

Senior Citizens Music Appreciation Program

Date: March 17, 2025

Time: 10:30-noon

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Beethoven and the Opera

I. Announcements

- A. NJSO Trip: Sunday, April 6 State Theatre, New Brunswick

Program: Tchaikovsky, Polonaise from Eugene Onegin
Billy Childs, Diaspora
Beethoven, Symphony 9, “Choral”

II. Antecedents

- A. Beethoven (1770-1827) wrote only one opera. Today it is known as Fidelio, but when it was first performed it was known as Leonore. Where did this title come from?
- B. The libretto for Beethoven’s work was based upon Jean-Nichols Bouilly’s libretto “Leonore ou L’Amour Conjugal”, which had been the basis for an earlier opera by the Austrian-Italian composer Ferdinando Paer entitled Leonora.
- C. The operatic genre which became the basis of Beethoven’s opera Fidelio is called “rescue opera.” Basically, this means that good triumphs over evil through the rescue of a main character by his/her beloved or other forces.
- D. Luigi Cherubini, an Italian composer much admired by Beethoven, had essentially created the “rescue opera” when he composed his “opera comique” Lodoiska in 1791. Cherubini referred to it as a “comédie heroïque” as it included spoken dialogue, a key characteristic of works performed at the Opera Comique in Paris and similar venues, in contrast to the Paris Opera. This tradition of performing works with spoken dialogue was a strong tradition in Paris, with Bizet’s Carmen being a prominent example—its original version has spoken dialogue, not sung recitatives.
- E. Beethoven admired Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte, which also has spoken dialogue and is in German—this was an important model for Beethoven’s only opera, which also has spoken dialogue.

III. From Leonore to Fidelio

- A. Originally performed as Leonore in 1805, Beethoven modified the work over the next decade, and its final form was first given in 1814. This period coincides with the Napoleonic Wars, when the European continent faced a confrontation between the ideals of the French Revolution and the maintenance of hereditary monarchy.

Beethoven sided with the “republican” values of the French Revolution, although he grew disenchanted with Napoleon after he declared himself emperor.

- B. As the synopsis in the Metropolitan Opera’s program booklet states, here is a brief summary of the plot.

“The sort belongs to the tradition of “rescue operas that were in vogue round the time of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars and the characters are straightforward portraits of good and evil. Leonore, Whose husband Florestan has been taken as a political prisoner, disguises herself as a man named Fidelio And finds work at the prison where she believes Florestan is being held. She ultimately saves him from Execution, and the work ends with a rousing celebration of liberty and marital love.” (p. 31)

C. Main Characters

1. Leonore (soprano)
2. Florestan (tenor)
3. Rocco, the jailer (bass/baritone)
4. Don Pizarro, prison warden (baritone)
5. Marzelline (soprano)
6. Jaquino (tenor)
7. Don Fernando (bass)

D. Beethoven’s Vocal Writing

1. It has been said that when Beethoven wrote piano sonatas, he composed orchestrally, making them complex and challenging in the context of what was being written at the time. Similarly, his vocal writing is demanding, not only for soloists, but for the chorus. This is typical of Beethoven—listen to the finale to the 9th Symphony and to the Missa Solemnis. He strains their endurance and range and it takes singers with great stamina and a wide vocal range to meet his demands.

IV. Recordings for Today’s Session

Fernando Paer, Leonora Decca Eloquence 480 4859

Ludwig van Beethoven, Leonore (Live performance, 1970)

Opera Depot 10936

Ludwig van Beethoven, Fidelio Naxos 8.111020-21

Ludwig van Beethoven, Fidelio (Live performance, 1961)

Testament SBT2 1328

Ludwig van Beethoven, Fidelio (DVD) Deutsche

Grammophon 00440 073 4159

V. Internet Sources

Luigi Cherubini, Lodoiska

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lodoïska_\(Cherubini\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lodoïska_(Cherubini))

Ferdinando Paer https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinando_Paer
Beethoven's Fidelio <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fidelio>
Synopsis of Fidelio <https://www.metopera.org/user-information/synopses-archive/fidelio>

VI. YouTube Films

Full performance of Fidelio Vienna State Opera, Bernstein conducting
<https://youtu.be/sm7hGCSkhTE?feature=shared>

“Gott, well dunken hier” Jonas Kauffman, tenor
<https://youtu.be/QZYOCJKI1i8?feature=shared>

“Mir ist so wunderbar” Lisa Davidsen, others
<https://youtu.be/gXH5J7rPIJ8?feature=shared>

Aria of Florestan from

Paer's Leonora Jonas Kauffman, tenor
<https://youtu.be/l0ajPznROL4?feature=shared>

Leonore Overture 3 Leonard Bernstein
Bavarian Radio Orch.
<https://youtu.be/dRhwyzJABvI?feature=shared>