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Opera Lafayette Makes the Case for a Pre-Beethoven *Léonore*

By George Loomis, *MusicalAmerica.com*

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Most regional or fringe opera companies in the United States do a woefully deficient job of exploring and unearthing forgotten but worthy works from the past. An enterprise like Opera Lafayette is thus especially valuable. For more than 20 years the Washington, D.C.-based troupe, under the leadership of conductor Ryan Brown, has made a specialty of French operas from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Its productions have spanned major large-scale works, like Gluck's *Armide*, and more modest *opéras comiques*, such as Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny's *Le Roi et le Fermier*, which the company performed at the Royal Opera, Versailles. Each season it brings its major staging to New York, and accordingly Pierre Gaveaux's *Léonore, ou L'Amour conjugal*, an *opéra comique* from 1798, was presented in what might well be its modern-premiere production at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater, John Jay College, on February 23.

The event was uncommonly rewarding. The work's title suggests a link to Beethoven's *Fidelio*, whose earlier iteration from 1805 and 1806 nowadays is referred to as *Léonore*, although the definitive 1814 Beethoven opera was in fact called *Fidelio* from the start to distinguish it from Gaveaux's work and other operas it inspired.



Kimy Mc Laren and Jean-Michel Richer as Léonore and Florestan

The libretto for *Léonore* by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly was indeed the starting point for *Fidelio*. Opera Lafayette's plot synopsis could almost serve unchanged for the later work, and much of Bouilly's dialogue was incorporated verbatim (translated into German, of course) by Beethoven's librettist, J. F.

von Sonnleithner. That Beethoven was attracted to a French libretto is hardly a surprise. He had little use for the German *singspiel* tradition but was a huge admirer of Cherubini, a major force in *opéra comique*. The revolutionary period of the 1790s pushed the genre in a more serious direction, and Bouilly's moving story about a heroic woman rescuing her husband from political imprisonment has timeless appeal.

Every musical number in *Léonore* has a counterpart in *Fidelio* (including a duet for Leonore and Marzelline, which Beethoven eliminated in 1814). More interesting from the perspective of *Fidelio*, however, are places where Sonnleithner and Beethoven went on to create new musical structures, particularly ensembles. Two examples: in *Léonore*, Act I, ends with the prisoner's chorus and thus does without the tense confrontation that follows in *Fidelio*. And the trumpet call announcing the minister's arrival occurs in *Léonore* in a dialogue scene, whereas in Beethoven it serves as the climax of the electrifying quartet in which Leonore reveals her identity. Some people still insist that *Fidelio* is flawed dramatically, but experiencing *Léonore* underscores Beethoven's remarkable vision in greatly expanding the role of music to serve new and exciting dramatic ends.

Still, as Opera Lafayette cogently demonstrated, *Léonore* works perfectly well on its own terms. Gaveaux's music is engaging, and its extensive use of the minor mode aids in creating a fraught musical atmosphere. Although it cannot be said with ironclad certainty that Beethoven knew Gaveaux's music, the score was available in printed form, and parallels between the operas are not hard to find. Like the aria for Beethoven's character, Gaveaux's aria for Marceline is in two strophes, each professing from minor to major. The accompaniments for the respective prisoners' choruses are similar, and *Léonore*'s aria starts with a long horn solo. Gaveaux's care as an orchestrator is indicated by his instruction that the horns in the dungeon scene should play with their bells opposite each other to produce a cavernous effect.

The short opera (roughly 105 minutes, including intermission) was ably stage by Oriol Thomas with a sparse, abstract decor designed by Laurence Mongeau. It consisted of a couple of wooden frames attached to wires descending from above, viewed against a luminous background (lighted by Julie Basse). The period costumes (also designed by Mongeau) included a red bustier for *Léonore*, seen after she throws off her disguise as the young man *Fidélio*.

The first-rate, French-Canadian cast insured that the spoken dialogue was idiomatically delivered. Kimy Mc Laren sang with conviction and resonant tone, making *Léonore*'s aria an emotional highpoint. Also excellent was Jean-Michel Richer, who movingly conveyed Florestan's plight from the darkness of his prison cell.

As the jailor Roc, Tomislav Lavoie summoned impressive tone for his aria about the importance of money to young newlyweds, and Alexandre Sylvestre brought ample vocal authority to the minister, Dom Fernand, in rectifying the injustice done Florestan. Pascale Beaudin and Keven Geddes bickered engagingly as Marceline and Jacquino, and Dominique Côté did well by Pizare, a speaking role.

Conducting Opera Lafayette's 32-piece period-instrument orchestra, Ryan Brown was alert to the score's theatricality and the handsomeness of its details.

Photo by Louis Forget

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