

Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* for a new online audience of millions

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Ludwig van Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, in a performance at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, has been available for viewing on certain web platforms since early April. The production was about to open to the public—as part of the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth—when the coronavirus forced Vienna's theatres to close. Instead, the theatre documented its version of the opera on video.

Beethoven's only operatic work had its premiere in 1805, remarkably, at the same theatre, under the title *Leonore, or The Triumph of Married Love*.

The work only gained success in 1814 after Beethoven changed significant portions of it. The current production, directed by award-winning actor Christoph Waltz, in his third operatic effort, with Manfred Honeck conducting the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, is based on Beethoven's second version in 1806.

In the deepest dungeon of a prison near Seville in Spain, a man has been confined in isolation from other inmates for two years. Florestan (Eric Cutler) was uncovering abuses of power by the prison supervisor Don Pizarro (Gábor Bretz) when he was secretly arrested, before the King's minister, Don Fernando, could be informed. The outside world, including his wife Leonore (Nicole Chevalier), is merely informed he has gone missing.

Leonore senses something is wrong. Disguised as a man, she applies for work at the prison and is employed as an assistant to the jailer Rocco (Christof Fischesser). The latter's daughter, Marzelline (Mélisha Petit), falls in love with the serious young "Fidelio," much to the displeasure of Marzelline's previous admirer, Jaquino (Benjamin Hulett). Marzelline dreams of marriage and shared happiness. Jaquino, who was first in the running for Marzelline's heart, is stunned.

When Don Fernando announces his intention of investigating rumours of arbitrary arrests under Pizarro, a plan is hatched to rapidly eliminate Florestan. After Rocco refuses to comply, Pizarro has to carry out the murder himself. Prior to the deed, Rocco is supposed to dig a grave in a corner of the dungeon. Fidelio, his assistant, feels sorry for the half-starved prisoner whose rations have been cut by Rocco. When Fidelio hands him water and bread, she recognises Florestan. Pizarro arrives and Leonore throws herself in front of her husband, reveals herself to be Florestan's wife and pulls a pistol.

Trumpets signal the appearance of the King's representative. Rocco snatches the gun from Fidelio and disappears with Pizarro. Leonore collapses in a heap. A little later, an angry crowd call for vengeance. Leonore is terrified. Rocco then leads the King's minister to the dungeon, surrounded by a crowd of people. The minister orders the immediate release of all innocent prisoners and jubilation breaks out. Leonore removes the chains from Florestan as the people sing:

"Whoever has possessed such a partner of his heart/Let him join in our jubilee!/Never can the praise be too loudly sounded/Of the wife that is the saviour of her husband!"

Artistic reasons may have played a role in the opera's initial failure. The four different overtures point to Beethoven's struggle to find an appropriate form for the opera's content. In his work, Beethoven's repeatedly made alterations and rejected much of what he had previously done. Musicologist Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen, in his recently published work, *Ludwig van Beethoven—Musik für eine neue Zeit* (*Ludwig van Beethoven—Music for a New Age*, 2019), describes Beethoven as the "experimenter par excellence in different types of form."

The "Leonore" overture from 1806, which later became famous and was often played, is an independent piece. The overture later deeply impressed a young Richard Wagner (1813-1883), who went on to establish his own career as a composer of operatic drama. The "Leonore" overture contains spirited elements of traditional singing (between Marzelline and Jaquino), reminiscent of Mozart's work and designed to contrast with highly dramatic and tragic scenes, culminating in the oratorio-like pathos of the choirs. In a distinct way, Beethoven's experiments in form reflected the social upheaval and disruptions of his time.

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 was greeted with enthusiasm by many, but also led to the mobilisation of older, feudal forces. After the death of Joseph II, the Habsburg ruler, in early 1790, a wave of reaction swept across Vienna, isolating innovative artists such as Mozart. His *The Magic Flute* (1791)—social criticism in the form of a fantasy opera—was performed only 14 years before Beethoven's *Leonore*. In 1792 Austrian troops marched against France in an attempt to suppress the revolution.

When the French playwright and politician Jean-Nicolas Bouilly (1763-1842) published the stage play *Leonore* in 1798, which later formed the basis for the libretto of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, the civil war in France had largely stifled hopes for equality and fraternity. The play is based on a real story Bouilly experienced as an official in Tours when a woman in man's clothing apparently tried to free her innocent husband from prison. Fearing censorship, Bouilly moved the plot of the play to Spain. Before Beethoven adopted the story, the original *Leonore* was performed three times in the style of a popular, adventurous "rescue opera."

Napoleon's coronation as Emperor in December 1804 shocked all those, including Beethoven, who had placed their democratic and revolutionary hopes in him. Beethoven had originally dedicated his Symphony No. 3 ("Eroica," 1802-04) to Napoleon. The occupation of Vienna in 1805 (shortly before the premiere of *Leonore*) by French

imperial troops was the final nail in the coffin of the revolution's ideals. The French officers who attended the world premiere disliked Beethoven's opera, and those Viennese who had made their peace with the new power may well have been repelled by Beethoven's pathos and some of the passages in the text.

So when the choir of prisoners sings, "Silence! make no noise! Pizarro's eyes and ears are o'er us!," it may have cut too close to home. And when Pizarro, who lies to Rocco to persuade him to commit murder, explains, "The state is concerned. That troublesome inmate of yours—He must quickly be got rid of," that too may have caused discomfort.

Rocco is not the only character who knows how quickly someone who has "great enemies" can officially be declared a criminal. The jailer, who readily digs Florestan's grave, the grave for the ideals of the revolution, represents petty-bourgeois opportunism. The civil servant Don Fernando, emissary of a righteous king, lives up to popular hopes placed in constitutional monarchy.

Beethoven had turned the profane sensational drama of earlier productions into a serious work that elevated the "rescue opera" genre, based on love and sentiment, to a new level and that is why the opera was on occasion banned. In the spirit of prerevolutionary hopes and Enlightenment ideals, Florestan's highest moral duty is love of and loyalty to the truth. Without truth, no justice. And to this end he is prepared to make great personal sacrifices. Leonore, for her part, shares Florestan's tenets ("I have faith in God and justice"). Pizarro's guards, on the other hand, understand loyalty only as blind obedience to orders.

In his Beethoven biography, musicologist Dieter Rexroth points out that the version of *Fidelio* performed today, which had its successful premiere a month after Napoleon's abdication in May 1814, treats the question of liberation as an utopian longterm goal in contrast to the opera's original version. It corresponded to reality in the Restoration period. The old forces of reaction had won. Nevertheless, not everything remained the same.

Beethoven's main characters are representatives of the lower classes, social layers largely despised and ignored before the 1789 revolution. Now they are the bearers of profound feelings and desires, their actions tragic, combative and dramatic. Previously these characteristics were the exclusive reserve of heroic figures drawn from the nobility. A woman like Marzelline is also taken seriously when she expresses her domestic idea of happiness. (She and Jaquino recall Papagena and Papageno in *The Magic Flute*.) Rocco, who subordinates himself to authority, is no cipher, but rather a contradictory and dynamic figure.

After the second performance of the opera in 1806, Beethoven deleted Rocco's aria, "If you don't have gold, you can't be completely happy." However, it proved to be so popular with the public that it was restored in the final version of 1814 and is also included in the current production directed by Christoph Waltz.

The opera undoubtedly reflects the powerful and contradictory experiences of the epoch of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Nothing can be taken for granted. In terms of reason and truth, everything is decided in struggle. Without Leonore's actions and determination, Florestan would be dead. This gives the music the urgency and power that has continuously captivated audiences.

In 2015, the WWSWS criticised a postmodern *Fidelio* production at the Salzburg Festival that seemed to fear this power and sought to reduce it to the self-destructive passion of a single individual. There could be no greater injustice done to Beethoven.

Waltz's production largely corresponds to the opera's ideal of freedom, geared to social reality. The prison and prisoners evoke the present. The set consists of giant staircases winding through time and space, which change from one scene to the next, according to the different lighting effects. Sometimes one finds oneself in the gloomy dungeon through which Rocco and Fidelio make their way with a flashlight; on occasion, we see, accompanied by stirring orchestral passages, a large oval between the staircases, resembling the eye of a typhoon. The drab, grey uniforms worn by the entire cast emphasise the general prison-like state of the world.

Another production of the opera this year in Bonn, transferred the plot and its prison regime to Turkey, superficially implying one could compare the Erdogan government with the counterrevolutionary regime in Vienna and Paris circa 1805.

Waltz allots a prominent place to the prisoner choir. Ill, unreal prisoners emerge from the darkness, while less stricken, normal people warn: "Caution, we are being listened to." The scene recalls the global surveillance by intelligence agencies and governments brought to light by Edward Snowden. The circumstances of Florestan's arrest and torture recall the fates of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, although this connection is not spelled out in Waltz's production. And today's audience is well aware of the significance of Leonore's statement: "The cruelty of the tyrant gives me strength."

Waltz has taken great care with his cast whose lively interactions contrast with the oppressive, grey atmosphere of the set. He has clearly benefited from his own experience as an outstanding movie actor, utilising his sensitivity for accuracy and subtle nuances registered by a film camera. The performers on stage consist of individuals who fuse together in the glittering, almost white, cool light of the future just before the curtain falls. The opera's message, "All people become brothers," which also characterises Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, is very clear and assumes especial urgency in the current coronavirus crisis.

The premiere of the successful production, with its excellent ensemble, has been transformed into an online and television event capable of reaching a much broader audience. One hopes that this precedent can be repeated and established in future.



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