

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## CHAPTER 1 Real Worlds, and Better Ones

### Beethoven Vs. Rossini; Bel Canto Romanticism

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 1 Real Worlds, and Better Ones

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

## DEEDS OF MUSIC

In only one area did Beethoven fail to exert a transforming influence on the music of his time, and that was opera. *Fidelio*, his single operatic venture, initially a flop, was revised so often and so extensively that three distinct versions and no fewer than four overtures for it survive. As if recognizing that his talent suffered a limitation where the theater was concerned, Beethoven concentrated thereafter on composing “incidental music” for dramatic plays.

The overture to *Coriolan* (1807), meant to be performed before the curtain went up on a tragedy by Heinrich Josef Collin (1771–1811), was his first essay of this kind. The complete performance of the play no doubt included more music by other composers in the form of entr'actes (music to fill up the time it took to change the scenery), music to accompany silent stage action (chiefly fights and duels), “melodramas” (lofty declamation to musical accompaniment) for the main characters, perhaps some little songs and choruses for minor characters, and of course dances.

In 1810 Goethe's historical tragedy *Egmont*, about a Flemish general and statesman whose political martyrdom sparked the revolt of the Low Countries against Spain, was performed with a complete incidental score by Beethoven. The Overture is in F minor, which with Beethoven was a kind of extra tragic, intensified C minor—compare his Piano Sonata, op. 57 (called the “Appassionata”), the String Quartet, op. 95 (called the “Serioso”), and so on. One of Beethoven's most characteristically heroic orchestral works, the *Egmont* Overture plays out the *Kampf-und-Sieg* (Struggle and Victory) scenario to the very hilt. The brief but boisterous F-major coda in military style seems to compress the whole effect of the Fifth Symphony finale into a couple of coruscating minutes; it was reprised at the end of the play as the “Siegessymphonie”—the Victory Symphony.



**fig. 1-1 Beethoven's *Fidelio*, lunette by Moritz von Schwind (1804–1871) in the foyer of the Vienna State Opera.**

Two years later, two plays by August von Kotzebue (1761–1819), the most popular dramatist of the time and a notoriously reactionary politician, were staged with incidental scores by Beethoven to inaugurate the National Theater in Pest, the administrative seat of the Hungarian provinces. One was an exercise in exoticism: *Die Ruinen von Athen* (“The ruins of Athens”), from which a “Turkish March” and a chorus of whirling dervishes became great concert favorites. The other was a somewhat ambiguous exercise in nationalism: *König Stephan* (“King Stephen”), about the semilegendary founder of the Hungarian nation, who formed Hungary’s first alliance with the German-speaking lands. It, too, features victory music, but the victory it celebrated was a thinly veiled celebration of Hungary’s submission to Germany.

The ill-favored opera, toward salvaging which Beethoven labored all through the period of his incidental music, started out as *Leonore, oder Der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe* (“Leonora, or the triumph of conjugal love”), on words translated and adapted by the court librettist Joseph von Sonnleithner, assisted by a whole committee of Beethoven’s friends, from a famous libretto by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly dating from 1798. The libretto exemplified a genre that became something of a craze after the French revolution. Modern scholars have christened it the “rescue opera,” a loose, anachronistic term that covers many situations. In general, though, French *opéras comiques* (operas with spoken dialogue and happy endings) in the decades surrounding the Revolution symbolized the theme of social emancipation in stories that portrayed an unjust abduction or imprisonment (usually at the hands of a tyrant) and a liberation, usually as the result of sacrifice—by lover, spouse, or servant, but in any case by a “common person” whose virtue is contrasted with the depravity of the tyrant.

The chief composers of rescue operas on their native soil were André Grétry (1741–1813), whose *Richard Coeur-de-Lion* (“Richard the Lionhearted,” 1782) launched the genre and provided an early example of a motto melody that returned at significant points throughout the drama; Étienne-Nicolas Méhul (1763–1817) with *Euphrosine, ou Le Tyran corrigé* (“Euphrosine, or the Tyrant Rebuked,” 1790); Rodolphe Kreutzer (1766–1831), with *Lodoïska* (1791), which combined the liberation motif with Polish patriotism; and especially the transplanted Italian Luigi Cherubini (1760–1842), with another *Lodoïska* in the same year, and with many more rescue operas to follow. The first composer to set Bouilly’s *Léonore, ou L’amour conjugal* was the otherwise unimportant Pierre Gaveaux (1760–1825), for performance in Paris in 1798. Thereafter it was set twice in Italian by composers well known to Beethoven: Ferdinando Paer (as *Leonora, ossia L’amore conjugale*; Dresden, 1804)

and Simon Mayr (as *L'amor coniugale*; Padua, 1805). Paer's score was in Beethoven's library at the time of his death, and contains some conspicuous parallels with Beethoven's setting.

The basic story line of this much-traveled and much-translated libretto, set in a fictionalized Spain, was a virtual paradigm of the rescue formula. Here it is, as summarized by the opera historian Scott Balthazar, with the names of the characters, and their voice ranges, adapted to Beethoven's setting:

Leonore (soprano), disguised as the boy Fidelio, has apprenticed herself to the jailer Rocco (bass), hoping to free her husband Don Florestan (tenor), who has been unjustly imprisoned for two years by his enemy Don Pizarro (bass-baritone). Pizarro learns that his superior, Don Fernando (bass), who is unaware of his treachery, will arrive the next day. Fearing a reprisal, Pizarro orders Rocco to arrange for Florestan's murder by a masked man (to be Pizarro himself) and permits Leonore to be present at the scene. Before Pizarro can kill Florestan, Leonore intervenes, long enough for Fernando to arrive and rescue her husband. Rocco is pardoned and Pizarro imprisoned.<sup>1</sup>

Sonnleithner's adaptation of this simple plot for Beethoven complicated and extended it with subplots for minor characters (such as Marzelline, Rocco's daughter, who has fallen in love with "Fidelio"), so that Bouilly's swift two-act play became a slow-moving and fairly shapeless three-acter, which probably accounts for its initial failure. *Leonore* closed after three unenthusiastically received performances in November 1805 (ironically enough, during Napoleon's occupation of Vienna; the audience consisted largely of French officers). A slightly shortened revision failed again in 1806, whereupon Beethoven radically scaled the work back and replaced several of the remaining items with shorter, more forceful alternatives. Leonore's large aria—"Komm, Hoffnung," or "Come to me, O Hope"—near the end of act I, for example, was furnished with a very intense accompanied recitative addressed to Pizarro: "Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin?" ("Despicable man! Where are you rushing off to?").

The new version, now titled *Fidelio* to distinguish it from its predecessors, has been a repertory item ever since its premiere at the Vienna Kärntnertor Theater on 23 May 1814. One of the reasons for its staying power is surely the fact that it at last allowed Beethoven to play to his strengths. The short second act, beginning with the imprisoned Florestan's recitative and aria (his first appearance) and ending with a jubilant choral finale in praise of Leonore's steadfastness, embodies yet another permutation of the basic dark-to-light scenario from Haydn's oratorio, *The Creation*, that went into several of Beethoven's instrumental works. Here it could be made more explicit than ever, not only by the presence of words, but by the use of actual stage lighting and scenery.

Beethoven recognized the congruence between the reshaped libretto and his trusty heroic trajectory, and took steps to abet it. The only second-act items in the 1806 version of the opera that were significantly revised for the 1814 performance were the first and the last, and both were revised to make more vivid the contrast of dark and light as emancipatory metaphor. Florestan's recitative and aria, "Gott! welch dunkel hier!" ("O God, what darkness here!"), is preceded by an orchestral introduction containing some of the "darkest" music Beethoven ever wrote. It resembles the beginning of the *Coriolan* Overture, except that the unisons are played softly (as if emanating from a remote place) and, as already mentioned, it is plunged one degree deeper into the dark flat region of the circle of fifths, to F minor. In pointed contrast, the C-major Finale begins with the chorus of townsfolk and prisoners praising the day ("Heil sei dem Tag!") in bright colors intensified, as in the Fifth Symphony finale and the *Egmont* Overture, by the addition of a piccolo to the orchestra.

The darkness and harshness of the introduction to Florestan's aria are underscored by a number of well-understood conventions, including the hoary *passus duriusculus*, the chromatically descending bass with a history that extends back to the passacaglias and ciacconas of the sixteenth century. A more modern, indeed almost prophetic touch is the tuning of the timpani to a tritone, E $\flat$  and A, on which discordant notes the drums beat out a jarring tattoo during long-sustained diminished seventh chords. The stabbing woodwind phrases that follow have an uncanny vocal quality—cries in the dark (Ex. 1-1a). They are answered, as it were, by Florestan's own opening cry—"Gott! welch dunkel hier!" ("Oh God, what darkness here!")—one of the truly bloodcurdling moments in opera (Ex. 1-1b).

**ex. 1-1a Ludwig van Beethoven, *Fidelio* in vocal score, no. 11 (Florestan, introduction and aria, mm. 14-20)**

Just as the musical artifices in the introduction are Janus-faced, linking past and future, so the aria has two stanzas that play on the same dramatic contrast. The first, in A  $\flat$  (the relative major), is a reminiscence of the past, in which youthful freedom is contrasted with present slavery by the use of a sudden modulation to the pathetically fraught key of the flat mediant (C  $\flat$ ). The second, in F (the parallel major), was added to the aria for the 1814 revival. It foreshadows the metaphorical coming of day, as much by the use of the concertante solo oboe in its highest register as by the words that predict as a dream of heavenly immortality the events that are about to unfold in real life.

The Finale testifies to the opera's descent, for all its seriousness and its high ethical tone, from the comic operas of the eighteenth century, with their complicated "chain finales" in which continuous music underscores and reflects the dramatic action. It is constructed very much like a symphonic movement, with significant departures from and returns to stable tonalities. An opening march and chorus are followed by Don Fernando's accompanied recitative, which maintains the C-major tonality as the words explicitly evoke the "stripping off of night." Then, while Florestan is brought up from the dungeon out into the sun, the tonality begins to modulate flatward, as if Florestan's dark key were accompanying him, only to be dispelled as Don Fernando recognizes the prisoner.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal part and piano accompaniment. The vocal part is in the upper system, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower system. The key signature is F major (one flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal line is in the upper system, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower system. The lyrics are: "Gott! welch' Dunkel hier!" and "O grau - en - vol - le Seil - le!". The piano accompaniment features dynamic markings of *p*, *f*, and *p*, and includes the instruction *rit.* (ritardando).

**ex. 1-1b Ludwig van Beethoven, *Fidelio* in vocal score, mm. 33-41**

The reuniting of Florestan and Leonore takes place in the warmly gleaming key of A major, which darkens momentarily into its relative minor as the crowd vents its wrath on Pizarro. The moment in which Leonore, at Don Fernando's behest, actually unlocks her husband's chains is set, as if in fulfillment of Florestan's dream, in the dream key of F major, approached as a deceptive cadence from the dominant of A. All that remains now is for the assembled characters and chorus to *celebrate* the reuniting of the pair, and Leonore's steadfastness, in a concluding blast of C major that reaches its peak of energy (*Presto molto*) in a veritable *Siegessymphonie*, colored every now and then with a little dab of B  $\flat$  harmony just so that it can be dispelled again and the modulation into the bright clarity of C major reenacted (Ex. 1-2).

solists

Nie wird es zu hoch ge - sun - gen, Ret - te - rin den

Chorus

Wer ein hol - des Weib er - run - gen,

Gat - ten sein, nie wird es zu noch ge -

stimm' in un - ser'n Ju - bel ein.

sun - gen Ret - te - rin, Ret - te - rin

Ret - - te - rin

nie wird es zu hoch ge - sun - gen, Ret - te - rin Ret - te - rin.

**ex. 1-2 Ludwig van Beethoven, *Fidelio*, Act II finale**

So powerful is the tonal trajectory of the second act of *Fidelio*, and so practiced and surefooted Beethoven's enactment of it, that one can fairly regard it as the “nub and kernel, preceding all form,”<sup>2</sup> to quote Schopenhauer, the reality that underlies the dramatic action and gives it life. This is what Richard Wagner, who saw himself equally as Beethoven's heir and Schopenhauer's, would later try to summarize in his famous definition of “music drama”—*deeds of music made visible*.<sup>3</sup>

Is the music in an opera a supplement to—or metaphor for—the action and emotion portrayed? Or are the action and emotion portrayed a metaphor for the underlying life force in which we all participate, of which music is the most direct and palpable embodiment we can ever know on earth, hence prior to all reason and representation? The latter, of course, is the true romantic (or at least the true German) answer—the answer that boggled the nineteenth-century mind and crowned instrumental music, of which Beethoven remained the preeminent master even when writing opera, as the supreme artistic medium.

## Notes:

(1) Scott F. Balthazar, "Leonora," in *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. II (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 1150.

(2) Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 263.

(3) *Ersichtlich gewordene Thaten der Musik* (or, in W. Ashton Ellis's translation, "deeds of Music brought to sight"); R. Wagner, "On the Name 'Musikdrama'" (1872), in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Vol. V (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1896), p. 303.

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