

PROGRAM NOTES

Léonore, ou L' Amour conjugal

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Léonore, ou L' Amour conjugal, with a text by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly and music by Pierre Gaveaux, is one of the most famous pieces of lyric theater that virtually no contemporary audiences have ever witnessed. This opéra comique, which premiered at the Parisian Theatre Feydeau in 1798, is emblematic of a persistently neglected category of dramatic repertory—the dialogue opera of the French revolutionary period. It also, of course, provided the source material for an object of widespread renown and sustained scholarly fascination: *Fidelio*, the sole surviving (and much revised) opera of Ludwig van Beethoven. Bouilly and Gaveaux's *Léonore* is thus a work with a uniquely bifurcated historical identity. On the one hand, its plot and musical idiom are tied closely to the time and place of its creation; it betrays a clear debt to the conventions of classical-era opéra comique and to the specific political circumstances of the late 1790s. On the other hand, the opera's abstract and broadly generalizable themes—of the strength of conjugal devotion and the necessity for rebellion against unjust persecution—would prove eminently adaptable, exerting an enduring hold on the popular imagination in France and throughout 19th-century Europe.

Léonore was described by its librettist as a 'fait historique.' The term refers to a sub-category of French opera developed during the final decades of the 18th century, featuring plots "ripped from the headlines" or otherwise based upon acts of contemporary heroism. In his (sometimes spurious) memoirs, Bouilly—a lawyer turned playwright—publicized the work by emphasizing its veracity. He claimed that the drama was inspired by an event that occurred during the revolutionary reign of Terror. While employed as a civil servant in central France, he had witnessed a "sublime deed of bravery and devotion by one of the ladies of the Touraine, whose noble efforts I had the happiness of assisting." The details of the incident, while plausible, are impossible to verify. And it should be noted that the author's own reputation stood to benefit in association with that of his theatrical doppelgänger—if he "assisted" the efforts of a real-world *Léonore*, Bouilly implied that he himself served as the model for the libretto's prime symbol of justice and authority, the benevolent minister Dom Fernand. Moreover, if *Léonore* contains a grain of historical truth, it simultaneously (and rather conveniently) exemplifies many of the most popular plot archetypes of contemporaneous French theater. The theme of dramatic rescue from captivity was unsurprisingly ubiquitous in the years surrounding the fall of the Bastille, as was the dramatic condemnation of arbitrary tyranny. (Prison scenes abound in works of the period, from Monsigny's *Le déserteur* to Dalayrac's *Raoul, Sire de créqui*. The evil Dourlinski in Cherubini's *Lodoiska* is but one obvious predecessor to *Léonore*'s power-mad villain Dom Pizare.)

Gaveaux's score for *Léonore* looks both backwards and forwards, blending tuneful, old-regime idioms with more complicated numbers reflective of the rapidly evolving aesthetic of the 1790s. The stylistic language of Roc, Marceline, and Jacquino remains largely within the conventions of the pre-revolutionary age. These comic characters express themselves in a rustic patois and in a series of popularly-infused strophic forms. Case in point is Marceline's opening love song, "Fidélio, mon doux ami," a set of minor-mode couplets with major-mode refrain. But Gaveaux had also thoroughly absorbed the developments of the revolutionary decade, as evidenced, in particular, by his expansive approach to choral music and his inclusion of styles borrowed from the realm of lyric tragedy. (Gaveaux was both a composer and a star actor at the Theatre Feydeau. Originating leading roles in several touchstone works of the period, including Cherubini's *Lodoiska* and *Medée*, and Steibelt's *Roméo et Juliette*, had granted him a first-hand fluency in the latest trends in modern operatic writing.) Notable in this regard is the ensemble that concludes the opera's first act ("Que ce beau ciel"), which is sung by male captives who gradually fill the stage, and which provides a clear model for the famous "prisoner's chorus" ("O welche Lust") at the parallel moment in Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Also innovative are the serious, *obbligato* recitative and romance performed by Florestan as the curtain rises in Act II. The declamatory vocal style, dark C-minor tonality, and evocative orchestral effects create a foreboding tone reminiscent of the tragédie lyrique. (Gaveaux requests the horns play "bell to bell"—a technique that Gluck had used to represent the soundscape of the underworld in his Parisian *Alceste*.) Indeed, the prison scenes of *Léonore* were so somber that they threatened to compromise the very identity of the comic genre; as one commentator noted, it was a "strange verbal misuse" to categorize Bouilly and Gaveaux's work as an opéra comique.

Léonore was met with critical acclaim after its Parisian premiere. *The Journal de Paris* was hard-pressed to name another opera in memory that had achieved "so complete and universal a success," while the *Censeur dramatique* highlighted the "astonishing" musical effects and the "nuanced" and "forceful" dramatic construction of the title character. The popularity of the work soon inspired a number of adaptations for export outside of France. Ferdinando Paer and Simon Mayr set Italian translations in 1804 and 1805, respectively; Beethoven received a German version of Bouilly's libretto for production in Vienna that same year. (He would revise his opera, with new and altered texts, in 1806 and 1814.) What is perhaps most remarkable about *Léonore* is the manner in which its themes have been successively and broadly reimagined, divorced from the very specific historical and geographical circumstances of their initial conception. Bouilly and Gaveaux's opera was written in the aftermath of the Revolution's most radical phase, the Terror of 1793-94. Its metaphors of liberation should thus be read not as commentary on the fallen regime of the Bourbon monarchs, but on that of Robespierre and the Jacobins. (The Theatre Feydeau had a solid reputation for royalist sentiments, and Gaveaux was the author of a well-known, anti-terror anthem, *Le reveil du peuple*.) By 1814, the finalized

Fidelio of Beethoven had acquired an entirely new political resonance: its plot was largely viewed as a paeon to the toppling of Napoleon, and its exuberant finale as a hymn to the reinstatement of European stability after the Congress of Vienna. Central to both of these (and many subsequent) interpretations of *Léonore's* fundamental themes is what the historian Paul Robinson has called a “right-angled conception of history,” a transition from the old order to the new that is achieved only through struggle, and therein derives much of its enduring—and inspirational—appeal.