

A painting of a prison corridor with a close-up of hands clasped in prayer. The corridor is long and narrow, with metal railings on both sides. The walls are a dull, greyish-blue, and the floor is a dark, polished surface. In the foreground, a pair of hands is clasped together in a prayerful gesture, with the fingers interlaced. The hands are rendered in a warm, reddish-brown tone, contrasting with the cool, grey tones of the corridor. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a somber and contemplative atmosphere. The overall style is that of a classical painting, with visible brushstrokes and a focus on emotional expression.

FIDELIO

BY LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

<https://sfopera.ihubapp.org/c/fidelio-2021/feed?postTypeId=whatsNew>

DIGITAL PROGRAM:

A digital program is available [HERE](#). Please note the following articles:

- [Director's Note](#) by *Fidelio* director Matthew Ozawa
- "[Art Reflecting Emotion](#)" a note from San Francisco Opera General Director Matthew Shilvock
- [Fidelio: At a Glance](#) by Paul Thomason
- "[The Liberator: In Fidelio, A Tyrant Meets His Match](#)" by Larry Rothe
- "[Singing about Freedom](#)" by Mark Burford (includes a Spotify playlist that places the Prisoners' Chorus within a continuum of songs about liberation)
- "[We Shall Be Free, We Shall Find Peace](#)" a digital exhibit of art by incarcerated persons at San Quentin State Prison

<https://sfopera.ihubapp.org/posts/86358/matthew-shilvock-new-content>



A Note from Matthew Shilvock: Art Reflecting Emotion

From the Ancient Greeks forward, the stage has served as a way for us to make sense of the world, to hold up human experiences, and to engage with them emotionally, viscerally. The stage is at once both a safe space where we can engage vicariously with extremes of human emotion but also a very vulnerable place where art can unlock real experiences in our own lives. Unlike reading about human experiences in the news, the theater invites us to connect with those experiences in a very personal way.

It is vitally important to me that the work on our stage reflects our community; that we embrace the storytelling power of this space to better understand the world. When we invited Matthew Ozawa to create a new *Fidelio* production, it was very much with that aspiration. How could this piece, over 200 years old, teach us truths not just about humanity but about humanity *now*? As we emerge from this time of darkness and silence in the world, that is a particularly urgent need.

Beethoven composed *Fidelio* in the tailwinds of the French (and American) Revolution, embracing a broad idea of independent human will unshackled from the hierarchical formalities of church and state. That his protagonist is a woman makes the point even more powerfully. Beethoven's embrace of the liberating power of the human spirit is as resonant now as it was then and, as with the Ninth Symphony, *Fidelio* has been an anthem to freedom from oppression and isolation for over two centuries. It uplifts with an extraordinary hopefulness that is so fitting in this moment.



Art reflects life in broad archetypal ways, but it can also shine a spotlight on very specific aspects of society and community. Our setting of *Fidelio* in a detention center brings that to the fore. Not only is detention a metaphor for oppression, but the setting evokes a very real part of the lived human experience in 2021. The confinement of people on the basis of national origin, whether that be in the US or elsewhere, and the very real questions of how nation states address increasing migration whether populations are escaping war and violence, climate change, or other factors. This production of *Fidelio* lets us, as audience members, into the emotions of isolation, of separation, of the desperation for escape. Matthew Ozawa invites us to ask questions of ourselves and our world, using the lens of something very real.

The opera director Graham Vick, who very sadly passed away from Covid earlier this year, was a leading proponent of immersive opera—opera where audience members are physically in the experience with the artists. His immersive work happened in found spaces—abandoned factories,

warehouses, etc. In his 2002 staging of *Fidelio* he asked audience members to put a black bag over their heads and stand far apart from each other during Florestan's opening aria in Act II. Florestan, deep in a subterranean cell, cries out in the darkness, in the silence, ultimately seeing a vision of his beloved Leonore. The director wanted his audience to feel that darkness and isolation. He wanted us to actually experience Florestan's sensory deprivation.

In the more formal world of a 3,000-seat theater we have to find that physical isolation in other ways. In the music under the baton of Eun Sun Kim, in the setting by this extraordinary creative team led by Matthew Ozawa, we are invited to be a part of Leonore and Florestan's world. As Florestan cries out, we are there with him in the cell, bound, deprived of human connection. And we too are liberated by Leonore's bravery. My definition of a successful opera production is one where the audience feels that they are *participating* in the emotional drama, that they are not just observing something happening but living it in the moment. Opera offers one of the most profound reflections of our world, and I cannot wait to share in that with you in this *Fidelio*.

<https://sfopera.ihubapp.org/posts/86361/fidelio-at-a-glance>

At a Glance

Crushing political tyranny coupled with the eternal, unquenchable promise of hope—these competing themes in Ludwig van Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, are as poignant, and uplifting, today as they were when it was written over 200 years ago. At the center of the story is Leonore, a woman who disguises herself as a man, Fidelio, in the desperate attempt to find—and then free—her husband Florestan who is being imprisoned for his political beliefs. Ignoring the danger, Leonore gets a job as assistant to the jailer Rocco at a prison overseen by her husband's enemy, Don Pizarro. Armed only with her gritty determination and overwhelming love, she faces the ugly reality of the life endured by the oppressed. It all builds toward one of the most thrilling climaxes in all of opera—set to music only Beethoven could write.

The Creators

It was none other than Emanuel Schikaneder, director of the Theater an der Wien, who in 1803 persuaded Ludwig van Beethoven to write his first opera. Twelve years earlier Schikaneder had supplied Mozart with the libretto to *The Magic Flute* and created the role of Papageno. Now he provided Beethoven with free lodging in the apartment complex attached to the theater, and a libretto entitled *Vestas Feuer* (The Vestal Flame). At that point Beethoven had composed his Op. 18 string quartets, his first three piano concerti, numerous piano sonatas, including the Moonlight and Waldstein sonatas, and was working on his third symphony. He found little to inspire him in Schikaneder's libretto, so after a few months he turned to a libretto by the French writer Jean-Nicolas Bouilly, *Léonore, ou L'Amour conjugal* (Leonore, or Married Love). Beethoven was working from a translation by the Viennese writer and editor Joseph Sonnleithner who had expanded Bouilly's original to provide more opportunities for music drama. Bouilly is said to have taken his plot from a recent real-life incident that took place in France during the Revolution's Reign of Terror, when a woman had disguised herself as a man in order to free her husband from the prison where he was being held as a political prisoner.

While composing the opera during 1804–05 Beethoven had a rather one-sided love affair with the widow Josephine von Brunsvik, emotions that certainly spilled over into the intensity of his depiction of a wife heroically saving her husband from death in prison. The libretto spoke to Beethoven's own idealized view of women, and its larger themes of the defeat of political tyranny and the triumph of good over evil

resonated with Beethoven's passionate belief in the ideals of the Enlightenment. Unfortunately *Fidelio* was not a success at its premiere on November 20, 1805. Its three acts were too long, and problems with the censor delayed the premiere until after Napoleon's troops had occupied Vienna. The Empress and most of Beethoven's friends and supporters had fled the city, which meant the audience was a miscellaneous crowd sprinkled with French officers. After three performances, the opera was withdrawn.

Beethoven was persuaded to make significant cuts to the opera, including reducing the number of acts to two, which he only did with great reluctance. The revised version was given on March 29, 1806, but Beethoven quarreled with the new director of the Theater an der Wien, Baron Peter Anton Braun, and withdrew the opera after only two performances. In 1814 Vienna's Kärntnertor Theater quite unexpectedly asked to revive *Fidelio*. Beethoven agreed but insisted he would first have to make numerous changes. The poet Georg Friedrich Treitschke, who was also stage manager of the theater, made substantial changes in the libretto, including rewriting finales for both acts, adding a new recitative for Leonore's aria, adding a final section to Florestan's aria, and cutting some weak numbers. This third version of *Fidelio* premiered on May 23, 1814. It was a success, and in this final version the opera has become a cornerstone of the international operatic repertoire.

The Setting

Beethoven and his librettists set the opera in 18th Century Spain, near Seville. Act I takes place in the courtyard of a State Prison. Act II begins deep in a subterranean dungeon with the final scene set on the parade grounds of the castle. The universality of the opera's themes, especially the fight against political tyranny, has often led to an updating of the opera's time period.

The Music

During Beethoven's life, German opera was moving from the comic *singspiel*, in which musical numbers were separated by dialogue, toward a model that would eventually become dominated by Wagner's through-composed works. Mozart's *singspiel* *The Magic Flute* has been called the first great German opera; it is certainly comic, but has an underlying serious message as well. Beethoven's *Fidelio* shares the form—musical numbers separated by spoken dialogue—but is more overtly serious than Mozart's *Flute*. The music Beethoven composed for his opera is on an exalted level, at times foreshadowing his monumental Ninth Symphony. But at the same time it reflects the very distinct personalities of his characters, some of whom are far from heroic. The folksy nature of Marzelline and Jaquino and the evolving character of Rocco all are conveyed in their music. Pizarro's evil plotting is depicted in his chilling aria. But it is with the multitude of emotions experienced by Leonore and Florestan as they grapple with their situations, that the profundity of the composer's purpose truly takes over. And with the Act I Prisoners Chorus, Beethoven's music gives voice to the universal longing for freedom that is just as gripping today as it was 200 years ago. The numerous revisions Beethoven made

resulted in no less than four different overtures for the opera. The original 1805 version began with the Leonore Overture no. 2. The great Leonore Overture no. 3 was written for the 1806 revival. Beethoven wrote the Fidelio Overture, that almost always begins the opera today, for the 1814 performance. The Leonore no. 1 Overture seems to have been composed in 1807 for a performance of the opera in Prague that never took place.

In San Francisco Opera History

It was not until 1937 that San Francisco Opera presented *Fidelio*, but it pulled out all the stops: Kirsten Flagstad headed the cast, with Belgian tenor René Maison as her Florestan. Ludwig Hofmann was Pizarro, Emanuel List, Rocco, and the conductor was the legendary Fritz Reiner. Two years later *Fidelio* returned and, again, history was made with the casting. Appearing opposite Flagstad was Lauritz Melchior, the only time he ever sang the role of Florestan in the U.S. and the only time this famous pair appeared together in an opera not by Wagner. Since then, San Francisco audiences have often enjoyed such high-powered pairings as Astrid Varnay and Set Svanholm (1951), Birgit Nilsson and Jon Vickers (1964), Gwyneth Jones and James King (1969) Elizabeth Connell and James McCracken (1987), Christine Brewer and Thomas Moser (2005). Other notable Leonores include Inge Borkh, Gré Brouwenstijn, and Hildegard Behrens. SFO Pizarros have included Herbert Janssen, Hans Hotter, Paul Schoeffler, and Geraint Evans. During each of their debut seasons Alexander Kipnis sang Rocco (1939) and Sheri Greenawald appeared as Marzelline (1978). In a bit of casting that seems unusual today, Marilyn Horne appeared as Marzelline in her second season with the company (1961). The opera has often attracted famous conductors: in 1954, 79-year-old Pierre Monteux led *Fidelio* and two other operas, after retiring from the San Francisco Symphony. Others include Erich Leinsdorf and three company music directors: John Prichard, Donald Runnicles, and now Eun Sun Kim. In 1946 SFO gave *Fidelio* in English, an experiment that only lasted one season. In 1951 the Jaquino was San Francisco's own James Schwabacher who later endowed the Schwabacher Recital Series, still presented by the San Francisco Opera Center and the Merola Opera Program.

Instrumentation & Performing Forces

ORCHESTRA

Pit Musicians

- 2 Flutes & 1 Piccolo
- 2 Oboes
- 2 Clarinets
- 2 Bassoons & 1 Contrabassoon
- 4 Horns
- 2 Trumpets
- 2 Trombones

- 1 Timpani
- 44 Strings (13 First Violins, 10 Second Violins, 8 Violas, 7 Cellos, 6 Basses)
- **62 Total Orchestra**

Backstage Banda & Sound Effects

- Act I —
- Act II — Banda Trumpet

CHORUS

- 37 Regular Choristers
- 36 Extra Choristers
- **73 Total Choristers**

DANCERS

- **0 Total Dancers**

<https://sfopera.ihubapp.org/posts/86359/fidelio-cast-and-creative>

FIDELIO

(Sung in German with English supertitles)

Opera in two acts by **Ludwig van Beethoven**

Libretto by **Joseph Sonnleithner and Georg Friedrich Treitschke**

Cast

(in order of vocal appearance)

<i>Jaquino</i>	Christopher Oglesby †
<i>Marzelline</i>	Anne-Marie MacIntosh *†
<i>Rocco</i>	James Creswell
<i>Leonore</i>	Elza van den Heever
<i>Don Pizarro</i>	Greer Grimsley
<i>First Prisoner</i>	Zhengyi Bai †
<i>Second Prisoner</i>	Stefan Egerstrom †
<i>Florestan</i>	Russell Thomas
<i>Don Fernando</i>	Soloman Howard

Facility Office Staff, Guards, Interrogators, Prisoners, Aides, Media, Secret Service, Soldiers

* San Francisco Opera debut † Current Adler Fellow

TIME AND PLACE: *Recent past or not so distant future. Detention Facility.*

ACT I: FACILITY OFFICES / HOLDING CELLS

—INTERMISSION—

ACT II: BASEMENT / FLORESTAN'S CELL

Creative Team

Conductor

Eun Sun Kim

Director

Matthew Ozawa

Set & Projection Designer

Alexander V. Nichols

Costume Designer

Jessica Jahn

Co-Lighting Designer

JAX Messenger

Co-Lighting Designer

Justin A. Partier

Chorus Director

Ian Robertson

Assistant Conductor

Robert Mollicone

Prompter

Dennis Doubin

Musical Preparation

John Churchwell

Maureen Zoltek

Kseniia Polstiankina Barrad†

Andrew King†

Fabrizio Corona

Diction

Anja Burmeister Strauss

Supertitles

Christopher Bergen

Assistant Directors

Morgan Robinson

Jose Maria Condemi

E. Reed Fisher

Stage Manager

Jenny Harber

Assistant Stage Managers

Jayne O'Hara

Thea Railey
Rachel Garoon

Fight Director
Dave Maier

Costume Supervisor
Jai Alltizer

Wig and Makeup
Jeanna Parham

[Artist Bios](#)

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A new San Francisco Opera Production

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 14 2021 • 7:30 pm
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 17 2021 • 2:00 pm
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 20 2021 • 7:30 pm
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 22 2021 • 7:30 pm
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 26 2021 • 7:30 pm
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 30 2021 • 7:30 pm

The performance will last approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes with one intermission.

Latecomers may not be seated during the performance after the lights have dimmed. Patrons who leave during the performance may not be re-seated until intermissions.

The use of cameras, cell phones, and any kind of recording equipment is strictly forbidden. Please turn off and refrain from using all electronic devices.

<https://sfopera.ihubapp.org/posts/86592/directors-note-matthew-ozawa>



Director's Note: Matthew Ozawa

Fidelio has consistently served as a symbol of hope for generations of people afflicted by oppression: a revival in 1814 served as a protest against Napoleon's autocratic tyranny; an Arturo Toscanini led performance in 1937, as well as a Bruno Walter conducted Metropolitan Opera performance in 1941, affirmed the dignity of humanity and the countless victims escaping Europe's Nazi terror; performances of *Fidelio* in 1954 following the death of Stalin became a statement of outrage for those who were unjustly condemned to the regime's prisons. Each performance reaffirmed and celebrated the power of humanity to defeat tyranny and overcome oppression. The questions we now ask ourselves are: Who is afflicted by oppression in the USA and globally? What does shining a light on injustice look like? How is true freedom achieved?

Beethoven's only opera is demanding, revolutionary, and shockingly relevant. It is a story of hope, self-sacrifice, love and liberation. At the heart of *Fidelio* is the heroism of a woman, Leonore, a vision for the modern age, whose personal sacrifice to free her husband from wrongful incarceration results in the liberation of all those imprisoned in a state facility. Far from the customary roles for women in opera, Leonore's courage and bravery are empowering. Driven by a noble and just cause, as well as immense love for her husband, Leonore fights from within

the “system” and thus becomes a medium for the liberating light that frees all those from darkness. Her heroic exposure of injustice reminds us that we, too, have the power to be agents of change. Each person deserves the opportunity for their voice to be heard, and each small action carries the potential to create immense ripples in the wave of revolutionary freedom.

The frame that holds Leonore’s journey is that of a prison, and the narrative sharply spotlights the many perspectives and tiers of power embedded within such a facility. On one end of the spectrum are workers in the facility, where those controlling and propping up the “system” are disconnected from the oppression they are upholding. On the other end are those completely without power: the prisoners, and at the very bottom is Florestan, Leonore’s husband, who is silenced for speaking truth to power. In order to navigate such a divide, Leonore must transform herself into Fidelio to keep from being othered or outed in her pursuit to find and free her husband.

Beethoven’s intention to choose such a location and story perfectly reflects his revolutionary and humanistic leanings. Living during the Enlightenment era, he was impacted by Europe’s renewed optimism that democratic progress would consolidate egalitarian ideals, ideals proclaiming that people deserve equal rights and opportunities. Enlightenment ethos elevated principles of freedom and civility, with the hope of creating a utopia that would decrease the disparity between the wealthy and impoverished. These ideals ignited the French Revolution in 1789. However, as in many cycles where power is threatened, they were quickly crushed by the Reign of Terror, as well as the economic and social injustices nurtured by the Industrial Revolution. Emerging from this feverish time in history were many dramas that highlighted patriotic and political themes, such as unjust imprisonment, escape, and heroic rescue. One such drama was *Léonore, ou L’Amore conjugal*, which became the basis for *Fidelio*.

Early on it became clear that our production wanted to mirror the dualities inherent in the narrative and music. How could we visually manifest Beethoven’s surging expression and juxtaposition of sonorities? How could we create a structure that would depict the facility, the system, and the tiers of people who inhabit it? We were cognizant that the opera’s original setting of the late 18th century was close to the time period in which it was written and premiered. It would have felt very contemporary and relevant to those that saw it. Therefore, we set our production in a recent past or near future detention facility, somewhere in the world. This setting allows us to investigate contemporary structures that remove those that are deemed an “other” and a threat and to give voice to those who have been powerless to speak. In doing so, not only do we aim to honor the rich history and spirit of the work but also recognize the countless people who have overcome oppression, fought for liberty, and have been agents of change. Might we all learn from Leonore’s journey and celebrate the power of love and collective action.

<https://sfopera.ihubapp.org/posts/86356/mark-burfords-songs-of-freedom>



Singing about Freedom by Mark Burford

In Ludwig van Beethoven's *Fidelio*, the Spanish noblewoman Leonore, the plot's heroine, delivers freedom not once but twice. The opera ends with Minister of State and *deus ex machina* Don Fernando magnanimously ceding his role as emancipator, allowing Leonore the gratification of liberating her husband, Florestan, from his chains. Earlier, in what may be *Fidelio*'s most memorable scene, Leonore, on the lookout for Florestan while disguised as the title character, talks her boss, the prison guard Rocco, into granting his inmates the brief reprieve of a walk in the garden. Blinded by the sunlight as they emerge from darkness but revived by breathing "free air" that restores the memory of life beyond incarceration, the prisoners contemplate a glimmer of hope—"We shall be free!"—clouded by a shadow of doubt: "O freedom! Will you return?" Stanford historian Paul Robinson has described this Prisoners' Chorus as *Fidelio*'s "ideological core." If so, the theme of freedom is situated at the heart of an early nineteenth-century opera that premiered well within memory of the French Revolution's call for *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.

As a set piece about the aspiration for liberation, the Prisoners' Chorus belongs to a history of songs that have ruminated upon the idea of freedom. We needn't look too far to find a predecessor. In 1791, the Act I finale of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Don Giovanni* pressed pause in the middle of a bustling party—a mashup of nobility and peasants that was “open to all”—to raise a grandiose toast: “*Viva la libertà!*” On the surface, the Enlightenment spirit of inclusion seemed willing, but human flesh is weak. Giovanni is identified as a “libertine” for whom freedom meant the unfettered right to sexually harass women and flaunt social contracts to his heart's content—liberties that would earn him a trip to hell. So, what exactly are we drinking to? *Fidelio* and *Don Giovanni* already suggest that there is, in fact, a spectrum of possible meanings of “freedom”—political freedom, intellectual freedom, sexual freedom, religious freedom, freedom of speech, and more—that singers and song-makers have reflected upon for and with their audiences.



The chorus “*Va, Pensiero, sull’ali dorate*” (“Fly, thoughts, on wings of gold”) from Verdi’s *Nabucco* at San Francisco Opera, 1987.

Photo: Robert Cahen/San Francisco Opera

Fidelio is the best-known among the many operas in which rescue from unjust captivity drove the plot. Late eighteenth-century French Revolutionary *opéra comique* was influential in its use of this dramatic device, often employed, as in *Fidelio*, to affirm a collective belief in the eventual triumph of individual freedom over repressive tyranny. Operas preoccupied with freeing European women held in a Turkish harem, with Mozart’s *Abduction from the Seraglio* as the most famous case, offer variations on this theme. The singing captive has been an attractive figure for composers, with illustrative examples in Almirena’s aria “*Lascia ch’io pianga*” from

George Frideric Handel's *Rinaldo* and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's 1904 setting of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's abolitionist poem "The Slave Singing at Midnight." But unlike the Prisoners' Chorus, individual numbers in so-called rescue operas tended to treat the denial of freedom as but one plight among many others worthy of existential lament.

Perhaps closer kin in addressing the experience of captivity were songs documenting the Black freedom struggle. Spirituals were religious folk songs created and sung by enslaved African Americans, some of which, like "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?" and "Go Down, Moses," articulated direct demands for liberation. In popular music nearer our own time, these demands could be made on behalf of real-life political prisoners, as in "Free Nelson Mandela," the mid-1980s romp by the ska band The Specials. Opera and reggae overlap in other ways. Countless reggae songs took metaphorical inspiration from Israelite exile following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, which we also see in Giuseppe Verdi's *Nabucco* and its chorus of the Hebrew slaves, "Va, pensiero." Both "Va, pensiero" and The Melodians' 1970 song "By the Rivers of Babylon," heard in the soundtrack of the film *The Harder They Come*, are sung to words lifted from the account of ancient Hebrew captivity in Psalm 137. If Biblical scripture asks "How can we sing in a strange land?" Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" extends the invitation "Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom?" while also reminding us that freedom is not just a matter of physical bondage: "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds."



Bob Marley on stage at The Roxy, Los Angeles, 1976. Photo: Bridgeman Images

To *Fidelio*'s prisoners, "the dungeon is a grave," but in some religious contexts, death can be embraced as a form of spiritual liberation. The post-Civil War African American song "Oh

Freedom,” repopularized in the 1960s by activist folksingers like Joan Baez, declared: “Before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free.” This Christian theology is also transmitted through the Lutheran liturgical music of Johann Sebastian Bach. In the alto aria from Cantata no. 114, *Ach, lieben Christen, seid getrost*, Bach sets the words: “You make me, O death, no longer fearful now, for through you alone I shall achieve freedom.”

More often, though, music expresses longing for freedom in the here and now. When it comes to love, of course, captivity cuts both ways. In the 1970 song “I’m Just a Prisoner (Of Your Good Lovin’),” soul singer Candi Staton confessed, “I don’t want to ever be free.” That same year, in “Freedom is Beyond the Door,” she sang about a woman summoning the courage to escape a relationship gone wrong. The freedom song proper is most closely associated with music heard during the civil rights rallies of the 1950s and 1960s. Freedom songs could be ready-made, thematically resonant spirituals or popular songs adapted to fit current circumstances. The lyrics of Harry Belafonte’s pseudo-calypso hit “The Banana Boat Song” (“Day-O! Daylight come and me wan’ go home”) were transformed into “Freedom! Freedom’s come and it won’t be long.” But the movement also generated newly written freedom songs like Nina Simone’s “I Wish I Knew How It Feels to Be Free,” music that was less about regaining freedom than pondering full liberation as yet unknown.



Nina Simone, c. 1967. Photo: Bridgeman Images

Songs have also been used to project a freedom that was never lost but is perceived to be under threat. During the early Cold War, the Red Scare produced a multitude of propagandistic pop songs that conveyed the tenor of the times and communicated national understandings of freedom that remain influential. In 1950, country music star Elton Britt's "The Red We Want" drew a sharp contrast between the "brave red" of the U.S. flag and the "slave red" of communism. Lee Greenwood's 1984 song "God Bless the U.S.A.," featuring the chorus "And I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free," continues a tradition of mobilizing the sound of country music as a delivery system for patriotic notions of freedom linked to a celebration of American exceptionalism.

What kind of "freedom song" has Beethoven written in *Fidelio*? The Prisoners' Chorus is notable for being both an expression of the desire to be liberated from the concrete circumstance

of imprisonment and a more abstract meditation on what it means to be free. As the prisoners become more and more fervent in their visions of freedom, a soloist among them steps forward to hush and caution them: “We are watched with eye and ear.” Should we, then, “speak softly” when engaging in freedom talk to keep things underground, or do we say it loud and let freedom ring? But Beethoven’s chorus also nudges us to interrogate how freedom happens. Do we, like *Fidelio*’s prisoners, simply hope, as we await Providence or benevolence, that freedom will come? Or, like pop diva Beyoncé in her 2016 anthem “Freedom,” should we simply proclaim: “I break chains all by myself?”

Mark Burford is R. P. Wollenberg Professor of Music at Reed College, author of Mahalia Jackson and the Black Gospel Field, and a recent guest on the podcast Aria Code, discussing "Va, pensiero" from Verdi's Nabucco.

<https://sfopera.ihubapp.org/posts/86360/fidelio-synopsis>

Synopsis

TIME AND PLACE: Recent past or not so distant future. Detention Facility

Background

Florestan has been unjustly imprisoned and silenced by his enemy, Pizarro, the governor of a state prison used to detain political prisoners. There he is slowly being tortured and starved to death. Florestan's wife, Leonore, believing her husband to still be alive, makes it her mission to find and free him. Leonore, disguised as a young man named "Fidelio," she is employed by the chief jailer, Rocco, as his assistant.

ACT I: FACILITY OFFICES / HOLDING CELLS

Scene 1

The young prison employee Jaquino courts Marzeline in vain, for she has fallen in love with Fidelio. Her father, Rocco, also wants a union between his daughter and Fidelio and hopes for the governor's permission to use the latter as a helper with the secret prisoners. Marzeline fears that Fidelio won't be able to bear all the misery that such work entails, but Leonore knows she must have courage and strength to carry out her secret plan—the rescue of her husband.

Scene 2

Pizarro receives news from a friend that the minister, Don Fernando, intends a surprise inspection of the prison. Fearing that Florestan will be found, he resolves to have him killed. A soldier is posted on the guard tower to give a signal as soon as the minister is sighted. Rocco, while not willing to be a murderer, agrees to hold his tongue for money and later hide Florestan's body in a ruined cistern. Leonore, who has overheard the plan to murder a prisoner, resolves to save him, whoever he may be. At her request Rocco allows some of the prisoners to go into the courtyard. Leonore is distressed that Florestan is not among them. Pizarro, furious at Rocco's independent actions, has the prisoners locked up again.

ACT II: BASEMENT / FLORESTAN'S CELL

Scene 1

In a secret isolated cell, Florestan, weakened from torture, hunger and thirst, has a vision: his wife appears to him as an angel of freedom. Rocco and Leonore come down into the deepest vault of the prison to open the cistern which is to be used as a grave. Leonore recognizes the unknown prisoner as her husband. Against Pizarro's orders she hands him bread and wine, but dares do no more. When Pizarro appears and tries to stab the defenseless Florestan, she rushes to shield him. Pizarro, in a burst of rage, attempts to kill them both. Leonore draws a pistol and levels it at him. Suddenly a trumpet call is heard announcing the minister's arrival. Leonore and Florestan are saved and reunited.

Scene 2

Florestan's fellow prisoners have been freed by the minister and Leonore removes Florestan's chains. Pizarro is arrested and led away, as the crowd hails Leonore for her courageous actions.

[< Main](#)

<https://sfopera.ihubapp.org/posts/86357/larry-rothes-the-liberator>



The Liberator: In Fidelio, A Tyrant Meets his Match by Larry Rothe

by Larry Rothe

Fidelio occupies an uncannily apt place in the present moment, when autocrats around the world have hit their stride. Not that Beethoven was clairvoyant. The leaders we call “strongmen” have always been with us, and whether their names are Bolsonaro, Duterte, Orbán, Putin, or Beethoven’s own Pizarro, they act from a common script, modeling behavior for each other and for their disciples—the true believers as well as the cynics who forfeit principle to guarantee their own survival—labeling disagreement as disloyalty and opponents as enemies, targeting the Florestans who dare question their versions of reality. Human nature being what it is, *Fidelio* has a place on any stage, at any time. Especially because Beethoven tells us the good guys can win.

Audiences of the nineteenth century approached *Fidelio* as the story of a loyal wife's mission to free her unjustly imprisoned husband. But the opera goes much further. Music gets no more political or demonstrates so clearly how personal choices shape the world.

Fidelio is based on an incident during the Reign of Terror, documented in a libretto of the 1790s by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly. His *Léonore, ou L'amour conjugal* had already been the basis of three operas when Joseph von Sonnleithner adapted it for the Vienna stage. Sonnleithner's was the libretto Beethoven had been waiting for, and he turned it into his own *Leonore* in just six months. It was cursed from the start. The Theater an der Wien management, fearing confusion with another recently staged *Leonore*, insisted on calling Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, and not even he could prevail against the marketing department. Then censors scuttled the premiere, set for October 1805. By the time the desperate Sonnleithner convinced them the work emphasized a wife's love, not rebellion against the state, Napoleon had taken Vienna, and on opening night that November the cast played to a house empty but for a crowd of uncomprehending French officers. After two more performances, *Fidelio* closed. Any message, either spousal or subversive, was lost on its audience.

In 1806, determined to salvage his work, Beethoven revised *Leonore* (the title we now use for that first version). But beyond folding three acts into two, he and his new collaborator, Stephan von Breuning, made only minor changes. The press liked this attempt no better than the original. With that, Beethoven shelved the project and went on to other things (the Violin Concerto, Piano Concerto No. 5, symphonies 5, 6, 7, and 8, and much more). Then, in 1814, finding Beethoven newly popular on the heels of his potboiler *Wellington's Victory*, the court theater sought his go-ahead to revive *Fidelio*. He agreed, on condition he could revise it again. This time, the playwright Georg Friedrich Treitschke subjected the libretto to a thorough overhaul. Beethoven did the same to the score. When they finished, they had a hit.

The times helped *Fidelio* as much as the revision, which premiered in May 1814, a month after Napoleon's exile to Elba. As Maynard Solomon writes, the opera "could readily be perceived as a celebration of the victory over the Napoleonic forces and as an allegory of the liberation of Europe from a contemporary tyrant and usurper." Which brings us back to the present. In our age of autocrats and the whirlwind of news they create, fake and real and always unnerving, we need our own allegory of liberation from a tyranny of mendacity and pettiness. *Fidelio* fills the bill. While married love is surely one of its themes, another theme, love of humanity, plays out on a scale equal to so sublime a subject.

Sublimities, Beethoven tells us, are where we find them, the angels we may entertain unawares when showing hospitality to strangers. The cosmic can appear in the everyday just as Leonore, disguised as the man Fidelio, appears at the prison she believes confines her husband, Florestan. Although unaware as yet of her potential, Leonore is extraordinary. The stirring overture assures us of that. But the curtain rises on the most domestic of scenes. Marzelline, the jailor Rocco's daughter, is at her ironing board, sparring with her father's helper Jaquino, a clueless would-be suitor. Into this world steps Leonore/Fidelio, who has talked herself into a job as Rocco's helper, the better to find Florestan. The dissonance—the heroic amid the commonplace—is unsettling, the more so as Leonore's disguise has tricked Marzelline into falling for Fidelio. Resisting this complication's comic potential, Beethoven emphasizes its danger. No one must discover Leonore, no one except Leonore herself. Who is she? Does she have what it takes to risk everything, even her life, to find her husband and to save him?

Pizarro, governor of the prison and Florestan's mortal enemy, answers these questions for her. Although Leonore will not reveal herself until later, Pizarro shows his hand now. Even before the first words of his aria "Ha! Welch ein Augenblick"—"what a moment"—a rumble of timpani and stabs of agitated strings announce the end of normal life. In an instant, the world of ironing boards and quibbling lovers is gone. Furious and melodramatic, Pizarro expands almost visibly as he sucks the oxygen out of the room. For him, Beethoven creates a musical equivalent to mouth-foaming anger as the governor spits out his plan for vengeance on the man who dared expose him. In the duet that follows, he enlists Rocco's help in silencing the whistle-blower. Leonora overhears this. Pizarro's words seal her fate, and his.

If Pizarro's hatred consumes him, it convinces Florestan's wife that this barbarian must go. In her descent to the dungeon, Leonore becomes the person she was meant to be. Just as she has assumed a disguise, greatness is a persona, something we take upon ourselves, often at peril. Leonore, not even certain yet if the miserable prisoner lying before her is in fact her husband, accepts her burden when she announces that, "whoever you are, I will rescue you," the music rising in a confident melodic crest above the uncertain monotone of the past minutes as she swears to set this poor wretch free. Her personal mission expands: no one should suffer like this.

But the prisoner *is* Florestan, and the question remains. Will she seize the moment? As Pizarro unsheathes his dagger, she draws her pistol. Throwing off her disguise, she knows she has crossed the line. At this moment, an offstage trumpet signals the arrival of Pizarro's commanding officer, the benevolent Don Fernando. As a device, that herald announces the success of Leonore's quest. As a metaphor, it confirms that she has found grace with an unseen higher power—much as a voice is said to have been heard from the sky, proclaiming approval and acceptance, at the baptism of Christ. Leonore began with a struggle to liberate one man. She does more, becoming the engine to end Pizarro's administration and liberate a people.

The narrative sweep of Beethoven's music is so potent that his means for achieving that sweep can easily be overlooked. Rarely is he singled out as a great orchestrator, yet his sense of the orchestra is impeccable, evidenced by a sonic texture remarkable in every bar, part of its genius being its refusal to call attention to itself. Beethoven couples that gift of sound (could he really have been *deaf*?) with his instinct for shapely accents and phrasing, always delivering the unexpected while convincing us of its absolute rightness.

In scale and function, the overture is the ideal curtain-raiser. After spending so much effort on his *Leonore* overtures—comparing the three versions makes interesting listening—Beethoven admitted that *Fidelio* needed something different. He created music that both suggests the heroine's determination and also segues perfectly into the opening scene's domesticity. And as aggressive as Beethoven could be, his art is also subtle. Compare the first three chords of the overture and the three big chords that conclude the opera, and you find the beginning echoed in the end.

Consider one instance of a subliminal device for drawing and contrasting characters. Pizarro finishes his aria "Ha! Welch ein Augenblick" singing "Der Sieg ist mein"—"victory is mine." Emerging from the furious coda that follows is a string figure heard again later as Florestan, delirious with a vision of Leonore, sings "zur Freiheit, zur Freiheit"—"toward freedom."

Freedom is the goal—hoped for in Act 1, achieved in Act 2. Hope, *Hoffnung*: the word is stated throughout the first act, notably in Leonore's "Komm, Hoffnung" aria, but also in the Prisoners'

Chorus, where its object is made explicit as the inmates—victims of politics, we are given to believe—revel in an interlude of sunlight and fresh air. “Hope whispers to me,” one of them sings, “we will be free!”

Correspondences abound in libretto and score. The *Augenblick* that gives Pizarro such grim pleasure is defanged when Leonore unlocks Florestan’s chains and quotes Pizarro almost verbatim but prefacing her “welch ein Augenblick” with “O Gott” rather than his scornful “Ha!” Foreshadowing the fanfare that announces Don Fernando’s arrival is the horn flourish introducing Leonore’s resolve to stick to her mission and follow *dem innern Triebe*, her compulsion, her inner voice.

I mention just a few details to call attention to an artistry that, while perhaps not always apparent, has never been in doubt. All details coalesce in an opera whose cumulative impact has such persuasive possibilities. *Fidelio* is an allegory of our potential to liberate ourselves by following *dem innern Triebe*—the voice demanding we act in a way that fills abstractions like *love* and *honesty* with meaning, the voice urging us, as it urged Leonore, to choose well.

Larry Rothe writes about music for the San Francisco Opera and Cal Performances. His books include For the Love of Music and Music for a City, Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony.