaced all the dialogue explaining the action with recorded sounds of heavy breathing and moaning. And he has fleshed out his neo-Freudian conception by adding *doppelgängers*, ghostly doubles shadowing both Leonore and Pizarro, for reasons that are far from clear.

The musical direction in Salzburg, under well-known conductor Franz Welser-Möst, is excellent, as is the cast, headed by Jonas Kauffman as Florestan and Adrianne Pieczonka as Leonore. In fact, the *NYRB* quotes Welser-Möst as saying that "Beethoven is not concerned with penetrating the minds of his characters," but is rather driven by the universal ideal of freedom and equality.

This conception clearly animated Bernstein in Vienna, as he brings out the passion in the Act I finale, with the individual voices rising thrillingly above the chorus. The Act II finale provides a dramatic conclusion, as the local people welcome the ragged prisoners, and Leonore and Florestan joyously embrace.

In the latest Salzburg production, in contrast, there is no passion and little acting. The chorus virtually disappears in the closing scene. This does not simply serve to distract attention from Beethoven's theme, but contradicts it egregiously. This is shown in the most jarring way in the finale, as Florestan, instead of joining in the celebration of his liberation, collapses and dies, shattered and destroyed by a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder.

This is certainly not the first time that a "non-political" interpretation of *Fidelio* has been staged, but it is surely among the most misguided. In the period after the Second World War and the Holocaust, some European conductors and operatic directors shied away from productions that emphasized socially oriented themes.

The tone was set in part by the Frankfurt School of ex-Marxists. In the musical arena, Theodor Adorno, a classically trained composer and also a philosopher and part of this loosely affiliated group of intellectuals, played the leading role. Adorno's famous injunction that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" was used to repudiate the Enlightenment as an ignominious failure and the ultimate source of the savagery of the twentieth century. Listening to Guth's comments, one can be reasonably certain he has read his Adorno.

The misreading and distortion of *Fidelio*, and of other operas as well, must reflect more than individual prejudices. A broader ideological reaction is involved, a consequence of the bitter experiences of the last century, which have engendered skepticism and an appalling ignorance of history, while "convincing" wide layers of artists and intellectuals that a production of an opera like *Fidelio* revealing sympathy for its original concerns can only be trite and hackneyed. One can only add that if they truly think *Fidelio* is out of fashion, they should find operas that express their own pessimistic and self-absorbed worldview, rather than mutilating the classics of the past.

This is part of the crisis of contemporary music. The solution of course is not simply to "stick with the classics" and continue to perform them, as much out of inertia as anything else, in what is perceived to be a traditional manner. There is nothing wrong in principle, for example, with attempting to "update" opera. There must be artistic means of bringing greater urgency and immediacy to contemporary performances.

However, genuine experimentation (which may include a deeper investigation of the artist's initial intentions) needs to be distinguished from charlatanry, mere tampering and actual intellectual regression in the guise of "making things fresh." New productions, as in the present case, that use the music while distorting the work as a whole, deserve the sharpest criticism.

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As far as new musical work goes, composers, while learning from the classics, will and must create music reflecting the specific character and development of the contemporary world. Their efforts will be powerfully affected by social struggles that find cultural expression, reshaping the outlook of artists and audiences alike.

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