Ludwig van Beethoven

Fidelio, op. 72

Opera in two acts

Cast:
Florestan, a political prisoner (tenor)
Leonore, wife of Florestan disguised as a man named Fidelio (soprano)
Rocco, the jailer (bass)
Marzelline, Rocco's daughter (soprano)
Jacquino, Rocco's assistant (tenor)
Don Pizzaro, governor of the prison (baritone)
Don Fernando, minister of the king (baritone)
Two prisoners (tenor, baritone)
Chorus of soldiers, prisoners and townspeople

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Program notes by Martin Pearlman

"Of all my children, this is the one that caused me the most painful birth pangs and the most sorrows." (Beethoven)

Beethoven first attempted to write an opera when he received a commission from Emanuel Schikaneder, the theater director who years earlier had written the libretto for Mozart's *The Magic Flute.* Schikaneder's libretto for *Vestas Feuer* was set in ancient Rome, but after struggling with it for a short time and composing about 10 minutes of music, Beethoven abandoned the project, complaining that it was trivial and poorly written ("verses such as could only come out of the mouths of our Viennese women apple-vendors").

He then began work on what would become his only opera, *Leonore,* later to be retitled *Fidelio.* While he was able to adapt some of his musical ideas from *Vestas Feuer*, this would be an entirely different kind of undertaking. It was more in the vein of the

"rescue operas" that became popular after the French Revolution, particularly those of Cherubini, whom Beethoven admired. *Fidelio* deals with political ideals: tyranny, heroism, and liberation. It tells the story of Leonore, who disguises herself as a male prison guard named Fidelio in order to rescue her husband Florestan from being put to death as a political prisoner.

The libretto was based on Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's libretto *Léonore, ou l'amour conjugale* ("Leonora, or Marital Love"), and, according to Bouilly, it recounted a true incident that took place in Tours during the time of the Terror. However, to avoid the censors and political trouble, he set his story in Spain at an earlier period. Bouilly's libretto had already been set to music three times, once in French and twice in Italian by the time that Beethoven's friend Joseph Sonnleithner prepared a German libretto for him. Sonnleithner based his version closely on Bouilly's original, providing spoken dialogue between musical numbers.

First version

The opera was finished in its original form toward the end of the summer of 1805, but its premiere was delayed by the Viennese censors, as well as by insufficient time to rehearse the difficult orchestral music and the daunting vocal writing. The opera finally did open on November 20 at the Theater an der Wien. Against Beethoven's wishes, the theater changed the title of the opera from *Leonore, oder der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe* ("Leonore, or the Triumph of Marital Love") to *Fidelio,* in order to distinguish it from the earlier Leonore operas.

The timing of the premiere could not have been worse. That month Napoleon's army occupied Vienna and most of Beethoven's noble patrons fled the city. On opening night, the theater was full of French officers, and the remaining two performances played to empty houses. This first version of the opera was not well received. It was criticized as being long and repetitious, and although there was beautiful music in it, it was considered symphonic rather than theatrical and dramatic. Critics compared it unfavorably with the operas of Mozart and Cherubini.

Second version

At the encouragement of his friends, Beethoven almost immediately began shortening and revising both the music and the libretto. There were major changes to the libretto, including some reordering of events, and the original three acts were reduced to two. The opera reopened in this second version on March 29, 1806, a mere four months after the premiere. This time the reaction of the press and the public was more positive, but the work was still under-rehearsed and poorly performed. The cast of singers, almost all of them the same as in the previous production, still had trouble with the vocal writing, and Beethoven raged at the poor choral singing and at the orchestra, which ignored his dynamics in their effort to survive the difficulties of their parts. Perhaps *Fidelio* would eventually have succeeded, but he angrily demanded the return of his score and withdrew the work after only two performances.

Third (final) version

Beethoven then turned to other music until 1814, eight years later, when three singers asked him to resurrect his opera for a benefit concert. One of them was Anna Milder, who had been the original Leonore at 19 years of age but who was now a mature singer famous for her roles in the operas of Gluck and Cherubini. Beethoven turned to the poet Georg Friedrich Treitschke, who further cut and revised the libretto and made more changes to the order of events. "I have read your amendments to the opera with great pleasure," Beethoven wrote, "[and] they determine me the more to rebuild the desolate ruins of an old castle." For his part, he rewrote the music in the finales, revised a great deal of the rest of the opera, and simplified some of the vocal writing. But he found it difficult to revisit an old work: "I could write something new more quickly than add new things to old as now."

One major change occurs at the beginning of Act II. Treitschke objected that Florestan, who at that point is nearly dead of hunger, should not then sing a bravura aria. They decided that he would instead have an ecstatic vision of Leonore appearing to him as an angel. Having written the words, Treitschke handed them to Beethoven. "He read, ran up and down the room, muttered, growled, as was his habit instead of singing -- and tore open the pianoforte. . . He placed the text in front of him and began to improvise marvellously . . . He would not permit himself to be disturbed. It was late when he embraced me, and declining the meal, he hurried home. The next day the admirable composition was finished."

The opera was at last a great success and had to be repeated a number of times in the following weeks. It was in many ways a different work from the one originally heard in 1805, and it is this third version that is normally performed today. In this final version, *Fidelio* still begins with the simplicity and light tone of an eighteenth-century comedy, but it soon becomes a deeper drama about courage and universal liberation, something more akin to the "Ode to Joy" in the Ninth Symphony than to a typical opera.

The four overtures

Over the course of its three versions, Beethoven wrote four different overtures for his opera. What is known today as the *Leonore Overture No. 2* was played at the 1805 premiere. It was then rewritten for the second production in 1806 and became what we know today as the *Leonore Overture No. 3*, but that symphonic work summarizing the action of the drama was criticized for its length and for overwhelming the light tone at the beginning of the opera. It is, as Wagner put it, "not the overture to the drama; it is the drama itself."

Thus for the final version in 1814, Beethoven decided to write an entirely new overture that would be lighter and shorter than the Leonore overtures. The night before the 1814 opening, he dined with friends and stayed afterwards to sketch ideas for the new overture on the bill. When he didn't show up for the final rehearsal the following

morning, Treitschke drove to Beethoven's lodgings: "He lay in bed sleeping soundly; beside him stood a goblet with wine and a biscuit in it; the sheets of the overture were scattered on the bed and the floor. A burnt-out candle showed that he had worked far into the night." Without being able to rehearse the overture, a different overture was substituted on the first night. The new *Fidelio Overture* was introduced at the second performance to an enthusiastic reception.

There is, of course, a *Leonore Overture No. 1*, which was discovered only after Beethoven's death. It is a simpler work, so numbered because it was originally thought to be the earliest draft, but it is now known to have been adapted in 1808 for a revival which never took place.

While the second and third Leonore overtures are often heard as independent concert pieces, it was Mahler who popularized the idea of inserting the *Leonore No. 3* during the scene change before the second act finale. That became a tradition for some conductors in the twentieth century, among them Toscanini and Klemperer, even though such a lengthy interruption to the drama is something that Beethoven never envisioned.

Later performances

If Napoleon's occupation of Vienna had put a cloud over the 1805 premiere of Beethoven's opera, the atmosphere was far brighter for its revival in 1814. By then, Napoleon had been defeated and was in exile on the island of Elba. Some months after the triumph of *Fidelio* in its final version, the opera was performed before dignitaries at the Congress of Vienna. It was a celebration of freedom following the defeat of Napoleon, a message that continued to resonate in later times. At the end of World War II, it was *Fidelio* that reopened many European opera houses, including the State Opera in Vienna; and years later, performances of *Fidelio* were associated with the fall of the Berlin wall.