

OPERA AND REAL LIFE

C. TIMELESS

Act Two opens with a long orchestral introduction, followed by a big recitative and aria for FLORESTAN (*Gott! Welch Dunkel hier!—"God, what darkness here!"*). He collapses, and Rocco and Leonore arrive to dig his grave. Without even knowing for sure that the emaciated figure is her husband, Leonore offers him a drink of water and crust of bread.

Pizarro arrives and tells Florestan that his moment has come. But Leonore intervenes, crying "First kill his wife!" There is a standoff until a distant trumpet gives the signal that the Prison Inspector has arrived. Pizarro is forced to go to greet him, leaving Leonore and Florestan to sing an ecstatic duet (*O namenlose Freude!—"What unspeakable joy!"*).

The scene changes back to the prison courtyard. The Inspector, DON FERNANDO, says that he has come to correct longstanding wrongs. When Rocco denounces Pizarro, he orders his arrest. He then tells Leonore to remove Florestan's shackles herself. **The opera ends on a chorus of praise for her determination and constancy.**

Beethoven: *Fidelio*, excerpts listed above (Royal Opera House 2020; Tobias Kratzer, *director*; Antonio Pappano, *conductor*; Lise Davidsen, *Leonore*; Amanda Forsythe, *Marzelline*; David Butt Philip, *Florestan*; Robin Tritschler, *Jaquino*; Simon Neal, *Pizarro*; Egils Silins, *Fernando*; Georg Zeppenfeld, *Rocco*)

For more detail and different images, see the class website:

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3. THROUGH PRISON BARS

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THROUGH PRISON BARS

PRISON SCENES WERE NOT UNCOMMON IN EARLIER OPERAS, mainly because they offered a situation reduced to its basic elements where qualities such as love, honor, and sacrifice might shine all the brighter in contrast. But Beethoven's *Fidelio* (final version 1814) is the first to take place entirely in prison. Set around the time of the French Revolution, it is about a woman (**Leonore**) who disguises herself as a young man (**Fidelio**) to obtain work at the prison where her husband (**Florestan**) is been secretly held by his political enemies. The somewhat awkward mechanics of the plot begin as domestic comedy then switch to melodrama, but the opera nonetheless stands as a powerful testament to freedom and the power of love.

Various productions of the Beethoven opera have set the action at the time of its creation around 1800, or updated it to virtually any period from then to the present. Others have seen the essential action as taking place within the human spirit rather than a literal dungeon, and have staged the work abstractly. After a brief overview of several such approaches, we shall play major scenes from the opera in a remarkable 2020 production that has it both ways: playing the first act realistically in period, and switching to something more universal and timeless in the second.

The synopsis below covers the entire opera, but only the **passages in bold** will be heard in class. *rb.*

A. OPERA POSTERS

We compare the opening of each act in a strikingly abstract production from Salzburg against more realistic approaches in Paris and New York.

Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Act I and Act II openings (Salzburg 2015; Claus Guth, *director*; Franz Welser-Möst, *conductor*; Adrienne Pieczonka, *Leonore*; Jonas Kaufmann, *Florestan*)

Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Act I opening (Opéra Comique 2021; Cyril Teste, *director*; Raphaël Pinchon, *conductor*)

Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Act II opening (Met 2002; Jurgen Flimm, *director*; James Levine, *conductor*; Ben Heppner, *Florestan*)

B. TRUE TO PERIOD

The action takes place in a prison courtyard and the house of the head jailer. Rocco. His daughter, MARZELLINE, is being pestered by an under-jailer, JAQUINO, who urges her to name a date for their wedding. But she has eyes only for FIDELIO, the handsome new hire. We know this to be LEONORE in disguise, and understand that she needs to play along in order to obtain Rocco's trust; he in turn seems eager to welcome "Fidelio" as his son-in-law. **Beethoven expresses these conflicting emotions in a canon quartet.**

The prison governor, Don Pizarro, arrives. Learning that a court official is to arrive that day on a prison inspection, **he sings an aria (*Ha! Welch ein Augenblick!—"Oh, what a moment!"*), realizing that he must act at once to kill Florestan, his former enemy whom he has been slowly starving to death in a dungeon, and conceal his body.**

He bribes Rocco to dig the grave, but Leonore overhears. **She pours out her loathing in a great aria (*Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin?—"Monster, whither away?"*) before reassuring herself that her love may still save her husband.**

Leonore begs Rocco to take her with him to the dungeon, and also to let the prisoners come into the courtyard for a few moments to enjoy the light of day. This leads to a beautiful chorus (*O welche Lust—"Oh, what joy!"*) that is one of the highlights of the score (unfortunately too long to play). But Pizarro returns and orders the prisoners back to their cells.