

Synopsis

Act I

Marzelline, daughter of the prison warden Rocco, rejects the attentions of her father's assistant, Jaquino, who wants to marry her. She has fallen in love with his hardworking new assistant, Fidelio. Rocco approves of the match and tells her that he will seek permission for the marriage from Don Pizarro, the governor of the prison. But Fidelio is in fact Leonore. Desperately searching for her husband, Florestan, who has been held as a political prisoner for two years, she has disguised herself as a man. When Rocco mentions a prisoner lying near death in a subterranean cell, Leonore suspects it might be Florestan and begs Rocco to take her on his rounds, even though it is forbidden.

Pizarro learns that Don Fernando, minister of state, is on his way to inspect the prison. He realizes that if Fernando discovers that his friend Florestan is alive, all Pizarro's plans will be lost. He tries to bribe Rocco to murder Florestan, but Rocco refuses. He then decides to kill him himself and orders Rocco to dig the grave. Leonore, who has overheard Pizarro, prays for the strength to save her husband. She asks for the prisoners to be given a few moments of fresh air, which Rocco grudgingly allows. Pizarro orders them back into their cells and makes it clear to Rocco that he must not disobey orders. Rocco and Leonore descend into the prison to dig the grave.

Act II

In his cell, Florestan hallucinates that Leonore has arrived to free him. But his vision turns to despair, and he collapses in exhaustion. Rocco and Leonore appear and begin digging the grave. Florestan awakens, not recognizing his wife, and Leonore almost loses her composure at the sound of his voice. Florestan asks for water. Rocco offers him wine and allows Leonore to give him some bread. When everything is ready, Pizarro appears. As he is about to kill Florestan, Leonore reveals her identity and stops Pizarro with a gun. A trumpet is heard—Don Fernando has arrived. Rocco and Pizarro leave to meet him as Leonore and Florestan are reunited.

In the prison courtyard, Don Fernando proclaims justice for all. He is amazed when Rocco brings his old friend Florestan before him and relates the details of Leonore's heroism. Pizarro is arrested, and Leonore frees Florestan from his bonds. The other prisoners are freed as well, and the people hail Leonore.

In Focus

Ludwig van Beethoven

Fidelio

*Premiere: Theater an der Wien, Vienna, 1805 (first version);
Theater an der Wien, Vienna, 1806 (second version);
Kärntnertortheater, Vienna, 1814 (final version)*

Even if for nothing else, *Fidelio* would command our attention by virtue of being Beethoven's only complete opera. Beyond this, though, its unusual structure, glorious score, and life-affirming aura make it a unique theatrical experience. The opera had a long and complex gestation; it originally premiered in 1805, but Beethoven continued to make revisions over the course of the next nine years. The story belongs to the tradition of "rescue operas" that were in vogue around the time of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, and the characters are straightforward portraits in good and evil. Leonore, whose husband Florestan has been taken as a political prisoner, disguises herself as a man named Fidelio and finds work at the prison where she believes Florestan is being held. She ultimately saves him from execution, and the work ends with a rousing celebration of liberty and marital love. *Fidelio's* magnificence does not depend on psychological nuance or development, but rather lies in the music's ability to overwhelm the audience with the power of genuine emotion. Its uniquely uplifting and inspirational nature made the opera the obvious choice for several important productions marking the end of World War II and the resurgence of art following post-war reconstruction.

The Creators

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) was a pivotal figure in music who enjoyed great success during his lifetime, especially for groundbreaking concertos and symphonies, as well as more intimate, but equally masterful, piano and chamber pieces. The libretto was written by Joseph von Sonnleithner (1766–1835), who, in addition to his work in theaters as a director and librettist, was an attorney (Beethoven was one of his clients) and a collector of folk and other music.

The Setting

Originally set in late-18th century Seville during a time of political upheavals following the French Revolution, the Met's current production updates the action to a prison in an unspecified location in the mid-20th century.

The Music

The powerful and innovative use of the orchestra found throughout *Fidelio* is not surprising from Beethoven. Likewise, the chorus's evocative music, such as the moving "Prisoners' Chorus" toward the end of Act I, is expected from the composer of such notable choral works as the *Missa Solemnis* and the triumphant choral finale of the Symphony No. 9. Yet some of the score's greatest surprises and pleasures derive from solo and ensemble vocal writing. The domestic issues at the beginning of the opera make apt use of comic-opera conventions, while listeners will recognize a very different musical approach (and character expression) in the solos for Leonore and Florestan. In fact, Beethoven creates hierarchies among his characters, from the earthly to the exalted, which are instantly recognizable in their music, much as Mozart does in his *Die Zauberflöte*. Among the most cherished moments in the score are the ensembles for multiple voices, especially the famous quartet "Mir ist so wunderbar!" early in Act I, and the trio in Act II, Scene 1, in which Rocco permits Leonore to offer Florestan bread and wine. Both of these examples, with their spiritual connotations and transcendental music, lift the action out of the realm of the ordinary and into the sublime and therefore serve as miniature analogues of the overall arc of the score.

Met History

General Manager and Music Director Leopold Damrosch introduced *Fidelio* to the Met during its second season in 1884. The opera was considered a novelty in the United States at the time and also served as the Met debut of the celebrated contralto Marianne Brandt as Leonore. *Fidelio* returned in 12 seasons through the next two decades. Gustav Mahler conducted a production in 1908 widely praised for its musical sensitivity, and another new production, designed by the great Joseph Urban, marked the centenary of Beethoven's death in 1927. Kirsten Flagstad appeared as Leonore 14 times between 1936 and 1951, and performances in a 1960 production featured the conducting of Karl Böhm and the first of 39 memorable performances by tenor Jon Vickers as Florestan. Birgit Nilsson would sing Leonore in eight notable performances between 1960 and 1966. The production was replaced in 1970 with one by Otto Schenk—his second for the Met—also starring Vickers but this time with such stars as Leonie Rysanek, Walter Berry, and Judith Blegen in the cast. James Levine led the premiere of the current production, by Jürgen Flimm, in 2000, starring Karita Mattila, Ben Heppner, Falk Struckmann, René Pape, and Matthew Polenzani. James Morris sang the role of Don Fernando 32 times between 1972 (on the night of Anja Silja's Met debut as Leonore) and 2006.

Program Note

To get at the distinctive quality of Beethoven's lone opera *Fidelio*, its virtues and peculiarities, we need to dig into the composer's temperament, his attitudes toward his art, and his attitudes toward opera—what would seem, on the face of it, the least likely genre with which he would want to involve himself. Beethoven only intermittently composed vocal music, was not interested in comedy or fantasy stories, had little experience with theatrical music and little instinct for dramatic structure, and had no great understanding of writing for the voice. Yet through the force of will and tenacity, he managed to write one of the greatest and most moving of all operas.

Beethoven grew up in high-Enlightenment Bonn, Germany, and came of age in the revolutionary decade of the 1780s, when progressives in the West imagined humanity turning an epochal corner into better and more just governments, a new age of freedom and happiness. In America, that dream led to a revolution and a revolutionary constitution; in France, it led to a revolution and ensuing bloodbath; and in German lands, to "benevolent despots," enlightened rulers such as Vienna's Joseph II, who aspired to achieve progress by royal mandate.

From his time to the present, Beethoven has been called a revolutionary, but he himself never expressed any such intention. Revolutionaries want to overthrow the past and present because they despise them. On the contrary, Beethoven was steeped in the history of his craft and based everything he did on that knowledge. He believed in tradition and authority. He studied the theory of music, the various musical genres and what was appropriate to each, endured brain-breaking months of mastering formal counterpoint, absorbed it all, and then went his own singular way.

That meant, among other things, that Beethoven set out to master each of the traditional genres of music. Each time he took up a new medium, he studied what he considered the best of its type and, to some degree, modeled what he did on that basis. Haydn was his main model for quartets and symphonies, Mozart for violin sonatas and concertos, and so on. What came out of his devotion to tradition and to models was, invariably, something new and unique to him, an intensity of personality that music had never seen before. In line with his desire to master all major musical forms, Beethoven considered it a responsibility to write for the stage, just as it was to write sonatas and quartets and symphonies. Beyond that, in Vienna an operatic success did gratifying things for your career and your bank account. But when it came to actually doing it, he faced a stone wall within his own sensibilities.

This is because there was one dominant model for operas in the early 19th century: Mozart. And whether or not he understood it consciously, Beethoven was incapable of making much use of Mozart's influence. Of the four greatest Mozart operas, three of them are, on the surface, sex comedies—the stories turn around who's sleeping with whom, or hopes to. The fourth, *Die Zauberflöte*,

is, on the surface, a silly fantasy story. Though there is, of course, a great deal under the surface of all four of those operas, Beethoven was not interested in comedy or fantasy and, being a bit puritanical, deplored the racy aspects of Mozart's operas despite his respect for them.

Another barrier for Beethoven was simple lack of experience. Mozart wrote his first full opera at age 12 and produced operas periodically from then on, culminating in the climactic masterpieces of his last years. To the task he brought a profoundly theatrical personality, both in his temperament and his art. Part of that was a fascination with people, their doings and their quirks, and with the nature of class and the interactions of classes. All of it went into his operas.

If Mozart is one end of a human spectrum, Beethoven is virtually on the opposite end. He was utterly solipsistic and could only view other people and their lives and motivations through his own lens, and he served humanity in his art but deplored most of humanity in the flesh. Creatively, he was most at home in instrumental music, where his incomparable understanding of the connection of music to the heartstrings could inform his work on a more abstract plane. So while Mozart was perhaps Beethoven's single greatest model and inspiration in general—mainly in his instrumental music—when it came to opera, Mozart was his greatest impediment.

Beethoven's operatic salvation, the model he needed, arrived from France. At the end of 1803, he was unenthusiastically picking at an opera libretto called *Vestas Feur*, a wheezy ancient-Rome concoction by Emmanuel Schikaneder—librettist of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*—mainly because Beethoven wanted to become house composer of Schikaneder's theater. Meanwhile, Cherubini's opera *Les Deux Journées* had made a huge splash in Vienna. It was followed by more of its type, which featured stories about some dramatic and courageous act of liberation and came to be known as "rescue operas."

Beethoven dropped *Vestas Feur* and took up a French libretto that became *Fidelio*. It had already been set by three other composers. Not only did its character of a heroic wife appeal to him, but he would also be working with a rescue story then the rage in Vienna. He had a friend cobble together a German adaptation and set eagerly to work. He decided to avoid recitative, which he found artificial, and have characters speak between numbers as in the comic genre *Singspiel*, now adapted to serious opera.

Then the realities set in. The libretto was creaky, particularly in the first acts. Leonore has disguised herself as a man, calling herself Fidelio, in order to get work at the prison where her husband is being held by the tyrant Pizarro. The quasi-comic contretemps of the disguised Leonore being mooned over by the jailer's daughter was a Mozartean situation, so Beethoven wrote more or less Mozartean music for it—which was not his cup of tea, though he brought it off professionally enough. In its first performances in November 1805, the opera

failed royally, for two reasons: the tedious pacing and the bad luck that the premiere fell in the early days of Napoleon's occupation of Vienna, when few people were interested in venturing out to the theater.

After a tumultuous hours-long confrontation between Beethoven and his friends, he was persuaded to shorten the opera, cutting a good deal of music and refashioning it from three acts to two. That second version was mounted in March 1806 and began to find an audience. But then Beethoven got into a row with the theater manager, accusing the man of cheating him, and to general consternation withdrew the score. Though it was his own doing, he was devastated by the second failure of the piece. Finally, he got a third chance in 1814, when on the promise of a performance, he thoroughly reworked and tightened *Fidelio*. What came out was the version we know, which quickly found success and took up residence on the boards around Europe.

None of that would matter if the opera had not contained, from the beginning, some of the most splendid music Beethoven ever produced. In the quartet of the first act, "Mir ist so wunderbar," Beethoven for once equaled Mozart at his own game: four people singing the same melody in canon, each speaking of their own feelings while trancelike music encompasses it all. And the prisoners' chorus as they emerge from the dungeon, "O welche Lust," is one of the most heartrending moments in opera. In his vocal music, Beethoven tends to pull single words out of the text that represent its essence. Here, that word, at the climax of the chorus, is "Freiheit," "freedom." In Florestan's great aria from the dungeon that begins the second act, where he recalls his days of love and happiness with Leonore, the climax is again on "Freiheit."

Talking about his final revision of *Fidelio*, Beethoven observed, "it is my habit always to keep the whole in view." That applies to all his music, and he applied it in opera perhaps beyond any composer before. The main example is something that only Beethoven would do: the climax of *Fidelio*, both dramatically and symbolically, is the bugle call that announces the arrival of the minister, the salvation of Florestan, and the downfall of Pizarro. The bugle is the fulcrum of the opera, the sounding image of liberation.

Beethoven was chronically suspicious of everybody, and for him, other people were virtually a closed book. Still, human suffering always moved him. Friends said he could denounce somebody one day, but if on the next day he found them in a bad way, would empty his pockets for them. The attacks on acquaintances and associates that marked his life were balanced by great displays of kindness to stricken friends. If he did not have Mozart's skills of human observation, he instead brought to *Fidelio* a deep sense of compassion that informs the whole piece.

Fidelio is often labeled a dramatically weak opera redeemed by great music. That is only half true. The other key strength is the opera's unique and

incomparable embodiment of simple but profoundly important truths about people and about societies. In *Fidelio*, Beethoven turned his attention to the heroism of a single person on a small stage. At heart, the opera proclaims how a woman and wife, imbued by conviction, courage, and love, can bring down a tyrant. Those are ideals at the heart of Beethoven's own convictions, and to them he brought the full force of his own craft and courage.

—Jan Swafford

Jan Swafford is a composer and writer whose books include Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph, biographies of Johannes Brahms and Charles Ives, and The Vintage Guide to Classical Music. He is currently working on a biography of Mozart.