

3 : THROUGH PRISON BARS

A. PRISON POSTERS

1. Class title 1 (Royal Opera House, entrance of Don Pizarro)

The photo is from a production of *Fidelio*—the only opera by **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827)—in London. A powerful man entering a prison on horseback. It is realistic in that I have never before seen a live horse in this opera. And yet it is a mighty symbol of what this opera is all about: imprisonment and freedom. I started the first class, if you remember, with some glorious music by **Richard Strauss** contrasted with a grungy set of undoubted reality. In this class, I hope to continue along those lines, by investigating what degree of realism is necessary in an opera that takes place in a prison. I originally intended to sample three or four operas, but I have decided now to confine myself to *Fidelio*. So let's start with some posters and a snatch of Beethoven's overture.

2. Section title A (prison posters)

3. — central portion of the above

I built that video deliberately in layers. The middle two posters, in Vienna and Zurich respectively, might be said to represent the *idea* of the opera: the prison world summed up by the **MC Escher** set of stone stairs below, the faithful wife disguising herself as a man to free her husband in the image above.

4. All four posters

The outer posters, however, introduce new elements. The one on the right is for the same Royal Opera production as my title slide, directed by **Tobias Kratzer** in 2000. though it is less evocative: a literal prison of around 1800. The left one, though, from **Claus Guth's** 2015 production in Salzburg, hardly seems to fit at all. All the same, it gives me a place to start, with a comparison between two opening sequences, the last two minutes of the overture and start of the first scene. We will look first at a hi-tech production at the Opéra Comique in Paris (**Cyril Teste**, 2021), and then at the Guth in Salzburg. Ask yourself the question: Where is the realism, and what purpose does it serve?

5. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, opening (Paris)

6. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, opening (Salzburg)

7. — stills from the above

What did you think? Both productions are updated from their original period of around the French Revolution. The Paris production could only be now; I am sure that closed-circuit television is pretty standard in prison management, so this is ultra-realistic. The question is whether the realism take you any further into the heart of what the opera is about, and frankly I doubt that it does.

8. Still from the Salzburg production

Fidelio is based upon a supposedly-true story about a woman who disguises herself as a man in order to rescue her husband who has been unjustly imprisoned during the Reign of Terror. Although in modern dress, the Guth production does not shove modernity in your face; it would be possible to see it as an abstraction of more or less any era. The opening sequence we watched shows two almost-identical figures: the wife, **Leonore**, and her male version, **Fidelio**. Fidelio (Canadian soprano **Adrienne Pieczonka**) does all the singing, but her double appears from time to time, communicating with the audience in sign language. So is there any reality there? I would say so, yes: in the huge set with no apparent exit, in the oppressive black box that is lowered from above, in the sense that everything that matters is internal. When we first see Leonore's husband **Florestan** at the start of Act II, he is in a deep dungeon with no glimmer of light. His first words are "Gott, welch Dunkel hier!" (God, what darkness here!) Let's look at a few seconds of a traditional production at the Met, and then, for rather longer, at the same moment in the Guth. The singers are **Ben Heppner** and **Jonas Kaufmann**.

9. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Florestan's recit (Met)

10. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Florestan's recit (Salzburg)

11. — stills from the above

What can you say about the lack of realism in the Salzburg production? Those who go regularly to the Met Live-in-HD broadcasts will recognize it; Jonas Kaufmann's emergence from behind the black wall has been featured for years in the **Rolux** commercial; it has become iconic. It has an obvious practical purpose; it is just so difficult to see a singer who is supposed to be in complete darkness; cheat up the lighting too far and you lose any reality you might have gained. Far better, I think, to treat the darkness metaphorically; with a singer like Jonas Kaufmann, who's going to complain? The real subject of the opera—its inner, as opposed to exterior, reality—is human freedom, and it is against this that everything should be judged.

12. Scene breakdown of the Met production

Why are there such differences in how *Fidelio* is staged? Because the opera itself is by no means consistent in genre. For the first 40 minutes, you might think you were in a **domestic comedy**—not Mozart exactly, but the next generation along. Its main plot is whether Leonore can maintain her disguise as a man when **Marzelline**, daughter of the head jailer **Rocco**, falls in love with her, thus putting the nose out of joint of her regular boyfriend **Jacquino**. And, in order to gain Rocco's trust, she has to play along with Rocco's obvious desire to recruit her as a son-in-law. With the second scene, we meet the evil Governor **Don Pizarro**, the comedy goes, and the mood becomes **melodramatic**. There are several points where it can become almost **realistic**, as when Fidelio asks for the prisoners to be brought up into the light, or when she goes down to the dungeon with Rocco to dig her husband's grave. But once she has declared herself and Florestan is saved, the score frankly becomes an **oratorio** with the same kind of choral finale that he would later append to his *Ninth Symphony*. Whether realistic or stylised, any director of the opera has to take into account the massive genre-shifts already built into it.

B. TRUE TO PERIOD

13. Section title B (Kratzer production, Act I)

That title covers the two scenes of Act I of the opera, in the London production by **Tobias Kratzer** I used for my title slide. Both, as you see, and quite realistic. This was one of three new video productions of the opera I bought or downloaded while preparing the class, to add to the three I already had. So rather than recycling clips I have used before, I have decided to focus on this production for the rest of the class. I think you will find it fits the theme very well, being utterly realistic in the first act, and taking a totally different tack in the second. I will sample the major numbers of each.

14. Marzelline, Rocco, and Fidelio

As you probably saw, the Act I set consists of a real-looking interior that slides in and out of the prison courtyard. While the whole opera is motivated by **Leonore (Lise Davidsen)** disguising herself as a man in order to rescue her husband, the situation she must first negotiate is basically comic. In order to gain the trust of the head jailer **Rocco (Georg Zeppenfeld)**, she has to play along when Rocco's daughter **Marzelline (Amanda Forsythe)** falls in love with her. This upsets under-jailer **Jaquino (Robin Tritschler)**, but if we assume that he gave Marzelline the black eye we see in this production, it's no great loss. Beethoven sums all this up in the third number of the score, a **canon-quartet**, "Mir ist so wunderbar."

15. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Act I Quartet

16. Simon Neal as Don Pizarro

Soon the prison governor, **Don Pizarro** arrives on the horse you have already seen. He is an odious individual who has imprisoned Florestan to exact a personal revenge. I would like to say that the aria Beethoven gives him ("Ha, welch' ein Augenblick!") is one of the masterpieces in the score, but it's not. It's pretty generic villain's snarl and bark, although a strong singer (as **Simon Neal** is) can bring the house down. I'll play the second half of it, in part for two aspects of realistic detail that Kratzer gets into his staging: the way Pizarro's soldiers harass Marzelline, and the way Pizarro treats her pet canary.

17. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Pizarro aria (second half)

18. Marzelline and Pizarro's men

[This photo, incidentally, comes from a later revival, with a different Marzelline.] There is about half an hour of music still to go in this act, with two major highlights. **Leonore's great aria** of loathing and determination when she sees Pizarro, and the **Prisoners' Chorus**, when she persuades Rocco to let them up into the fresh air. The latter is probably the most beautiful number in the score, but it is long and not especially clear in this production. So instead I am going to play the lyrical part of Leonore's aria. Here Kratzer does something I have never seen before: he lets her go back to the house, thinking she will be alone, quite unaware that Marzelline is watching. Tell me what you think.

19. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Leonore aria (from "Komm, Hoffnung")

20. — still from the above

Did you like the staging? There is a clip of this scene on YouTube. The comments all praise Davidsen's singing, but there are several that feel the staging sabotages it completely: "Why can't directors go back to staging opera the way it is meant to be done?" My own view is the opposite. *Fidelio* requires a hefty dose of suspension-of-disbelief, not least that an adult woman could be mistaken for a young man for the entire duration of the opera. This also motivates Marzelline in important ways we shall see in Act II.

C. TIMELESS

21. Section title C (Kratzer production, Act II)

Let me explain that. Instead of opening in Stygian darkness, Tobias Kratzer takes a leaf out of Claus Guth's book, and shows the dungeon in full light, in front of the same kind of neo-classical white wall that has become almost a Guth trademark. What he does that is completely original, though, is to put **Florestan** in the middle of affluent spectators. Had I not played his recitative twice already, I would play it again, to show the way he appeals to the spectators for their aid. Instead, though, I will move on to the aria itself, beautifully sung by the British tenor David Butt Philip. Let me ask you what you think of the spectators' attitude, and if the production has now totally abandoned reality?

22. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Florestan's aria

23. — still from the above

What do those spectators do for you? I must admit that I had intended to illustrate this class with more conventional productions that did not raise such difficult questions about reality—but then I discovered this and knew I had to go with it. The spectators, of course, are us—or at least those of us wealthy enough to afford ringside seats. We have come to enjoy, not to get involved. The basic attitude I see from the spectators here is "Not my problem," although some are beginning to feel uncomfortable.

24. Still from a little later in the act

As the aria ends, the stage does get darker, though we are reminded of the spectators by the projections of some heads on the wall above. [I am not sure if these are actual live shots of people onstage, but it is surely meant to look like that.] Rocco and Fidelio enter to dig the prisoner's grave, in preparation for Pizarro to do the actual murder. Even without recognizing that this is her husband, Leonore takes pity on him, and offers a drink of water and a crust of bread. Now Pizarro enters.

25. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Act II quartet, "Er sterbe!"

26. — still from the above

Traditionally, Leonore brings a revolver with her into the dungeon, and holds Pizarro at gunpoint when she reveals her identity. He retreats when the offstage trumpet is heard. In this production, though, Pizarro has Rocco and Fidelio searched before they go down, and his men remove Fidelio's gun. In an interview, Kratzer said that he was interested in finding the tipping point that suddenly gives

revolutionary ideas traction in a modern society. He notes that the catalyst may not be a politician or person of power; it can be an altogether smaller figure, a Greta Thunberg, say. And much of what he did in the first act was to set up Marzeline as a candidate for this role. However, Pizarro has only been wounded, not killed. Leonore and Florestan have an ecstatic duet, and normally the curtain falls at this point, either for the often-inserted *Leonore Overture #3*, or to go straight into the jubilant finale. But in Kratzer's production, the revolution is not yet complete.

27. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Act II finale, opening

28. — still from the above

Oratorio though it may be, there is much beautiful music in the final scene, and I wish I could play it. But I will give you the very end. Pizarro has been denounced and arrested. Leonore has released her husband from his chains. But instead of coming forward to lead the ensemble in song, they both put on pieces of modern dress and disappear into the crowd. For the people who surge forward over the picture frame are no longer the characters in some opera, but **we ourselves**. Only Jaquino is left as the one unreconstructed holdout who failed to join the humanitarian revolution.

29. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Act II finale, ending

30. Class title 2 (ending at La Scala)

Looking for a closing title, I came upon this closing shot from a very recent production at La Scala. This too brings the opera into the present, but makes it a moral for the ordinary working man. **Literal reality or symbolic?** It is not an easy question, but I hope I have given you something to think about.