

Class 5 : Through Prison Bars

A. Release

1. Title 1 (*Fidelio* at Covent Garden)
2. *Figaro* and *Fidelio*

The slide contrasts scenes from last week's opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and this week's, *Fidelio*. Both are profoundly human documents, but one was written before the French Revolution of 1789, and the other after it. It is a crucial watershed. One takes place in a palace, the other in a prison. Although driven by the best of motives, the *détente* in *Figaro* comes about through the scheming of two clever women who know how to bend the rules to achieve their goals. But in *Fidelio*, the previous rules have been thrown away entirely, and the heroine **Leonore** is a brave woman motivated not only by love for her husband, but by a deep sense of what is right. **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827) despised the court world of Mozart's *Figaro*; the opera he truly admired was *The Magic Flute* which, despite its fantasy and magic, was rooted in an understanding of the German people.

3. *Fidelio* in Madison, Wisconsin

Most of the class will be devoted to looking at Leonore and how she embodies the republican ideals of the era. But I want to start at the most basic level, with the prisoners in this terrible place, who as a special favor have been allowed into the courtyard to see the light of day. Everything I show will be from the **2002 Met production**, not the Madison one shown here. I will explain the dramatic context later.

4. **Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Act I, prisoners' chorus**
5. — still from the above

Here is the context. We are in a prison holding political prisoners. Leonore has disguised herself as a young man, **Fidelio**, to obtain access to her husband **Florestan**, whom she believes is being held there illegally. Hoping to catch a glimpse of him, she persuades the chief jailer **Rocco** to allow the prisoners into the sunlight for a few minutes, and he does. Leonore does not find her husband among them—he is being held in a much deeper dungeon—but what is striking is that her pity goes out to *all* the men, whether she knows them or not. Listen especially to her music in the final moments in the act, as the prisoners are sent back to their cells.

6. **Beethoven: *Fidelio*, end of Act I**
7. Bouilly and *Léonore, ou L'Amour conjugal*

The **Jürgen Flimm** production is updated, of course, though for the most part it feel timeless. But Beethoven's original grew out of a very specific time, in the aftermath of both the **French Revolution** (1789) and the **Reign of Terror** (1793). The 1798 play by **Jean-Nicolas Bouilly** (1763–1842), *Léonore, ou*

L'amour conjugal (Leonora, or Conjugal Love), was written to contain songs, and it was set to music by two other composers as well before Beethoven got to it. Apparently it was based on a real incident from the Reign of Terror, but Beethoven is less concerned with portraying the abuses of that time than celebrating the nobler feelings of the Revolution that preceded it. He had several tries at his adaptation, starting in 1805, before he could finally let it go in 1814.

8. John Bokina on *Fidelio*

As you know, I have been using the book *Opera and Politics* by **John Bokina** as my guide in many of these classes. Although totally at sea with Political History myself, I was convinced by his characterization of the values of *Fidelio* as “the virtuous republicanism of the later Enlightenment”—provided, of course, that you spell “republicanism” with a small R. Florestan has been stashed in his dungeon because he was a whistle-blower, threatening to expose the corruption of his jailer **Don Pizarro**; he is certainly driven by patriotism, duty, and all those good things, although he no longer has any freedom to act. But Bokina’s *Kirche, Kinder, Küche* description of the idea republican woman will rub most of us the wrong way. Fortunately, Leonore’s duty to her husband is far more than passive subordination; she takes a braver and more active role than many male heroes. And the last two bullets on the slide also play a part here. We will see her being acclaimed by the entire community at the end of the opera, and it is already clear that she is moved by suffering of any kind, not just the desire to save her husband. I’ll pick up the story in Act II, when *Fidelio* has gone down into the dungeon to dig the prisoner’s grave. As yet, she does not recognize her husband, but she swears to save him, *no matter who he is*, and gives him first water and then bread.

9. Beethoven: *Fidelio* Act II, grave-digging duet and dialogue

10. — still from the above

A trio then follows, in which Florestan tells this young man, whom he still does not recognize as his wife, that his reward will come in heaven. But I have to cut ahead to the showdown, when Pizarro comes to gloat over Florestan and then murder him, only to be stopped by *Fidelio*, who pulls a gun and unmasks herself as Leonore. The stand-off is broken by a trumpet call from above, which Pizarro has arranged to warn him of the arrival of the Minister **Don Fernando**, whom his spies have warned him is on his way to the prison on a surprise inspection. Hence the need to dispose of Florestan, but by now it is too late.

11. Beethoven: *Fidelio* Act II, dungeon quartet

12. — still from the above, with dialogue

I would have liked to carry on a little here into the dialogue, but they cut it in this production. Nonetheless, I find these spoken lines as moving as anything in this opera that is sung.

13. Beethoven: *Fidelio* score and *Ninth Symphony* CD

Beethoven was done with drama. His only opera, *Fidelio*, which had begun as a domestic comedy and has become an existential struggle for life, love, and freedom, now takes its leave from the operatic stage. Oh yes, the curtain will rise again, and there are 20 minutes more music left, but Beethoven switches to to musical mode in which, frankly, he feels a lot more comfortable: oratorio. The final scene

in the prison courtyard has three main parts: a chorus of rejoicing, the entrance of Don Fernando and his speech that checks all the republican Enlightenment boxes, and then another chorus in praise of Leonore and heroic womanhood. This is the mode that Beethoven would pick up again ten years later with a lot more assurance in the final of his *Choral Symphony* in 1824, in the very same theatre that saw the premiere of his final version of *Fidelio*. I'll pick it up with the entrance of Don Fernando.

14. Beethoven: *Fidelio* Act II, final scene, first part
15. Beethoven: *Fidelio* Act II, final scene, second part
16. Main title 2 (Robert Lloyd as Don Fernando)

B. Incarceration

17. Main title 3 (*Aix House of the Dead* and portraits)

My featured opera for the second hour will be Janacek's *From the House of the Dead* (1930), but if there is time, I want to preface it with two brief clips from much more recent operas set in prisons. I had hoped to include a scene from *Dead Man Walking* (2000) by **Jake Heggie** (b. 1961), but the full DVD is prohibitive and the YouTube clips are not good enough; I will put a couple on the website, though.

18. David Lang: *Prisoner of the State* (NY Philharmonic, 2019)

The first is an oddity. In 2019, the New York Philharmonic commissioned the man at the top center, **David Lang** (b. 1957), to rework the story of *Fidelio* as a music-theater piece of his own, called *Prisoner of the State*. I have no idea who thought of this, but I must say I have quite enjoyed the music I have been able to hear. So I am offering this aria by the **Leonore** character, here inexplicably called **The Assistant**, "I was a woman," in which she describes the loss of her normal womanhood in the quest for her husband. And frankly, I think you might need something a little gentler between the stern heroism of the first half and the intensity of most of the second, and be longing for a break from all those male voices! This is a pre-production video with piano.

19. David Lang: *Prisoner of the State*, "I was a woman"
20. Thierry Escaich: *Claude* (Opéra de Lyon, 2013)

Claude (2013) by **Thierry Escaich** (b. 1965) is based upon a short story by **Victor Hugo** (1802–85) about a weaver put out of business by the invention of automatic looms; he takes to the barricades, is arrested, imprisoned, and eventually executed for killing the governor. I'll only show one scene, in which **Claude** is visited in his cell by a vulnerable prisoner, **Albin**, whom he had previously rescued from bullying, and the start of their caring relationship. Although set in an historical period, I felt both the piece and the production very much in touch with real life.

21. Thierry Escaich: *Claude*, scene 3
22. Leos Janacek: *From the House of the Dead* (1930)

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 and teaches to read. Most of what I show will be taken from a 2007 production by the late **Patrice Chéreau** from Aix-en-Provence that later came to the Met. But since we are talking about *Opera and Real Life*, I want to show you the opening, and if time the closing, from a 2018 production by **Krzysztof Warlikowski** in Brussels and London. He places it in a modern American-style prison that plunges the action into the here-and-now. Note the young black man practising basketball at the beginning; they call him *The Eagle*; he is something of a symbol in the opera, as I'll explain before we are done.

23. **Leos Janacek: *From the House of the Dead* (Brussels, 2018), opening**

24. **Leos Janacek: *From the House of the Dead* (Aix-en-Provence, 2007)**

I will add intertitles between the scenes of the Aix production; I hope that is explanation enough.

25. **Leos Janacek: *From the House of the Dead* (Aix-en-Provence, 2007), compilation**

26. **Leos Janacek: *From the House of the Dead* (Brussels 2018)**

Although he has a moment of exaltation when the eagle flies and Grojancikov is released, Janacek returns the prisoners to captivity at the end; this is no *Fidelio*. But you may be interested to see that Warlikowski, using the same music, gives the opera quite a different ending. As you may have realized, the young basketball player is his equivalent of the eagle; he is wounded by a malicious inmate in the first act. But now he has recovered.

27. **Leos Janacek: *From the House of the Dead* (Brussels, 2018), ending**

28. **Main title 4 (still from the above)**