



Opera & Real Life

5. Through Prison Bars

March 29, 2022

Through Prison Bars

A SURPRISING NUMBER OF OPERAS ARE SET IN PRISONS. Around 1800, indeed, “rescue opera” was a popular genre, no doubt inspired by the spirit of the French Revolution. Beethoven’s *Fidelio* (1805–14), which was based upon a French original already set by three other composers, is the only opera of its kind to survive in the modern repertoire—and much of the reason why it *has* survived is due to the composer’s intense commitment to the republican ideals it exemplifies.

More recent prison operas have been less concerned with escape than with the human beings locked up under brutalizing conditions. The greatest of them is surely *From the House of the Dead* (1930), the final work of Leos Janacek. But there are others more recent than that; among them: *Dead Man Walking* (2000) by Jake Heggie, *Claude* (2013) by Thierry Escaich, and *Prisoner of the State* (2019) by David Lang. We shall watch an extended sequence from the Janacek, plus samples of one or more of the others as time permits; links will also be provided online.

A. Release

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) based *Fidelio* on a German translation of the 1798 play *Leonore, ou l’amour conjugal* (Leonore, or married love) by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly (1763–1842). It is a curious hybrid that begins as domestic comedy and rises to heights of noble sentiments that could only be treated in oratorio. He struggled with it for several years, before signing off on the final version in 1814.

The heroine **Leonore** is looking for her husband **Florestan**, who has gone missing. Believing him to be illegally imprisoned by his political rival **Don Pizarro**, she dresses as a man and seeks employment in the prison under the name **Fidelio**. She soon gains the trust of the chief jailer **Rocco** (and unfortunately inspires the love of Rocco’s daughter),

and is eventually able to go with him into the underground dungeon. But Pizarro has been warned that the Minister of State, **Don Fernando**, has become suspicious of his activities and is about to make a surprise visit of inspection, so he must get rid of Florestan first.

Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Act I finale and scenes from Act II

NY Met 2002; c. James Levine, d. Jürgen Flimm; Karita Mattila (Leonore), Ben Heppner (Florestan), Falk Struckmann (Don Pizarro), Robert Lloyd (Don Fernando), René Pape (Rocco)

B. Incarceration

From the House of the Dead (1930) was the last opera of **Leos Janacek** (1854–1928), premiered two years after his death. It is based on a memoir by **Fyodor Dostoevsky** (1821–81) of his own time in prison. It has no plot as such, only a number of characters who interact in various ways, and at one time or another tell their own stories of how they came to be imprisoned. Seeking a way to lead you through it, I have put together a 20-minute montage of scenes involving **Grojancikov**, an upper-class prisoner arrested for revolutionary activities, and **Aljeja**, the sensitive young man he befriends:

- The squabbling prisoners gossip about the new arrival.
- Grojancikov is brought into the courtyard, stripped, and taken away to be flogged. One of the prisoners has found a wounded eagle, and the men decide to keep it.
- Grojancikov is brought back from his flogging. Aljeja gives him his eyeglasses which he has repaired.
- A year later. Gorjanicikov has become friends with Aljeja and offers to teach him to read and write.
- The friendship of Grojancikov and Aljeja incites the envy of a prisoner, who attacks the young man.
- Grojancikov nurses the wounded Aljeja.
- The prison governor has received orders to release Grojancikov. Drunkenly, he tries to apologize to him. Aljeja bids him farewell, calling him “father.” The eagle has now recovered and flies away. Grojancikov leaves and the prison grind continues....

We shall watch the 2007 Aix-en-Provence production by **Patrice Chéreau**. For the opening and another view of the closing, however,

we shall go to the 2018 production by **Krzysztof Warlikowski**, who sets the action realistically, in an entirely modern prison.

Janacek: *From the House of the Dead*, various excerpts:

Aix-en-Provence 2005; c. Pierre Boulez, d. Patrice Chéreau; Olaf Bär (Grojancikov), Eric Stoklossa (Aljeja)

Janacek: *From the House of the Dead*, opening and closing:

Brussels 2018; c. Michael Boder, d. Krzysztof Warlikowski; Sir Willard White (Grojancikov), Pascal Charbonneau (Aljeja)

Additional Items

Depending on time, we may also watch some the items listed below, all from modern operas with prison settings. *Prisoner of the State* by **David Lang** (b. 1957) is a reworking of the *Fidelio* story with new music. *Dead Man Walking* by **Jake Heggie** (b. 1961), based on the memoir by Sister Helen Prejean, is the most-often performed 21st-century American opera. *Claude* by **Thierry Escaich** (b. 1965) is based upon a short story by **Victor Hugo** (1802–85).

Lang: *Prisoner of the State* (2019), aria, “I was a woman”

NY Philharmonic; Julie Mathevet (soprano)

Heggie: *Dead Man Walking* (2000), Las Vegas scene

Boston Conservatory 2018; Michaela Waltz & Michael Miller

Escaich: *Claude* (2013), Scene 3

Lyon 2013; c. Jérémie Rohrer, d. Olivier Py; Jean-Sébastien Bou (Claude), Rodrigo Ferreira (Albin)

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