

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2019-2020 Mellon Grand Classics Season

January 24 and 26, 2020

MANFRED HONECK, CONDUCTOR

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Fidelio

Opera in Two Acts, Opus 72

(1806 revision)

Libretto by Joseph von Sonnleithner after a drama of Jean Nicolas Bouilly. Textual changes for the revised version were made by Stephen von Breuning.

Florestan, <i>a nobleman</i>	Eric Cutler, <i>Tenor</i>
Leonore, <i>his wife</i>	Nicole Chevalier, <i>Soprano</i>
Don Fernando, <i>Prime Minister of Spain</i>	Alexander Elliott, <i>Baritone</i>
Don Pizarro, <i>governor of the prison</i>	Brian Mulligan, <i>Baritone</i>
Rocco, <i>chief jailor</i>	Wei Wu, <i>Bass</i>
Marzelline, <i>his daughter</i>	Rachele Gilmore, <i>Soprano</i>
Jacquino, <i>Rocco's assistant</i>	David Portillo, <i>Tenor</i>
Prisoner	Thomas Shivone, <i>Bass-Baritone</i>
Narrator	Don Marinelli

Prisoners, Soldiers, Guards
Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh
Matthew Mehaffey, Director

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Fidelio or *Leonore, oder der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe* ("Leonore, or The Triumph of Married Love"), Opera in Two Acts, Opus 72 (1804-1806)
(1806 revision)

Ludwig Van Beethoven was born in Bonn on December 16, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. He composed his opera *Fidelio* from 1804 to 1805, and later revised it in 1806 and 1814. Manfred Honeck has chosen to perform the 1806 revision for these concerts. *Fidelio* was first premiered in Vienna at the Theater an der Wien with conductor Ignaz von Seyfried on November 20, 1805, and the 1806 revision heard this weekend was also premiered at the Theater an der Wien with conductor Ignaz von Seyfried on March 29, 1806. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the complete opera at Syria Mosque with conductor William Steinberg in 1959, and most recently performed it in both Heinz Hall and Carnegie Hall in New York City with conductor Lorin Maazel in 1992. The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings
Approximate duration: 97 (Act I) and 48 (Act II) minutes

Beethoven was, philosophically, a child of the French Revolution. His visions of freedom, universal brotherhood and equality guided by the spirit of love were the ideals that inspired his life. When he came to choose the texts for his major vocal works, they had to reflect those beliefs: nothing "frivolous or immoral," he said, only that which was "uplifting." In March 1803, he scored a success in Vienna with just such a noble work, an oratorio based on part of the Passion story, *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. Emanuel Schikaneder, the librettist and first Papageno for Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and a jack-of-all-theatrical-trades, heard Beethoven's oratorio, and thought that the young composer (aged 33) had the talent to write an opera. Schikaneder had recently taken over the management of the Theater an der Wien, and he invited Beethoven to become house composer and take up residence in the theater. Beethoven agreed. Rumors of an opera based on an ancient Roman subject titled *Vesta's Fire* began to circulate almost immediately around Vienna. While making sketches for the project, however, Beethoven was also paying close attention to the sort of spectacle that excited the enthusiasm of the theatergoers patronizing Schikaneder's establishment every evening, and the theatrical rage in Vienna in 1803 was a series of French "rescue operas" whose plots included acts of extreme courage as the device for saving an unjustly imperiled life. (The scenarios for such operas flourished in real life during the Reign of Terror after 1789.) The best known of these *Opéras de la délivrance* was *Richard the Lion-Hearted* by the now sadly underestimated Belgian-French musician André Grétry, but the examples of the form that most deeply stirred Beethoven were *Lodoïska* and *Les deux Journées* by Luigi Cherubini, whom he regarded as the (other) greatest living composer. ("I value your works more highly than all other compositions for the stage," he wrote to Cherubini in 1823.) As Cherubini had demonstrated to Beethoven's satisfaction, such a piece could carry the messages of freedom, heroism, love and devotion that the Viennese master wanted to embody in his music, so he started the search for a libretto.

Jean Nicolas Bouilly was a French lawyer and playwright who held a position in Tours during the Revolution. In 1798 he devised an opera libretto, based on an incident he had witnessed during the Reign

of Terror, for which the French tenor and composer (of three-dozen operas) Pierre Gaveaux supplied the music. The piece, a rescue opera *par excellence*, was called *Léonore, ou l'amour conjugal*, and celebrated the courage of a devoted wife who disguised herself as a man and risked her life to save her wrongfully imprisoned husband. Bouilly's libretto was well received, and retained enough popularity to inspire two later Italian adaptations for the opera stage, one by Ferdinand Paër, the other by Simon Mayr. Joseph von Sonnleithner, intendant of the court theaters in Vienna, brought the French text to Beethoven's attention in the form of his own German translation. Beethoven was immediately struck by its dramatic potential. He broke off his association with Schikaneder, stopped sketching *Vesta's Fire*, and in January 1804 wrote to his friend Johann Rochlitz that he was working on "an old French libretto adapted."

Progress on the opera, as with all of Beethoven's important scores, was slow. Originally he hoped to finish the work by June 1804, but the first version of *Leonore* — or *Fidelio*, as the theater people, much to Beethoven's chagrin, insisted on calling it to avoid confusion with Paër's *Leonore* — was not ready until late the following year. Always driven to rise above the ordinary, he rewrote and revised incessantly: the first act quartet and Florestan's aria, for example, each went through more than a dozen transformations. Such determination and tireless striving for perfection are at the very heart of Beethoven's achievement. He was challenged and drawn constantly onward by some ineffable creative vision, and was simply not satisfied until the music on the paper matched the ideal in his mind. In his book on *The Interior Beethoven*, Irving Kolodin noted, "As tended to be the life-long case with Beethoven, the overriding consideration remained: achievement of the objective. How long it might take or how much effort might be required was not merely incidental — such consideration was all but non-existent."

Fidelio was finally launched into the world on November 20, 1805. It failed. Exactly one week before the premiere, Vienna had been occupied by French troops, and two days later Napoleon installed himself in Schönbrunn Palace on the western outskirts of town. The French, who had taken over the city under the pretext of sheltering the Viennese from the encroaching Russian horde, were instructed to treat the natives with courtesy and allow life to proceed "as normal." The members of the Viennese aristocracy, including most of Beethoven's patrons, decided not to wait around and see what happened, however, and left town. The audience at the premiere of *Fidelio* was therefore not the friendly and supportive one the composer had anticipated, but was instead made up almost entirely of French infantry officers who were given a night's leave to entertain themselves. They would have preferred something lighter and more diverting than the profound humanist statement Beethoven served up for the occasion, and they probably did not understand the German text very well anyway, so the premiere was a flop. In addition to the bemusement of its unreceptive listeners, the first performance of *Fidelio* was also flawed by the new work's dramatic shortcomings. Sonnleithner had inflated the two acts of the French original into three in his German adaptation, padding the text by giving undue importance to the secondary characters and generally diluting the dramatic impact of the story. Beethoven, inexperienced in the requirements of the theater, took Sonnleithner's libretto as it stood and composed a vast quantity of magnificent music for it, but his contribution was of such weight and length that it clogged the dramatic action and allowed the momentum of the story to flag. *Fidelio* played for just two more nights, to nearly empty houses, and was then withdrawn.

Beethoven's noble friends returned to Vienna at the beginning of 1806. Led by Prince Karl Lichnowsky, they obtained a copy of the *Fidelio* score, and invited its composer to a gathering to discuss the work. After six hours of heated debate, Beethoven was convinced to cut three numbers from the opera, shorten some others, and reduce the three acts to two. Stephen von Breuning patched together a text for this second version, and when it was unveiled at the Theater an der Wien on March 29, 1806 (with the title *Leonore, oder der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe* ["*Leonore, or The Triumph of Married Love*"]), it met with markedly better acclaim than had its predecessor. Beethoven, however, despite the good intentions of the producers, became incensed over the project. He felt that the musical preparation was inadequate ("the murdering of my music," in his words), and was convinced that he had been cheated of his share of the box office receipts. He demanded the return of his score and insisted that the production be stopped. He heaved his materials into a valise, slammed shut the office door of Baron Peter von Braun, who had taken over management of the Theater an der Wien from Schikaneder two years before, and that was that. Or at least, that was that for the next eight years.

At the beginning of 1814, three singers at the Court Theater (J.M. Vogl, K.F. Weinmüller and a Mr. Saal) were due to present a concert for their own benefit. By that time, Beethoven had become Europe's most famous and highly regarded composer (that year the Viennese were especially enamored of his latest hit, the clangorous *Wellington's Victory*), and the trio of singers thought that a revival of his only opera might meet their needs. The idealistic subject of *Fidelio* had never been far from Beethoven's thoughts (in the intervening years, he had rejected a score of possible librettos, including *Faust*, *Macbeth* and *Alexander*

the Great), and he agreed to the revival. At his request, Georg Friedrich Treitschke, official poet and stage director of the court theaters, undertook the task of making the *Fidelio* libretto stageworthy. He did a good job with the revision. So did Beethoven, who, entirely of his own volition, revised every number in the score, with the sole exception of the *March*, shortening them and making them more dramatically taut. (So difficult did he find the work that he told Treitschke the effort should “win for me a martyr’s crown.”) With the third version of *Fidelio*, however, Beethoven had finally fully realized his vision of a decade earlier. The work was a great and immediate success at its first performance on May 23, 1814 at Vienna’s Kärntnertor Theater, and it has remained one of the most admired and popular of all German operas.

After the final version of *Fidelio* was premiered in 1814, it was revived in Vienna in 1822 and introduced to London in 1832 and to New York in 1839. It thereafter became a fixture of the operatic repertory, but the first two versions of the opera remained unknown throughout the 19th century, despite the vocal score of the 1806 version having been published in 1810; the original 1805 version did not appear in print or receive another performance until 1905, the centenary of its premiere. That original version has since been recorded several times and staged occasionally, but the 1806 revision was not heard again until Dr. Helga Lühning of the Beethoven Haus in Bonn, the composer’s birthplace, undertook a thorough examination of the sources in the 1990s in preparing an authoritative edition of the score for the new edition of Beethoven’s Complete Works being issued in conjunction with the composer’s 250th birthday, in 2020. That 1806 *Leonore, oder der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe* — the cradle of one of Beethoven’s greatest inspirations — was performed for the first time in 191 years in September 1997 in Bonn conducted by Marc Soustrot and recorded on the MDG label.

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Several passages from *Fidelio* are familiar to concert audiences in the form of the four overtures Beethoven composed for the opera, a multi-preludial circumstance unique in the annals of musical theater. The three overtures named *Leonore*, all in the key of C major, quote themes from the opera, notably Florestan’s aria and the trumpet call from Act II. *Leonore No. 1* was Beethoven first attempt at an overture for his opera, but, according to his friend and early biographer Anton Schindler, he rejected this attempt after hearing it performed privately at Prince Lichnowsky’s house in Vienna before the 1805 premiere. (Later evidence suggests that it may have been composed for an unrealized performance in Prague in 1807.) Another new overture, *Leonore No. 2*, was used for the opening. For the 1806 revision, Beethoven created one of the most magnificent of all overtures, the *Leonore No. 3*. When the 1814 revival was being planned, however, he realized that this great musical fresco not only robbed the first act of much of its dramatic and musical potency (“As a curtain-raiser, it almost made the raising of the curtain superfluous,” wrote Irving Kolodin) but also clashed with the tonality of the opening number, so he composed yet another overture, on a smaller scale, called simply the *Fidelio Overture*. It is now almost always heard to open the opera. The common practice of inserting the *Leonore No. 3* as an entr’acte in Act II was instituted at the Vienna Court Opera by Otto Nicolai in 1841. A performance of the 1806 version of *Fidelio* offers the rare opportunity to hear the magnificent *Leonore Overture No. 3* in the context for which Beethoven had originally created it.

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Characters:

Florestan, *a nobleman*
Leonore, *his wife*
Don Fernando, *Prime Minister of Spain*
Don Pizarro, *governor of the prison*
Rocco, *chief jailor*
Marcellina, *his daughter*
Jacquino, *Rocco’s assistant*

Act I

A prison near Seville in the 18th century.

Scene 1. Rocco’s Kitchen. Florestan, a fighter against despotism, has been imprisoned by his enemy Pizarro. Hoping to save him, Florestan’s wife, Leonore, disguises herself as a young man under the name

"Fidelio," and becomes an assistant to Rocco, the chief jailor at the prison. Marcellina, Rocco's daughter, falls in love with the disguised Leonore, thereby arousing the jealousy of her suitor, Jacquino. Marcellina asks her father to approve her wedding to Fidelio. He does, planning that Fidelio will be both son-in-law and successor to his position. Fidelio, carrying on the pretense of manhood, asks Rocco if she can help tend the prisoner incarcerated in the prison's dungeon, whom she suspects to be Florestan. Telling her that the man is greatly wasted from starvation, he says he will ask permission for her to accompany him below.

Scene 2. The Prison Courtyard. Pizarro receives notice that Don Fernando, the Spanish Minister of State, will soon arrive to inspect the prison and to question Pizarro about his suspected abuse of power. Pizarro stations a trumpeter in the tower to announce Fernando's approach. Pizarro instructs Rocco to kill Florestan immediately, but Rocco refuses and Pizarro vows to finish the task himself. Hoping that she may confirm his whereabouts, Fidelio searches for her husband when the prisoners are allowed into the courtyard. They stumble into the light, but Leonore is dismayed not to see Florestan among them. Pizarro returns and angrily drives the prisoners back to their cells. He orders Rocco to go into the dungeon, with Leonore as an aid, and dig the grave without delay for the man he is about to murder.

Act II

Scene 1. The Dungeon. In the darkness of his cell, Florestan at first meditates on his pitiful state, but his thoughts soon turn to Leonore and their happiness in earlier days. Rocco and Leonore enter. Leonore recognizes her husband, but continues to conceal her identity for fear of raising Rocco's suspicion. Rocco and Leonore comfort Florestan with bread and wine, but then begin digging the grave. Pizarro arrives, and announces his intention to kill Florestan. With dagger in hand, he rushes toward Florestan, but Leonore, brandishing a pistol, throws herself between them. Just at that moment, the trumpet sounds to announce the arrival of Don Fernando. Pizarro leaves to receive the Minister. Florestan and Leonore fall into each other's arms and rejoice at their reunion.

Scene 2. The Parade Ground of the Castle. Don Fernando arrives. He orders the prisoners freed. They are led into the courtyard by Leonore and Florestan, whom Fernando recognizes as an old friend he thought dead. Leonore is allowed to remove her husband's chains herself, while Pizarro is taken away to answer for his treachery. Florestan sings a tribute to his devoted wife, and all join in a jubilant hymn to love and brotherhood.

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