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 978-0-521-45852-8 - Ludwig van Beethoven: *Fidelio*
 Paul Robinson
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I *Introduction*

Fidelio is unique among operas in the standard repertory. It is the only opera by a composer, Beethoven, universally considered among the greatest in Western music. (*Pelléas et Mélisande* is also Debussy's only completed opera, but Debussy doesn't quite enjoy Beethoven's reputation.) Of course many important composers – Bach, Brahms, Mahler come to mind – never wrote an opera. But no composer of Beethoven's stature has failed to produce other operas after the first.¹ Actually, Beethoven himself didn't intend to be a single-opera man, and he never stopped looking for suitable librettos. Yet his inability to find one seems both right and inevitable. *Fidelio*'s true successors are the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony.

Fidelio is also unique in its effect on audiences. It is an opera that many listeners otherwise averse to the genre claim to admire: its intellectual seriousness and humanity, those listeners contend, save it from the frivolity and exhibitionism endemic to opera. By contrast, true buffs are sometimes put off by its vocal awkwardness and tendency to prefer philosophical rumination to dramatic action. For them attending *Fidelio* is less like a night at the opera than a morning in church. John Steane captures this ambivalence nicely: '*Fidelio* . . . can be the greatest of all operas, but only once or twice in a lifetime.'² Edward Dent makes a similar point by way of a comparison with Mozart:

Fidelio is perhaps still the most deeply moving opera of the whole modern repertory, and all the more profoundly impressive because it is the quintessence of Beethoven, the culminating work of his second period; but in the general career of Beethoven it stands out as an isolated experiment. Like the concertos, it is great because it is the expression of Beethoven; but for complete mastery and supreme accomplishment in the handling of a definite form we must look to the concertos of Mozart as we do to the operas.³

Even its friends admit that *Fidelio* has its longueurs. I have yet to meet anyone who professes to like Rocco's gold aria. More

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generally, every listener senses the discrepancy between the domestic comedy (and light-weight idiom) with which the opera begins and the emotionally charged, musically resplendent political allegory with which it ends. The usual excuse is that Beethoven lacked practical experience of the theatre and should be forgiven his infelicities in view of the work's philosophical power and musical beauty. One might even argue that *Fidelio* is the best first opera ever written. Certainly it surpasses the first efforts of better known opera composers: Wagner's *Die Feen*, Verdi's *Oberto*, Puccini's *Le Villi* and Strauss's *Guntram* (Mozart's *La finta semplice* seems an unfair comparison, because Mozart was only twelve when he wrote it).

But in an important sense the *Fidelio* we know was not Beethoven's first opera. It might more reasonably be called his third, or at least his second, since the 1814 version was preceded by two earlier versions. The 1805 and 1806 *Fidelios* closely resemble one another, but the changes Beethoven made in 1814 are so radical as to constitute virtually a new work. Willy Hess provides a bar-by-bar analysis of the three versions in *Das Fidelio-Buch* (Winterthur, Switzerland, 1986), and Winton Dean's essay 'Beethoven and Opera', reprinted here as chapter 3, passes judgement on their relative merits. Readers interested in hearing the remarkable differences between Beethoven's first and last thoughts on the subject can consult EMI's recording of the 1805 version (issued under the title of *Leonore*).

Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's libretto, *Léonore, ou L'amour conjugal*, most likely dates from the period after the fall of Robespierre in the summer of 1794.⁴ It had already been set three times before Beethoven produced his first version: by Pierre Gaveaux (1798) in the original French and then by Ferdinando Paer (1804) and Simone Mayr (1805) in Italian. Beethoven probably knew the Gaveaux and possibly the Paer (the evidence is discussed by Winton Dean). His librettist for the 1805 version was Joseph von Sonnleithner, secretary of the court theatres in Vienna, who translated Bouilly's text freely into German and added several musical numbers. The relatively modest changes of 1806 (which saw the opera reduced from three acts to two) were made by Beethoven's friend Stephan von Breuning, while the massive overhaul of 1814 was entrusted to Friedrich Treitschke, regisseur and poet at the Kärntnertortheater, where the 1814 version was premiered.

A consideration of the differences between the 1805 and 1814 versions will serve to highlight the features that make the latter

such a distinctive and, for some, problematic work. Certainly the most immediately striking difference is that the 1805 version is substantially longer and more leisurely than that of 1814. It contains two numbers cut in 1814, both of which contribute to the Marzelline subplot: a trio ('Ein Mann ist bald genommen') in which Marzelline and Rocco disabuse Jaquino about his marital prospects, and a duet between Marzelline and Leonore ('Um in der Ehe') in which Marzelline anticipates becoming a mother. Just as importantly, all the remaining numbers except the march before Pizarro's entrance are longer in the 1805 version, often considerably so.

Their greater length reflects a second difference between 1805 and 1814: in 1805 Beethoven often lets the music prevail over the drama. He cannot resist the pull of compositional symmetry or formal development, so that the story is frequently stopped in its tracks while a purely musical development is allowed to work itself out to a logical conclusion. In other words, Beethoven in 1805 is an even more 'instrumental' composer than he became in 1814, when, for listeners whose expectations are based on Verdi or Puccini, he still remains too much the symphonist.

The 1805 version is more 'instrumental' than the 1814 versions in purely vocal terms as well: the vocal parts, especially Leonore's, are highly ornamental, given to elaborate coloratura display, particularly at cadences. Thus even more emphatically than in 1814, the music for Leonore and Florestan sounds as if it had been written not for soprano and tenor but for clarinet and French horn. By contrast, the plainer vocal writing and the greater musical succinctness of the 1814 version make it dramatically more cogent – closer to the operatic ideal of *dramma per musica* – than the 1805 original.

Two other changes, however, might be said to have shifted the balance in just the opposite direction. These changes don't necessarily make the opera of 1814 less dramatic than that of 1805, but they transform it from a drama of persons into a drama of ideas. In 1805 the focus is on the individual characters, while in 1814 it shifts to the collectivity. This difference is already implied in the elimination of the two numbers I mentioned a moment ago. But it is seen above all in the more prominent role assigned to the prisoners – musically speaking, the chorus – in the later version. At the same time the prisoners themselves become a yet more transparent representative of all humanity, whose liberation in turn becomes the opera's true subject.

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For one thing, the 1814 version has a new chorus for the prisoners as they return to their cells, the exquisite ‘Leb’ wohl, du warmes Sonnenlicht’, which replaces a second revenge aria for Pizarro that had ended the act in 1805. More significantly, a change of scene is introduced after Leonore’s and Florestan’s ‘Namenlose Freude’ duet, allowing the final tableau to be set in the bright daylight of the prison parade ground (in 1805 the prisoners and people had invaded Florestan’s dungeon). The scene also receives a new choral beginning, ‘Heil sei dem Tag’, so that the chorus both begins and ends the finale in a celebratory C major, firmly establishing itself as the opera’s triumphant protagonist. The world-historical significance of the scene is confirmed by a new speech for the minister, who announces that henceforth tyranny will be banished and brotherhood enjoined.

Just as the role of the prisoners is enhanced – and along with it the opera’s philosophical gravitas – the story of Leonore’s rescue of her husband is sabotaged by a crucial dramatic (as well as musical) change introduced in 1814. Originally the outcome of the great confrontation between Leonore and Pizarro was left in doubt. At the end of the quartet (no.14) Rocco snatches Leonore’s pistol as he departs with Pizarro, and the lovers, still imprisoned, are forced to recognize that their reunion might be their last. As Joseph Kerman remarks, the scene takes on some of the characteristics of a *Liebestod*,⁵ a moment of tension and ecstasy that Beethoven realizes in a long and affecting recitative leading into the ‘Namenlose Freude’ duet.

This intensely dramatic scene was sacrificed in 1814 when Rocco no longer takes Leonore’s pistol but instead seeks to reassure the lovers that all is well by gesturing towards heaven. Rocco’s dumbshow is supposed to settle every uncertainty about the happy ending, not just for Leonore and Florestan but for the audience as well. The agonized recitative of 1805 is accordingly eliminated, and the ‘Namenlose Freude’ duet is now launched with only a few lines of dialogue. Most importantly, the duet carries the double (and perhaps contradictory) burden of expressing both the lovers’ reunion and their escape. Winton Dean complains bitterly that Leonore and Florestan are thereby stripped of their individuality and become mere ‘personifications’. The wonted satisfactions of musical drama give way to philosophical/political generalities that, for Dean, come dangerously close to tub-thumping (see below, p. 44).

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Arguably the last act of the 1805 *Fidelio* makes for better conventional theatre than does the end of the 1814 version (although everyone, including Dean, agrees that the earlier portions of the work are greatly improved in their final incarnation). But one might counter that Beethoven had no particular gift for conventional opera – for the musical and dramatic interaction of character we so enjoy in Mozart, Wagner, Verdi, Puccini and Strauss. By contrast, he was an unsurpassed musical philosopher, and the move from individual drama to communal vision effected with Treitschke's aid in 1814 is precisely what puts *Fidelio* in a category by itself. Joseph Kerman is again authoritative: 'What [Beethoven] could do extremely well was project ideas and ideals in his music. . . . In revising his opera in the direction of greater idealization and universality, [he] was leading from strength.'⁶ Thus, in spite of its dramatic defects, the 1814 version has rightfully displaced Beethoven's earlier efforts. Not only is it musically superior, but, more importantly, it alone boasts the distinctive moral pathos that separates *Fidelio* from all other works for the lyric theatre.

I have said that the true subject of *Fidelio* as we know it is the liberation of humanity. But the statement unfairly prejudices the question of Beethoven's politics. Doubtless *Fidelio* has long enjoyed a visceral appeal for people on the left as the opera that most fully embodies the ideal of a pacified existence. In his autobiography Stephen Spender reports that as a young man, 'No opera moved me quite so much as *Fidelio*'.⁷ But cautionary scholars like Maynard Solomon have argued that Beethoven's political views at the time were at best ambivalent and perhaps expressly anti-revolutionary. David Charlton's discussion, in chapter 4, of the origins of *Fidelio* in French opera of the late eighteenth century shows that Beethoven's source, Bouilly's *Léonore*, was an unambiguously Thermidorean document. Indeed, Bouilly later said that the story was based on a true event in which an aristocratic woman in the Touraine rescued her husband who had been imprisoned by the Terror.⁸ There is evidence, in other words, that *Fidelio* is a fundamentally reactionary work, at least in inspiration.

Chapter 5, '*Fidelio* and the French Revolution', seeks to counter this anti-revolutionary reading, not by questioning the incontrovertible findings of Maynard Solomon, David Charlton and others, but by looking to the dramatic and musical logic of the work Beethoven actually wrote in 1814. In *The Principle of Hope* the philosopher Ernst Bloch calls the final scene of *Fidelio* 'the

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Marseillaise on the fallen Bastille'. He adds, 'Every future storming of the Bastille is intended in *Fidelio*.'⁹ Bloch's appropriation of *Fidelio* to the cause of revolution is perhaps too explicit and inclusive (does it encompass not merely 1789 and 1848 but also the revolutions of Lenin, Mao and Castro?). Nonetheless, I am inclined to believe that he has correctly identified the ideological and moral appeal that has made Beethoven's only opera uniquely beloved. *Fidelio* holds the stage above all because it so powerfully expresses the hope for a redeemed humanity.

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2 *Synopsis*

Characters

Don Fernando, minister of state	Bass*
Don Pizarro, governor of a state prison	Bass*
Florestan, a prisoner	Tenor
Leonore, his wife, disguised as a young man, <i>Fidelio</i>	Soprano
Rocco, jailor	Bass
Marzeline, his daughter	Soprano
Jaquino, doorkeeper	Tenor
First prisoner	Tenor
Second prisoner	Bass
Prisoners, officers, guards, townspeople	
Place: a Spanish royal prison, a few miles from Seville	
Time: the eighteenth century	

* Often sung by a baritone or bass-baritone

Overture

The *Fidelio* overture, famously, is the last of four Beethoven wrote for the opera. It is always described as slighter and more anodyne than its three predecessors (especially *Leonore* No. 2, written for the 1805 version, and *Leonore* No. 3, written for 1806), which are generally thought to render the opera superfluous because they so dramatically realize its fundamental contrast between oppression and liberation. In particular the *Fidelio* overture seems a more appropriate introduction to the comic action of the opening scene. Yet to listen to it alongside the Mozart overtures, with which it might seem to invite comparison, is to recognize its more muscular construction and weightier sonority. It is unmistakably Beethovenian, even if drawn on a less monumental scale than the *Leonore* overtures.

A brisk fanfare, which will later serve as the main theme of the Allegro, introduces the piece. It might be associated with the opera's heroic central action. It is answered by a short Adagio of soft

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modulations in the horns and clarinets, alluding perhaps to the heroine's sustaining hope (which Beethoven often signals with horns). After the fanfare has been repeated in the subdominant, the Adagio sets off on a longer, more anxious harmonic course, rising to *forte* over insistent timpani strokes, until it gives way to the Allegro.

In the sonata-form Allegro the fanfare theme is elaborated in Beethoven's vigorous second-period manner. The movement culminates in a unison *fortissimo* statement of the fanfare, followed by a more elegiac version of the contrasting Adagio. In the final Presto trombones add yet greater weight to the already brassy scoring and help create the sense of affirmation so typical of Beethoven's endings. Thus while the *Fidelio* overture avoids pre-empting the drama as literally as do the second and third *Leonore* overtures (which actually incorporate the liberating trumpet call from the act II quintet), its ending anticipates the exalted mood in which the opera itself closes.

Act I

No. 1, Duet (Allegro, A major), 'Jetzt, Schätzchen, jetzt sind wir allein' (Jaquino, Marzelline)

The courtyard of a state prison. Marzelline is ironing outside her father's house (which, for operatic reasons, is located within the courtyard), while Jaquino is receiving packages through a door in the prison gate. The duet is devoted to Jaquino's attempts to propose to Marzelline and her fending off of his importuning. The contrast between Jaquino's ardour and Marzelline's sarcasm is meant to be amusing, but the effect is curiously disagreeable and, with its many repetitions, tedious. When Jaquino is momentarily distracted with the packages at the door, Marzelline, in a lyrical aside, confesses her love for her father's young assistant, Fidelio.

The duet, in free A-B-A form, is based on a four-note orchestral figure, essentially rhythmical in character, that Beethoven works through the orchestra above or beneath the voices. Both the vocal line and the accompaniment are short-breathed and staccato, save in the middle section where Marzelline expresses her romantic longing in sustained phrases that reach above the staff. The whole has a *faux-naïf* atmosphere of chirpy rusticity. In the coda tenor and soprano unite, even though no reconciliation has been achieved (in contrast, say, to the opening duet of *The Marriage of Figaro*), and

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Marzelline is set loose on several unmotivated coloratura runs. With its transparent orchestration the number has an archaizing flavour that places us unambiguously in the farcical world of mistaken identity and romantic delusion – in other words, the world of the eighteenth-century domestic comedy.

Dialogue Rocco calls Jaquino into the garden (which the stage directions locate through a door to the right of the courtyard). Alone, Marzelline concedes that she had been quite fond of Jaquino until Fidelio came into the household.

No. 2, Aria (Andante con moto, C minor/C major), ‘O wär’ ich schon mit dir vereint!’ (Marzelline)

Marzelline’s aria was the first number in the 1805 version of the opera. Like the preceding duet, it is very much in the *Singspiel* manner. Marzelline’s imaginings begin with the modest wish that Fidelio were already her husband but soon give way to frankly passionate thoughts of their marital bliss. Beethoven marks the shift with a conventional move from minor to major, as well as a faster tempo and fuller orchestration, whose pulsing reflects the hope beating in Marzelline’s breast. The second verse conjures up the daily routine of domestic chores but then alludes (rather archly) to the pleasures that will await the couple when night descends. The leitmotif of Marzelline’s ruminations is hope, which might tempt us to interpret the aria as a foretaste of Leonore’s great outburst, ‘Komm, Hoffnung’ (no. 9), the opera’s only other solo number for female voice. But the common theme of hope serves rather to contrast Marzelline’s self-deluding fancies with Leonore’s profoundly courageous refusal to despair. The contrast is underlined by Beethoven’s music: Marzelline’s aria is light, airy and (in its conclusion) cheerful, whereas Leonore’s great appeal to hope, in an almost melancholy Adagio, is set to long and weighty *legato* lines, and her concluding Allegro conveys not cheerfulness but ecstatic determination.

Dialogue Coming in from the garden, Rocco asks whether Fidelio has returned with dispatches for the governor of the prison. Leonore, disguised as Fidelio, enters carrying chains (from the blacksmith’s) and a box with the dispatches. Rocco congratulates him on the economy of his purchases, promises a reward and hints that the young man’s heart is an open book.

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No. 3, Quartet (Andante sostenuto, G major), ‘Mir ist so wunderbar’ (Marzelline, Leonore, Rocco, Jaquino)

Hushed sustained harmonies in divided violas and cellos, to which clarinets and then flutes are added, introduce this uncanny piece, which rips us from the bumptious world of the *Singspiel*, with its staccato idiom and wordiness, into a transfigured landscape of emotional intensity and relative silence. To be sure, the canon – which is maintained strictly for the first forty bars – hearkens back to a plebeian musical idiom (that of, say, ‘Frère Jacques’), but Beethoven’s treatment lifts this lowly form to the sublime. Each of the four participants delivers his or her quatrain, beginning at eight-bar intervals, as an aside: Marzelline thinks blissfully of Fidelio’s (imagined) love; Leonore sees great danger in the infatuation; Rocco anticipates the couple’s domestic happiness; while Jaquino bitterly complains of the betrayal. But the words – often unintelligible because they overlap one another – count for little in this radically musical adumbration of the opera’s ultimate resolution. The parallels with the F major *Sostenuto assai* section of the act II finale are noteworthy.

Dialogue Rocco announces that he intends to make Fidelio his son-in-law but adds that a good marriage needs more than love.

No. 4, Aria (Allegro moderato/Allegro, B flat major), ‘Hat man nicht auch Gold beineben’ (Rocco)

After the canon’s taste of poetry, Rocco’s number returns us to the prosaic realm of the *Singspiel*. It is an exercise in petty-bourgeois philosophizing, a sub-Franklinian paean to gold, which alone, Rocco says, can guarantee sustained contentment. The two-strophe aria is in a well established *buffo* tradition in which alternating sections in different tempo and metre (moderate 2/4 and fast 6/8) correspond to the contrasting moods of the singer’s encomium, the first anxiously sober (without gold ‘life drags on wearily’), the second gleefully philistine (gold brings power and love). In the latter violins mimic the gold’s ‘ringing and rolling’. Beethoven cut the aria in the 1806 version.

Dialogue Leonore begs Rocco to be allowed to accompany him into the prison’s deepest dungeons. Even though the governor has expressly forbidden it, Rocco agrees, but one cell, he says, must remain out of bounds. Searchingly, Leonore asks how long its inmate has been incarcerated, to which Rocco replies, ‘More than