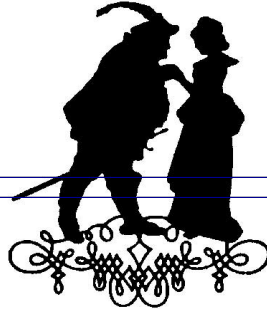


Opera con Brio

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Opera Lafayette's Revelatory *Leonore*

March 2020: A Timely Celebration of Beethoven

The year 2020 marks the 250-year anniversary of Beethoven's birth, and the musical world celebrates accordingly, as well it should. Among those doing so is the DC based Opera Lafayette, which celebrated its own 25th year anniversary with performances both in DC and New York of the first version of Beethoven's only opera, which he titled *Leonore* in 1805 (but which the theatre, Vienna's intimate Theater an der Wien, billed as *Fidelio*). I attended this delightful early version at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College in New York on March 2, 2020. In this intimate setting, a venue of less than 700 seats, with a tasteful and simple set, and with Artistic Director Ryan Brown leading the small period orchestra with élan, the performance was a revelation. This lighter, more comedic three-act version was no mere work in progress, nor was it just a fascinating first draft for the heroic opera *Fidelio* of 1814. *Leonore* came across as a work of equal, if very different, merit - a unified and masterful *Singspiel* of the day as well as an archetypal rescue opera.

Mr. Brown began with Beethoven's leisurely, expansive *Leonore Overture No. 2*, written as the opera's overture, which, as he states, "foreshadows the opera's story of a noble and heroic woman's efforts to save her husband from imprisonment." Right from the start, the vibrant tones of the early wind instruments, including flute, oboe, horns and trumpet, presaged the fluidity, freshness, and power of Beethoven's *Leonore*. Moreover, this taut production and Opera Lafayette's stirring performance stressed the organic and cohesive nature of this first version.

I first encountered the 1805 *Leonore* at the Lincoln Center Festival 96 with a concert performance from John Eliot Gardiner and the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique in New York's Alice Tully Hall (a performance documented on an Archiv CD). In that performance I was struck by Beethoven's emotional response to the text and characters, the simplicity and directness with which he painted in depth all his characters, and especially the two leads, *Leonore* and

Florestan. The performance was a kind of “dramatized oratorio,” in their own words, with the musicians forming a kind of “honeycomb...flanked, surrounded, or penetrated by the actor-singers.” This worked fine as a way of reinforcing the critical importance of Beethoven’s orchestra, and the sharply differentiated color of the period instruments. At the same time, a narrator replaced most of the opera comique’s spoken dialogue. This concept, however, diminished the inherent flow and dramatic thrust that was such a viable aspect of this 1805 version and which I was later to discover via Opera Lafayette’s enlightening performance.

This was the great revelation for me, in my first and only encounter with a full, simply staged version of this fascinating work. The ease and flow of the expository familial first act, for example, acquired a light, persuasive momentum. Its six numbers were both logical and compelling, maintaining the character of a sentimental German *Singspiel*. Marzeline’s sincere and childlike opening aria in C Major on the hope of love effectively opens the piece. With her light but clear voice, the perky soprano Pascale Beaudin was the perfect embodiment of this young, naïve daughter of the jailor Rocco. Her bouncy duet with her frustrated suitor Jaquino, the clear-voiced young tenor Keven Geddes, follows logically (rather than in reverse order as in *Fidelio*). So too does the following trio at Rocco’s entrance – a piece omitted



Pascale Beaudin as Marzeline; Keven Geddes as Jaquino
Photo: Louis Forget

in *Fidelio*. Thus the famous canonic quartet marking Leonore’s important entrance flows seamlessly out of this *Singspiel* trio, with Marzeline’s hesitant but elegiac opening line “Mir ist so wunderbar,” leading the way in the first quatrain. Rocco’s following light-hearted aria, more like a German folk song, sung by the buoyant bass Stephen Hegedus, then serves as an apt interlude and preparation for his trio-finale with Marzeline and Leonore. This logically closes the first act of Beethoven’s three-act concept.

Even before my first encounter with *Leonore* in 1996, I had happily experienced *Fidelio* more than a dozen times at the Met, in productions led by a myriad of renowned conductors, the first being Karl Böhm in 1971 with a cast headed by the great Canadian heldentenor Jon Vickers and Austrian dramatic soprano Leonie Rysanek. I had always regarded this monumental work somewhat as critic Bernard Holland had, as he details in an article that appeared in 2000 in the *New York Times*:

Here [in Fidelio] is great music driven by heartfelt sentiment, struggling to occupy an operatic stage. The paradox is in ensembles and set pieces that are musical masterpieces and acute studies of human nature awkwardly aligned in the flow of events on the stage. Great moments either bump into each other or sit uncomfortably apart.... Obsessive, half mad, like a collection of small architectural masterpieces set in a chaotic city plan, Fidelio lurches magnificently.

From another perspective, Leonard Bernstein (whose impassioned performances with the Vienna State Opera in the late ‘70s I still cherish) spoke movingly about the opera in “*Fidelio: a Celebration of Life*,” the opening of one of his famous “Young People’s Concerts” offered fittingly in 1970, the bicentennial of Beethoven’s birth:

Fidelio contains some of the most glorious music ever conceived by a mortal, one of the most cherished and revered of all operas, a timeless monument to love, life, and liberty, a celebration of human rights, of freedom to speak out, to dissent.

At the same time Bernstein also labeled *Fidelio* a “flawed masterpiece” and a “sublime failure” – not because of a deficiency in any of its individual numbers, but because of the disjointed gaps between certain numbers. He thus calls the opening subplot between Marzelline and her boyfriend Jaquino “lightweight, charming, not very important.” Then, without warning, Beethoven shifts to the sublime quartet that follows, suddenly dropping the lovely, transparent *Singspiel* mask of the first two numbers, elevating us abruptly with the introductory notes of the restrained melody in cellos and violas to a higher plane.

But there was no “lurching” in Opera Lafayette’s performance of the 1805 *Leonore*, not in Act I nor in either of the latter two acts. The famous Act I quartet is a good example, an ensemble that Beethoven understandably left unchanged in all versions of the opera, for it has always been regarded rightly in elegiac, even spiritual terms. In *Leonore* the quartet does not suddenly surprise us, thanks to the preparatory trio setting up the four entrances of the canonic quartet - which now includes the most important character of the opera, Leonore (disguised as Fidelio). Just as importantly, Maestro Brown kept the tempo of the quartet at a leisurely flowing pace as the increasingly rich vocal and instrumental textures intensify.

The quartet thus remained within the well-established homey, *Singspiel* context, not apart from it. Marzelline, the central character in each of the preceding three numbers, leads the way, jubilant in her love for Fidelio. Leonore (Fidelio) comes next, the radiant soprano Nathalie Pauline, concerned that this infatuation will foil her plans to rescue her husband. Then comes Rocco, delighted with his daughter’s choice, and finally Jaquino, miffed at the prospect of Marzelline’s marriage to Fidelio. Rocco’s jolly aria follows logically, which Canadian bass-baritone Stephen Hegedus delivered with charismatic fervor. Money, not just love, is equally vital in a balanced life he sings - foreshadowing the lure of money to come. The final Trio of Act I then sets up the events of the next two acts when the drama darkens and moves to the prison itself.



Nathalie Pauline as Leonore/Fidelio
Pascale Beaudin as Marzelline Photo: Louis Forget

Thus, the essence of Act I is far from a superfluous *Singspiel* subplot. Indeed Marzelline continues with her important role at the center of Act II. In a light, lyrical duet with Leonore, not used in *Fidelio*, she and Leonore return to the central theme of love. The duet pointedly contrasts with the darkness of the numbers preceding it in the opening of Act II featuring the powerful and resonant bass of Matthew Scollin as the vengeful Pizaro. With a supporting male chorus, he is a man possessed, savoring his chance to kill Florestan and then in his dark sotto-voce duet with Rocco seeking to lure him into his murderous plot. Directly on the heels of these two numbers, the women’s duet returned to and reinforced the *Singspiel* nature of Act I. After its two light soprano voices interweave with an exquisite solo violin, the duet closes with mellifluous Mozartian thirds. From this point on, at a less leisurely pace, the intensity of the drama builds with Leonore’s aria of hope, sung glowingly by Nathalie Paulin. It was indeed a complement to the prisoner’s chorus of hope soon to follow – all within the dark frame of Act II’s impending doom.



Jean-Michel Richer as Florestan; Nathalie Pauline as Leonore/Fidelio;
Matthew Scollin as Pizarro; and Stephen Hegedus as Rocco
Photo: Photo: Louis Forget

Beethoven's stirring Leonore Overture No. 3. Although Beethoven never did this, in the context of *Fidelio* following Leonora's bloodcurdling high B-flat confronting the murderous Pizarro and the ensuing trumpet call of liberation, this now familiar concert piece blazes forth with proper significance, and is always thrilling to hear. But undoubtedly the work loses momentum as the set is changed. In the 1805 *Leonore*, however, there is no such loss; the final scene remains in the prison cell, the music moving organically from the unsettled reunion of imprisoned husband and valiant wife to a finale for prisoners and

The classical, tripart division thus makes perfect sense: the first act primarily familial and expository, the second dramatic as the hidden motivations of Pizarro and prisoners emerge, the third uplifting and spiritual in its final resolution. Indeed in all three acts, the unified narrative has a persuasive momentum, which Opera Lafayette's carefully prepared production reinforces. The simple unified set by Laurence Mongeau, sensitive stage direction by Oriol Tomas, and subtle lighting design by Rob Siler also wonderfully reinforce the lighter eighteenth-century approach Ryan Brown and his team sought to capture. Such, after all, was the thrust of Beethoven's first version. The unit set of Act I easily morphed into the prison courtyard of Act II, which then darkened to become Florestan's grim cell for Act III.

In the final scene of *Fidelio*, a decade later, Beethoven moved the action above ground for a jubilant "Ode to joy" celebration. Most conductors today, beginning with Mahler a century ago, fill this scene shift with

townspeople celebrating the power of marital love. Subtle lighting changes within the versatile unit set were enough to transition to the joyful finale.



Jean-Michel Richer as Florestan; Nathalie Pauline as Leonore/Fidelio;
The chorus as prisoners and townspeople Photo: Louis Forget



Jean-Michel Richer as Florestan Photo: Louis Forget

Further contributing to the 18th century tone, neither of the two leads, Leonore or Florestan, came across as a Wagnerian dramatic soprano or heldentenor, the kind of voices needed for Beethoven's major reworking of their big arias in *Fidelio*; each admirably fit the bill as interpreters of their respective roles. Experienced soprano Nathalie Pauline, maintained her rich and expressive vocal color throughout the evening, while rising French Canadian tenor Jean-Michel Richer sang with elegant restraint Florestan's famous soliloquy, "Gott, welch Dunkel hier," ("God! How dark it is here!"), beginning Act III.

Indeed the soliloquy was an anticipated highlight of the evening. As musicologist/conductor Will Crutchfield explained in depth in both an article in the New York Times and in the comprehensive program booklet, he went back to Beethoven's surviving sketchbooks to reconstruct a significant passage torn out of the score in 1805 and lost. This, he explained, was "a solo in F Major with obbligato flute as the imprisoned Florestan recalls happier days with Leonore at his side." The roughly four-minute stretch was another revelation, with a lyrical and even bel canto flavor, or so it seemed from one hearing, perhaps owing in part to Mr. Crutchfield's specialty as a Rossini and Donizetti scholar. Notable too was how Mr. Richer began the aria without the usual stentorian "Gott" extended on a sustained high top note

for as long as possible. The closing of the piece was also more subtle, a diminuendo of strings that slips seamlessly into the following, hushed melodrama between Rocco and Pizarro.

The *Leonore* Project

In 2017 Opera Lafayette had given a rare performance of the opera whose libretto had been the inspiration for *Leonore*: Pierre Gaveaux's 1798 opéra-comique *Leonore, ou L'Amour conjugal* with a libretto by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly. Another feature article in the extensive program book includes a detailed synopsis and commentary, number by number, of the relationship between these two works, stressing again the eighteenth-century, French opéra-comique milieu that spawned Beethoven's *Leonore*. In his introduction to this program book, Ryan Brown articulated the goal of this three-year *Leonore* project: "We set about to prepare it with the idea that we would be able to tell the story of both Geveaux's and Beethoven's operas in a similar production, and that we would film each so that others would also have the chance to compare them."

Happily, Opera Lafayette was able to complete this project just before the devastating coronavirus mushroomed, causing cancellation of virtually all performances in New York and beyond, including a myriad of Beethoven celebrations. Thanks to this enterprising company and the dedicated work of Ryan Brown and others on this multi-year project, a wider audience will indeed be able not only to compare these closely linked works but also to savor a work, the *Leonore* from 1805, that has, as Brown intended to illustrate, "more connection to the 18th century than the later version [*Fidelio*]."

Shortly before his death, Beethoven reportedly said of *Fidelio*: "Of all my children, this is the one that cost me the worst birth pangs." But as Mr. Brown asserted in his pre-opera lecture, and as his spirited production well illustrated, *Leonora* is no mere sketchbook for the later *Fidelio*, it is a work of equal, though very different, merit – a masterpiece, and not a flawed one, of an earlier genre,



Nathalie Pauline as Leonore/Fidelio with the cast of *Leonore* Photo: Louis Forget

worthy of taking its allotted place in the repertory as well. As Romain Rolland stated nearly one hundred years ago (as quoted by John Eliot Gardiner in his program notes):

Beethoven's Leonore is a monument of the anguish of the period, of the oppressed soul, and its appeal to liberty – a formidable crescendo swelling from suffering to joy, traversing the road of hope and combat – an ascent from the abyss to the clear sky.

Roughly a decade apart, Beethoven's two rescue operas, *Leonore* and *Fidelio*, both work their magic, one homey and personal, the other grand and elegiac. Thanks to Opera Lafayette for revealing the charm, cohesion, and power of the earlier work. They are both operas to cherish from the pen of a composer who remains an icon in the world today and who speaks to us so eloquently, especially in these times of hardship and tragedy.

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