
BEETHOVEN'S *FIDELIO*
STUDY GUIDE
FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Introduction

This guide is intended to introduce students to opera: its language, characteristics, and conventions. It's designed for secondary schools, whether upper or lower (or middle and high schools in the US) depending on the topic, and offers a variety of educational suggestions that can be used by teachers in whatever manner works best for their orientation, course work, or the educational scheme in which they work.

The historical and musicological essays contained in this volume and on the accompanying DVD-ROM explore a range of topics about the figure of Beethoven, including the inevitable topic of his deafness, along with the changing role of the composer in society. They tell the complicated backstory of *Fidelio*, his only opera, from its conception in 1803 and premiere in 1805 through its final version of 1814. These were years that dramatically changed world history, leaving unmistakable traces in *Fidelio*.

In addition to these essays, others deal with historical and esthetic considerations, such as the philosophical and literary reception of Beethoven in Romanticism, while in the strictly musical arena the reciprocal "interference" among the theatrical traditions of France, Italy, and Germany will be analyzed. Composed during the period of Napoleonic victories over the Austrians and staged while Vienna was occupied by the French, *Fidelio* offers the opportunity to enter into a close study of the Napoleonic period and the reality of Viennese theatrical life during those years. These are all valuable contributions that will allow us to pursue an interdisciplinary course of study that begins with a reading and a collective reflection in class.

The plot

The plot of *Fidelio* is simple. Set in Spain, it deals with an episode that some sources report actually took place during the Jacobin Reign of Terror (1793-94), but there are strong doubts about its authenticity. It follows a genre cultivated in France and Italy by other composers, such as Pierre Gaveaux, Ferdinando Paer, Simone Mayr, and Luigi Cherubini. The main theme of "rescue opera" or *opéra à sauvetage* was the rescue of the protagonist from danger or even death, with the inevitable happy ending that featured the triumph of the ideals of liberty.

At the beginning of the first of two acts into which *Fidelio* is divided, young Jaquino is wooing Marzelline, the daughter of Rocco, the jailer of a state prison. Its governor, the tyrannical Pizarro, has unjustly imprisoned his own enemy in a secret underground dungeon. In order to learn whether the mysterious prisoner is her own husband Florestan, his wife Leonore has come to offer her services as assistant to Rocco—dressed as a man and calling herself Fidelio. Adding to her difficulty in gaining access to the prisoner is the fact that Marzelline has fallen in love with this newcomer whom everyone believes is a man, and she refuses Jaquino's advances.

Pizarro arrives and orders Rocco to murder the prisoner. When Rocco refuses, he decides to carry out the murder himself. He orders Rocco to descend into the secret dungeon to dig a grave to hide the body. Leonore/Fidelio manages to get the prisoners released for some fresh air, but Florestan isn't among them. Then she convinces Rocco to allow her to go with him into the prisoner's cell.

The second act opens in the dark dungeon where Florestan, in chains, deliriously imagines

that he sees his own Leonore beside him. After she descends with Rocco, Leonore does indeed recognize him. She doesn't dare show it, though, even to her long-lost husband, and continues the pretense. Only when Pizarro arrives to kill Florestan does Leonore reveal herself, threatening the tyrant with a pistol. Just when the situation is most dangerous, a trumpet signals the arrival of the government minister at the prison. Pizarro is dismayed when his criminal acts are uncovered, and he is condemned by the minister. He invites Leonore herself to remove her husband's chains, and the prisoners are all liberated. Poor Marzelline returns to her suitor, Jaquino.

Study Topics

The idealization of women

Like any work of art, *Fidelio* also lends itself to many interpretations. The most obvious, repeated by every commentator, is the celebration of conjugal love. Leonore is the wife who risks her own life to save her husband's. The theme is the more powerful because here the woman fights for the man, contrary to the most common situation in literature, in which the heroic man confronts the most arduous challenges in order to save his beloved.

Leonore is a rare case of a heroic woman in a dramatic opera, alongside Matilda in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (William Tell) or Puccini's title heroine in *La fanciulla del West* (The Girl of the Golden West), and in her own way, even Strauss's *Elektra*. In opera we usually encounter a female victim, who is prey to some kind of masculine exploitation.

A brief excursus along these lines might center on the perception of other female "heroic" leads in opera. Some examples include the title character in Bellini's *Norma*, who denounces her own crime in order to save a young wom-

an, Adalgisa. There is also Gilda in *Rigoletto*, who takes the place of the rake she loves when she learns he is to be murdered. Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* also shows heroic qualities when she finds redemption from dishonor in suicide. Or might we consider these women also as victims of the men in their lives, despite their courageous actions?

In their way, the plots of these masterworks can offer opportunities for deeper reflections in class on the status of women, both in the society of the past and of today. On this front, an abyss separates our civilization from the fanaticism of certain criminal sects, but we know that we can never let down our guard, even in our own house—as we know only too well from the daily news. If customs and conventions have changed with respect to those of a couple of generations ago, it is due in large part to the educational system that has made female students aware of the rights they have as compared to their male counterparts. Much more could be done in the classroom with further examples drawn from opera plots.

There are plots that can justly be viewed as "the undoing of women," as captured in the title of a passionate and comprehensive review of female characters in opera, an inexhaustible source of material useful for setting up a didactic exploration on this topic:

Dead women, dead so often. There are those who die disemboweled, like Lulu at the sacrificial knife of Jack the Ripper, in a cruddy attic of smoggy London; there are those who die for having embodied too well the false identity of a marionette-woman or for having simply affirmed that they are not there where the men are looking for them. . . . Those

who die of nothing, just like that—of fear, or fright, or sadness, or anxiety. Those who die poisoned, gently; those who are choked; those who fold in on themselves peacefully. Violent deaths, lyrical deaths, gentle deaths, talkative or silent deaths. . . . You could easily draw up a list of them.

The author, Catherine Clément, is especially attentive to the *musical* description of these unfortunates who inhabit opera:

The words are forgotten. An extraordinary paradox: in a world where the unconscious takes up so little room, where so much is made of spoken words, as if they meant what they said, with no past and no roots, we have the opera, where the conscious part, the part played by words, is forgotten. No doubt it is because opera is the place for unformulated dreams and secret passions ... Consequently, the less one hears the words, the greater the pleasure ... These women have the most beautiful music; the glitter of spotlights is theirs. Adoration and sublimation, a formidable love that must forever be conquered and danger that is absolute are theirs. And the act of falling, the final gesture is theirs as well—and the voice in its death agony.¹

Fidelio is one of the exceptions: here is truly a woman who fights and wins. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the author doesn't mention it in her ample list of operas. Could it be that a "victorious" woman would somehow run counter to the list of "losing" women because she disguises herself as a man?

From real life to opera

As we know, the events in the lives of artists inevitably affect the creation of their works. This is true for composers, as well as for poets, painters, or philosophers. In Leonore, Beethoven depicts his own feminine ideal: a being we might see as "asexual," in whose story physical love takes second place to idealized situations, and is based on sublime sentiments and altruistic actions. As Beethoven himself realized and mentioned in letters to his closest friends, Leonore was an ideal figure for whom the composer yearned his entire life but never met.

In *Fidelio* the only example of "garden-variety" love appears right at the beginning: Marzelline's crush on Fidelio. But Beethoven's attitude towards handling this love is immediately evident: "any hint of a piquant *double entendre*, which would have stimulated Mozart's dramatic *eros*, is deliberately eliminated by the prudish Beethoven."² His very choice of a subject to set to music confirms this prudishness, which is further underlined by his disdain for the other frivolous plots that were submitted for his consideration. As much as he admired Mozart the composer, he strongly condemned the plots of operas such as *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*. As for *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), he would never have set the flirtation between Papageno and Papagena, let alone the childish magical business called for by the librettist. A plot that other composers had already set to music, in which the heroine is ready to give her life for her husband's, appeared to be the only one that was worthy of his effort. Something else equally personal could help explain Beethoven's dedication to his only

opera—it has to do with his deafness. Just a year before discovering the subject by the French author Jean-Nicolas Bouilly that aroused his enthusiasm, he had come to the realization that the first faint symptoms of deafness, which he had noticed six years earlier, now foretold an inexorable degeneration. He was unable to hear the sounds of voices or instruments—a man who knew no other way to live. In 1802, this recognition led to the dramatic document that has come down to us as the “Heiligenstadt Testament,” in which the composer confessed to thoughts of suicide. Fortunately for him and for us, he reacted by mobilizing his forces to continue doing the one thing that gave meaning to his life: to compose. The strength of his resolve in fighting his deafness is attested not only in *Fidelio*, but also in his great instrumental compositions, beginning with his third symphony, the *Eroica*. Florestan’s suffering can thus be read as equivalent to Beethoven’s moral suffering, Florestan’s triumph as a commitment to all-out war against his illness. Florestan is the victim of tyranny, Beethoven of malevolent nature. “Pizarro, the cause of Florestan’s suffering, may well have represented to him the dramatic symbol for the cause of his own suffering.”³ Pizarro symbolizes deafness itself, while Leonore represents the utopian ideal of his own liberation from disease. This interpretation could explain Beethoven’s persistence in retouching *Fidelio* for a great part of his life, making profound changes, which extended to cutting or adding scenes. Eighteen times he revisited Florestan’s aria that opens the second act. “It was only by an effort that his mind could concern itself with details of action or characterization that did not form part of the larger ethical and musical plan of the work.”⁴

If we accept this interpretation of the opera, then we can also overturn the current theory that Leonore was the hero/heroine with whom Beethoven identified himself. Perhaps Beethoven felt closest to Florestan. He “equated [Florestan’s] imprisonment with his own deafness. Just as Florestan is isolated in darkness, Beethoven was imprisoned in silence.”⁵

Revolutionary years

Through the composer’s poetics, however, Leonore and Florestan transcend their individual characters to arrive at something higher than individual actions or states of being—something that has to do with the political and military events of those decades: the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era. *Fidelio* is frequently interpreted as a celebration of liberty from the oppression of tyrants. In the table below are summarized the preeminent events of this period in parallel with Beethoven’s most significant works of those years:

France between the Revolution and the Napoleonic Era	Beethoven (work titles in <i>italic type</i>)
14 July 1789: uprising by the Parisian populace and the taking of the Bastille. August: “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen”	Born in Bonn in 1770, was 18 years old at the outbreak of the Revolution. Attended university, where he studied the works of Kant.
1790	<i>Cantata on the Death of Emperor Joseph II.</i>
1791: Legislative Assembly	
1792: War between France and allied Austria and Prussia. Arrest of Louis XVI. The national Convention proclaims the republic and institutes the “Revolutionary Calendar.”	Moved to Vienna, where he studied with Haydn.
January 1793: Beheading of Louis XVI. War with England, Holland, Spain. Followed by the War of the First Coalition to “re-establish order” in France. Mass conscription of the French populace. Committee for Public Safety. New constitution.	Builds a network of amicable relationships among the Viennese aristocracy.
1794: Robespierre unleashes “the Terror.” The Convention reacts by condemning him to death. Victories by the republican troops.	Studies with Albrechtsberger.
1795: Attempted insurrection in Paris quelled by Napoleon.	First public concerts. <i>Three Piano Trios</i> .
1796: Victories by Napoleon in Italy. Creation of the Repubblica Transpadana with Milan as its capital.	Concerts in Prague, Dresden, Berlin. First signs of deafness.

France between the Revolution and the Napoleonic Era	Beethoven (work titles in <i>italic type</i>)
1797: The Repubblica Cispadana, then the Repubblica Cisalpina replaced the Repubblica Transpadana.	<i>Adelaide. Six String Quartets.</i>
1798: Expulsion of Pope Pius VI and proclamation of the Roman Republic. Second Coalition formed to fight the French.	Friendship with Karl Amenda, theologian and violinist.
1799: French defeats in Italy and Egypt. Napoleon becomes First Consul (dictator).	<i>Sonata Pathétique</i> for piano. Gives piano lessons to the young Countesses von Brunswick.
1800: New Napoleonic victories.	<i>Septet. Spring Sonata</i> for violin.
1801: Peace between France and Austria.	Studies with Salieri. <i>Moonlight Sonata</i> for piano. His deafness is now undeniable. Falls in love with Countess Giulietta Guicciardi.
1802: Italian Republic. Napoleon proclaimed Consul for life.	Writes his will, the so-called “Heiligenstadt Testament.”
1803: Napoleon plans the invasion of England.	<i>Eroica Symphony. Kreutzer Sonata</i> for violin. <i>Concerto n.o 3</i> for piano.
1804: Napoleonic Code created according to the principles of the Revolution. Napoleon crowned emperor.	<i>Waldstein Sonata</i> for piano. Obliterates Napoleon’s name in the score of the <i>Eroica Symphony</i> .
1805: War of the Third Coalition. French forces occupy Vienna.	<i>Fidelio.</i> <i>Concerto n.o 4</i> for piano. <i>Appassionata Sonata</i> for piano.
1806: War of the Fourth Coalition. French army enters Berlin.	<i>Violin Concerto.</i>

France between the Revolution and the Napoleonic Era	Beethoven (work titles in <i>italic type</i>)
1807: French victories over Prussia and Russia.	<i>Symphony n.o 5.</i>
1808: Guerrilla war against France in Spain.	<i>Symphony n.o 6.</i>
1809: War of the Fifth Coalition. The French re-occupy Vienna.	<i>Concerto n.o 5</i> for piano.
1810: Continental ports blockaded against English trade.	Incidental music to <i>Egmont</i> .
1811: English naval victory at Lissa.	<i>Archduke Piano Trio.</i>
1812: Napoleon’s disastrous Russian campaign.	<i>Symphony n.o 7.</i> Writes a passionate letter to “the Immortal Beloved,” who has not been identified; during his lifetime Beethoven never had a companion.
1813: War of the Sixth Coalition. The French are defeated at Leipzig.	Takes on the custody of his nephew Karl, a relationship that was to bring him great sorrow.
1814: Abdication of Napoleon, who retires to Elba.	Final version of <i>Fidelio.</i>
1815: Napoleon returns to France. Defeat at Waterloo by the Seventh Coalition.	<i>Wellington’s Victory.</i>

The taking of the Bastille is considered by historians to be the turning point for a new course in European history. It was a symbolic event, given that, of the few prisoners incarcerated there, most were common

criminals—not to mention that the king was already planning to demolish it. But the imposing structure was a physical manifestation of absolutist oppression. Its destruction meant an attack on the *ancien régime*, on

absolute power, and for the first time, the demonstration of the power of the people. (To put this particular event into perspective, the building was sacked and razed to the ground a little at a time over many years. The building contractor in charge of its demolition had the idea to sell its stones as mementos, just as with the Berlin Wall over 200 years later and today as with the outrageous destruction of the monuments of Middle Eastern art, torn apart by religious fanatics.) That the revolutionaries had a clear understanding of the historical rupture they had created is proven by their invention of the French Republican Calendar.

In *Fidelio* we will also find a kind of “taking of the Bastille”: the startling musical interruption of the trumpets that heralds the arrival of the noble minister of the king.

Like so many other contemporary men of learning, Beethoven was galvanized by the French Revolution and fell under its spell, even though the countries in which he was born and lived were continually at war with the French army. As was true in other works of literature and art around the turn of the nineteenth century, we also find strong emotions, dramatic tensions, and warlike empires in the music of these years: they satisfied the needs of the public.

Even before the Revolution, there was something in the wind that was to prepare the ground for a new historical path: the spirit of the Enlightenment, with its trust in the light of reason against the utterly baseless dictates of irrational revelations and arbitrary traditions. Absolute monarchy, legal and economic structures, the church, and educational systems—anything that could be considered a restraint upon liberty—fell

under Enlightenment censure. The French Revolution was recognized by European intellectuals as the symbol of the conquest of irrationality, finally overcome by rational thinking and open-mindedness, as described by the great philosopher born in the same year as Beethoven, Friedrich Hegel, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.

It was in this same spirit that Beethoven wrote his opera (as an example of a realistic, fact-based opera about this period, see Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, set during the period of the Terror). The prisoners who are liberated at the end of the opera transcend their given dramatic role to represent all humanity. One interpretation of *Fidelio*, particularly the role of Leonore, avoids the theme of conjugal love in favor of the victory of liberty over tyranny. Leonore's critical role as liberator is at the heart of the action, “not in the *deus ex machina* of the absent minister (absent, that is, until the final scene) but in the ordinary human being, a persona distinguishable from other persons neither by rank nor by office but only by qualities of character.... The liberating action celebrated in the opera is generated not from above but from below. *Fidelio* is a democratic opera in precisely the same sense that the French Revolution ... was democratic.... Leonore is the essential agent of the opera's liberating action, just as the Third Estate was the essential agent of the French Revolution. For both Beethoven and the Revolutionaries history is viewed from the bottom up.”⁶ Thus theorizes the musicologist Paul Robinson.

The Third Estate: we must not forget that the French Revolution was a phenomenon of bourgeois society. Among the bourgeois were Diderot, D'Alembert, and Rousseau.

And it would be the bourgeoisie who would assume power, although conceding a little to the nascent liberal aristocracy. In this spirit Beethoven had composed the *Cantata on the Death of Joseph II*, the imperial son of Empress Maria Theresa, and the incidental music to Goethe's *Egmont*, not to mention having dedicated his third symphony, the *Eroica*, to Napoleon. This eliminates the possibility of viewing Beethoven as a Jacobin sympathizer. While Beethoven hoped for liberation from authoritarian oppression, it would certainly not have been through the Fourth Estate (the “proletariat”), but from the Third, the bourgeoisie. The mere fact that he had chosen for his target of oppression a victim who presumably existed during the Terror tells us a lot about the composer's political, pro-bourgeois leanings.

“Beethoven was a rebel, but not a revolutionary,” writes another musicologist. “He judged the laws and conventions of the society of his day by a wholly subjective standard, that of his own nature.... His passionate belief in Liberty never faltered, though it changed in character; but it was in the first instance a wholly instinctive, natural egoism, the emotional reaction of a high-spirited, hugely talented youth increasingly aware of his exceptional gifts and irritated by the difficulties and frustrations.... But the young Beethoven's unwillingness to submit himself to any kind of external discipline; his passionate, instinctive rejection of the notion of equality; and his absorption in his music together formed an effective bar to his ever becoming a revolutionary in the practical or political sphere.... [He] never believed in Equality; but learned to find in the idea of *Fraternity* the emotional satisfaction which was denied him in its ordinary, personal forms.”⁷

Finally, let's consider a different interpretation about *Fidelio* from the musicologist Carl Dahlhaus: “on the one hand, it reflects the pressing reality of the historical moment to a degree that is unusual in opera, while on the other hand, the motive of the amazing rescue, defying the laws of probability, is reminiscent of the ‘marvellous’. The ‘marvellous’ constitutes one of the fundamental concepts of aesthetic theories of opera precisely because it renders the criteria of everyday reality irrelevant to sung drama.”⁸

Influences

In order to become painters, what must we look at? This question was put by art historian Ernst Gombrich in his seminal essay *Art and Illusion*. The answer he gave relates to musical education as well. Instinctively we would argue that to become painters, we should look at reality: nature, people, and so on. His answer seems surprising: no, we only need look at how others painted before us: “It is easier to learn to draw ears from books than from reality.” “The virgin eye is a myth.”⁹ The entire history of the arts, literature, and music demonstrate the necessity for derivations. Titian learned from Giovanni Bellini and Giorgione, and Virgil from Homer. None of them would have existed, at least in those forms, if the other poets and painters had not preceded them. It is inconceivable that the Beethoven we know could have existed without the models to whom he referred, and from whom he drew the lifeblood for his own music.

The exploration of *influences* is one of the inevitable topics in any historical study of the work of an artist. And, as is well known, artists aren't the only ones who are influenced. It's a body of knowledge that should become

part of the cultural toolkit of every student, because an understanding of previous contributions and who made them is necessary if we want to be constructive, and even original, in our life choices.

As we said at the outset, in *Fidelio* Beethoven took his cue primarily from the theatrical genre in vogue in France in the late eighteenth century: *opéra à sauvetage*, or rescue opera. But even more important for understanding his music are the musical sources. Beethoven's ethics were as far removed from the subjects of Mozart's operas as Mozart's stylistic modes were critical for Beethoven's own creations. Marzelline's aria could fit well in *The Magic Flute*, which inspired Beethoven, just by changing the personality of the characters. We know that Beethoven copied out more than a few pages of *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute* in preparation for his own opera. To demonstrate the Mozartean spirit that wafts through the first act of *Fidelio*, let's listen to the aria in which Rocco celebrates to virtues of gold (as the title character in *The Barber of Seville* will do a few years later, but with an entirely different spirit! We should add that Beethoven could feel a certain solidarity with the good-natured jailer and his interest in money.) With its delicious lightness, its quasi-folkloric tune, its jaunty and sometimes naive alternation between 2/4 to 6/8 time, along with the strophic form of the piece (AA), an unknowing listener might confidently attribute the piece to Papageno, the comical bird catcher of *The Magic Flute*. Teachers who want to explore the theme of Mozart's influence could compare the overture to *The Magic Flute* with the second of the four overtures composed by Beethoven, which can be heard on our CD.

No less significant, however, are Beethoven's "borrowings" from the works of rescue genre composers such as Gaveau, Paer, and especially Luigi Cherubini, whom Beethoven admired so much that he called him the greatest composer of the period. It is above all the dramatic impetus of Cherubini that was to be shared by his great admirer—an impetus that broke dramatically with the serene outlook of the eighteenth-century musical world. "The intense energy of Cherubini's style, with its pounding rhythms, constant sforzandos, cross-accents and dynamic contrasts, massive treatment of the orchestra, and still perceptible though partly transformed influence of the Neapolitan *opera buffa*, left a palpable mark on *Fidelio*."¹⁰

Perhaps Beethoven would not be entirely displeased that the opening of *Les deux journées* (The Two Days, better known in English as *The Water Carrier*) by the half-French, half-Italian maestro might appear to be one of his overtures for *Fidelio* if he weren't well aware of the profound complexity of his own musical language as compared to Cherubini's. This is particularly true in thematic development: Cherubini may have begun "à la Beethoven," but he did not treat themes in the same way, preferring instead a development technique based, for example, on simple progressions. Let's listen to the first five minutes:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsrYbDxFoiM>

How to listen

Before listening to a piece from *Fidelio*—excerpts, or if we want, the entire opera—it would be good to start with an exercise on how to approach any piece of music. A discussion with the students can lead them to recognize that there are many ways to listen to music:

- * *Distracted listening*, when the music stays in the background, without paying much attention to it; for example, while reading or studying.
- * *Relaxed listening*, when we want to pass the time agreeably; for example, while taking a car trip.
- * *Shared listening*, when we listen to our favorite music with friends and talk about it together.
- * *Dynamic listening*, when we dance.
- * *Inspirational listening*, when the music is played in a civil or religious ceremony to get us into the spirit of the occasion.

There's still another different way to listen: try to understand what this piece has to say, what it can communicate, what it can suggest to our sensitivity and our musical intelligence. At a basic level, music can suggest real sounds and noises, as when Vivaldi or Messiaen imitates birdsong. At a high level, music can be understood through anthropological, sociological, or philosophical perspectives, as the philosopher Theodor Adorno did when he interpreted the music of Mahler, Wagner, and Schoenberg. Somewhere in between is the most common type of musical interpretation: the emotional, which leads us to speak of music's gaiety or melancholy, of tenderness or fury. Our experience in interpreting a piece will become richer, more rewarding, and more

illuminating if we base it on objective data, on the *nature* of the piece, on its formal characteristics. The *what* a piece communicates to us depends on *how it is made*, how it is constructed. Discovering how a piece of music is made, or to know how to analyze it, opens surprising vistas in our capacity to give sense to what we are listening to.

Let's start with a basic experience. Ask the students: how can you explain that a piece can have a certain effect on us, while having a complete opposite effect on others?¹¹

There are many factors, so many *ingredients* composers can use to obtain the expressive results they seek. Let's consider just the elements our students will be able to perceive most easily. Composers choose:

- the tempo, or speed: can be slowed down or speeded up; in *accelerando* or *rallentando*;
- the dynamics, loudness: from the most quiet, or whispered to the most powerful, or *fortissimo*;
- the rhythm: can be irregular and unpredictable as opposed to regular and pulsating; can be organized in binary or ternary meters, etc.;
- the melody: can stay within a narrow range of the musical scale, or else reach to the highest or lowest notes;
- the mode: major or minor; or additional different modes;
- the instruments: a guitar makes a different effect than a trumpet.

We can see these different mechanisms functioning by comparing two instrumental pieces from *Fidelio*, both from Act II. The first is the introduction: ask the students to listen to the first two minutes or so; and then the instrumental introduction to the final chorus, sung by the liberated prisoners.

The most obvious differences are easy to

grasp. First of all, the tempo: very slow (*grave*) in the first, *allegro vivace* in the second. Then the dynamics: the first alternates continuously between *forte* and *piano*, versus the “Rossinian” crescendo of the second. Further: the rhythmic structure: the introduction starts with long notes and moves into a passage punctuated by staccato (detached) notes, then moves into agitated figures, while the finale is based entirely on a dotted march rhythm. The melody: split between the highest notes of the chords, with an imposing passage marked by *gruppetti* beginning in bar 11, like shivers of fear, against an obvious series of notes in unison. The mode is minor (F minor) in the first piece, major (C major) in the second. Finally, the instruments: alternating chords in the strings (*piano*) and winds (*forte*) at the beginning of the first piece, with responses between the strings and oboe on the “painful” descending half-steps; while the finale begins with full orchestra, becomes *pianissimo* for a few bars, and then gradually adds instruments until the full orchestra plays. Each of these expressive devices (or structural factors, parameters, formal categories, or other terms analysts have used to denote them) is approachable by the students, depending on their complexity. Degrees of complexity: to distinguish the sound of the clarinet from the timpani is something a three-year-old can do; to distinguish the sound of the violin from the viola requires a higher level of training. To distinguish between ascending and descending scales is less complicated than recognizing a modulation to a related key, and so on.

Our ability to interpret a piece depends on the varied combinations of expressive means that we are able to recognize. There

are many interpretations possible, as always when confronted with any work of art. This observation can be made about any experience we have in our lives. We are constantly interpreting in terms of our own personal past experiences, our psychological state of being, our culture, and many other factors. We observed earlier the different meanings musicologists have attributed to *Fidelio*. They can be ethical (marital fidelity), sociological (the role of women), historical (connections to the French Revolution), or philosophical, as suggested in the essay by Giovanni Guanti on the philosophical reception of Beethoven in Romanticism in this volume. While some of these “high” concepts are accessible only to the upper-level students, and perhaps the lower level, others are accessible even to the younger students. We could describe the *types* of interpretation (the meanings attributed to a piece), which would become more workable for the students when displayed along an *axis*, an *ordering* that moves from the most concrete to the most abstract. At the concrete end of the graph are onomatopoeia and movement: that a piece could suggest birdsong or a storm is something a six-year-old child can understand. Music can also remind us of the gallop of a horse or the crawling of a turtle. As students grow, we invite them to explore the emotive dimensions of a piece, which musicians used to term “the affections.” A progression of the possible interpretations could be presented thus, in a crescendo from the most concrete to the most abstract.

This is not a complete list:

Axis of meanings

- | Philosophical
- | Logical
- | Religious
- | Ethical
- | Historical
- | Political
- | Anthropological
- | Sociological
- | Evocative
- | Allegorical
- | Emotional
- | Spatial
- | Sensory
- | Kinetic
- ↑ Onomatopoeic

The orchestra and the overtures

First, a reflection on the historical function of the orchestra in *Fidelio*. It may be surprising that this opera was not staged in Italy until 1927, a century after its premiere in Vienna. It was too removed from the tradition of Italian opera to be widely accepted. The first, macroscopic difference lies in the function of the instruments. The voice holds the place of privilege in Italian opera, with the vocal melody deployed in long phrases, while the orchestra fundamentally serves as a support, with frequent interjections to illuminate the vocal line. Beethoven, however, conceived of his music in orchestral terms. He constructed the scenes of his drama as if they were movements of a symphony or piano sonata.

For Beethoven “symphonic thinking was second nature... it is not surprising that even in his opera he approached its instrumental

side from a predominantly symphonic angle... the instruments have the main say with the voice-parts more or less superimposed and unfolding over the orchestral harmony in a horizontal direction. A good example of this is the *poco allegro* section of Florestan's aria”:¹² we will take this into account later in the “portrait” of the characters. If we want to enjoy and foster enjoyment in the richness of *Fidelio*, it is essential to draw attention to the fundamental contribution of the orchestra. The most obvious example would be the overtures. Beethoven must have been eager to exercise his symphonic vein by beginning *Fidelio* with what is in essentially a symphonic movement. They had nothing to do with the Italian overtures of the eighteenth century. Beethoven's are structurally complex, and in a certain way independent from the opera that follows them; this is especially true of the third and fourth overtures. It's no coincidence that we often hear them in orchestral concerts, perhaps if not to the extent reported by Berlioz. He would have been delighted had the conservatory repeated a concert by Mendelssohn's Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra, in which all four overtures were played in a single concert!

More active listening can help us discover strong expressive connections to the plot. In the second overture, the relevant passage is a motive that is sung in Act II, in the aria where Florestan laments his loss of his liberty: “in des Lebens Frühlingstagen ist das Glück von mir geflohn” (In the springtime of my life happiness has flown).

More generally, “the overtures, aside from the fourth, are not mere introductions to the opera, but additional independent responses to the same problem, a renewed effort

to translate the idea of the opera through symphonic means alone.” They are a kind of summary, one could say, “a monument to this time of troubles and oppressed souls, and in his call for freedom a formidable *crescendo*, from suffering to joy, along the path of hope and struggle; an ascent from the abyss to the open sky.”¹³ This is true not only of the overture, but the entire opera.

The case of the first scene

The opera unfolds on two levels, sharply opposed in every way. First of all, spatially: above, the domestic story of the beginning; below, the prison. It has a corresponding contrast of light: brightness above, darkness below. The contrast is also psychological: above, domestic tranquility; below, fearful anguish. The contrast is also political: above, absolute power; below, the collateral of tyranny. The unfolding of the entire opera can be summarized as, “a descent into the abyss and the ascent from night into full daylight.”¹⁴ Set designers typically follow this duality of space and light.

After the students have learned about the noble democratic idealism that guides Beethoven’s opera, they might be dismayed by the lighthearted atmosphere at the opening—which is anything but heroic—enacted by two characters, Marzelline and Jaquino, who appear, quarreling, at the jailer Rocco’s dwelling. More than a few critics have reserved such dismay, and even a rebuke, for the composer: such a “low” tone to strike at the outset of a music theater piece destined to develop and to conclude, after fierce and even ferocious conflicts, on a very different plane: epic and triumphal. Its “light” and apparently “frivolous” atmosphere seems to strike a false note when compared to the

heroic seriousness of the rest of the opera. A first explanation for this might be Beethoven’s intention to portray his characters socially, a strategy he picked up from Mozart. Mozart did this by using working-class language for the low comedians Leporello and Masetto when he has them dance the rustic *Ländler*, while assigning the minuet for the aristocrats Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, and Don Ottavio; Don Giovanni gets the bourgeois contra dance when he dances with Zerlina, a peasant girl. Beethoven followed suit, although in a more restrained manner. Let us compare the scene where Rocco extols money with the opening of Act II, which introduces Florestan. Let’s just consider the way each one is constructed. The first example is in strophic form: the same popular form we find, for example, in some of the many *Lieder* by Beethoven or Schubert. The second is cast in a form suitable for the courtly, aristocratic tradition. In particular, let’s observe how Rocco expresses himself “through a consonant, diatonic tonal-harmonic language, a relatively rapid, syllabic delivery of the text, frequent reliance on staccato or detached articulations in the orchestra and voice, and relatively short-breathed vocal phrases; repeated tones, reminiscent of eighteenth-century patter, are quite conspicuous in Rocco’s music. On the whole the members of Rocco’s household avoid the kind of sustained, bel canto singing reserved for the heroic characters,”¹⁵ which we will find instead in Florestan’s aria.

The transition from the “low tone” of the beginning to the “noble tone” of all of the second act can be interpreted, from a social-historical perspective, as a contrast between the world of the *ancien régime* and the new world arising from the Revolution:

Beethoven has not dawdled in the jailer’s household simply because he can think of nothing better to do, or because he must ‘set the scene’ for the significant actions that follow, or even because he is adhering to the conventions of the rescue opera genre. Rather, he is here creating the first term of his grand historical argument, the lapsed world of imperfect beings and relationships that will be utterly transformed in the work’s conclusion. We can feel the power of that transformation only if the old order is firmly established in our minds as the *terminus a quo* of the opera’s trajectory. The sense of moving from an unreconstructed to a redeemed order is in fact the single most powerful impression that *Fidelio* conveys to its audience.¹⁶

The transition from the old to the new regime is certainly not painless, as we hear in the frequent expressions of anxiety and in the climate of fear that underlie the decisive actions in the plot. The same two excerpts we suggested above would work well for a sociological-historical discussion of this topic. The contrast between the two expressive worlds of the opera, between the tragic nature of the second act and the lighthearted nature of the first scene opens itself to a final interpretation, which is disturbing, to say the least:

Those who find the opening scenes of *Fidelio* disappointing might in any case ask themselves—did not everyday life continue apparently unchanged on the very threshold of Auschwitz and Dachau? Are there not doubtless today, prison rooms with pots of geraniums in the windows and prison-officers’ daughters in love with their father’s assistants, at the gates of concentration-camps or optimistically named ‘rehabilitation-centres’? There is no more

evocative way of presenting the horror of imprisonment than by first showing freedom, not in forms of impossible splendor but in the humble shape in which it presents itself to the ordinary human being.¹⁷

The quartets

To understand the expressive tone of the second act of the opera, let’s listen to its dramatic climax: the scene where Pizarro lunges with dagger in hand to murder Florestan. It is Leonore who stops him and then reveals who she is: the wife of the prisoner. Here Beethoven writes a quartet, with the voices entering one by one. Pizarro attacks with “Er sterbe!” (Let him die!) and a convulsive vocal line that winds its way upward by continuous chromatic steps until it explodes in a ferocious explosion of joy as he throws himself at his despised enemy. The trumpets, with their military calls, confirm his arrogance. At this point Florestan, Leonore, and Rocco enter in this order, each gripped by increasing anxiety, which becomes even more intense after Leonore has revealed her true identity and pointed the pistol at Pizarro. This is the climax of the opera, carried to its culmination by the repeated trumpet fanfare that announces the arrival of the minister. The agitated coda portrays the extreme distress felt by all four characters.

Let’s compare this now with the quartet from the first act, one of the most memorable numbers from *Fidelio*. Beethoven’s construction of this one is radically different: it’s in the form of a canon. Each of the four characters—Marzelline, Leonore, Rocco, Jaquino—comments on Marzelline’s obvious love for Fidelio (in reality, Leonore dressed as a man). Each of the four has very different words, and we would expect that, like the

quartet in the second act, the music would be different as well, both for the voices and the instruments. Instead, Beethoven has opted for a somewhat surprising solution: the form of the canon, which requires the characters to express themselves in the same way *musically*. The story seems to come to a halt, like a movie on pause. How can we explain Beethoven's choice?

The most obvious answer for a composer is that musical theater is not spoken theater, let alone cinema, where such situations would be unthinkable. Opera is its own form of communication with its own set of rules: each piece is appreciated first and foremost for what it is as music. If there is an analogous model, it would be in the visual arts. No one expects the figures in *The Last Supper* to move around, or Degas's dancers to whirl offstage. To help reinforce this obvious point, you can show the students some of the masterpieces by painters from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Greuze, David, or Apolloni:

<http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/frenchpainting/Detail.cfm?IRN=126562&ViewID=2>

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacques-Louis-David-Serment_de_%27arm%C3%A9e-fait_%C3%A0_l'Empereur_apr%C3%A8s_la_distribution_des_aigles_5_d%C3%A9cembre_1804_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

<http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/magika2000/5974553544/>

The quartet is like a great, independent artwork, complete in itself and set within a magnificent altarpiece. The history of opera is full of episodes that freeze the action: ensemble pieces, although they're not always canons. We find many of them in Rossini's operas, the most famous being "Mi par d'esser con la testa in un'orrida fucina" that closes Act I of *The Barber of Seville*. A comparison between the two would show one hand the dynamism of Rossini's ensemble, and on the other, the contemplative spirit of Beethoven's quartet. Before searching for a meaning on one of the upper levels of the "axis of meanings" above, let's enjoy this piece for what it has to offer our sensibilities, for the delicacy of the atmosphere that surrounds all four characters and transcends the joys or worries that the words communicate. On a higher level, the quartet may appear to be a celebration of the joys of domestic tranquility. And on a still higher level, it may prefigure the joys of the world to come, as will be revealed in the finale of the opera: "It is a kind of musical promise, a down-payment, as it were, and has the effect of alerting us near the start of the opera that something much more significant is in store for us than we would be inclined to expect from the trivialities of the opening duet and Marzelline's aria—the only two pieces we have heard up to this point.... The canon, in sum, must be bracketed off from the numbers that surround it. It anticipates the world in which *Fidelio* ends, but it does not fundamentally disturb the opera's bipolar structure—our sense of moving from a discredited past to a redeemed future."¹⁸

Tableaux vivants

The procedure followed by Beethoven in his Act I quartet has an analogy in one of the practices in vogue in nineteenth-century France: *tableaux vivants*, or living pictures. In the theater, a group of singers or actors would be posed in groups to remind the audience of real events, historical or mythological subjects, and paintings. In modern times, Pier Paolo Pasolini introduced *tableaux vivants* inspired by Pontorno's painting *Deposition from the Cross* in his film, *La ricotta*. Although the following material is in Italian, the pictures alone can tell the story.

http://www.mediastudies.it/IMG/pdf/7_Corredo_Tableaux-2.pdf

Not long ago the experience was given an evocative reprise in the theater at the Museo Diocesano (Diocesan Museum) of Naples in 2015. Before the visitors' eyes, the *tableaux* were gradually composed in flesh and blood by actors, who reproduced paintings by Caravaggio. Again, the pictures in the link below will tell the story.

<http://www.caffeinamagazine.it/lo-spettacolo/9353-tableaux-vivants-le-opere-di-caravaggio-prendono-vita-davanti-agli-occhi-degli-spettatori>

The following resource in English suggests ways to incorporate *tableaux vivants* into your own teaching:

<http://artmuseumteaching.com/2012/12/06/tableaux-vivant-history-and-practice/>

This experience could be performed by our students with the quartet or else with other ensembles from the opera. Divided into groups, they could perform one at a time or simultaneously. A procedure similar to the Neapolitan performances would involve bringing on one character (in our case, Marzelline), and then the others in their turn. Unlike the re-creation of an existing painting, the *music* will suggest not only the timing of the entrances, but especially the postures and gestures, which the students will come up with on their own.

Fidelio has other ensemble opportunities that would be suitable for additional *tableaux vivants*: in Act I, the trio that precedes the march; in Act II, the trio for Florestan, Rocco, and Leonore, and the following quartet. Both finales, which include the chorus of prisoners, could involve the entire class in a grand ensemble tableau.

Standing out from the crowd

As we mentioned earlier, the quartet from Act I shows the characters using identical music (thanks to the canon) to express different sentiments using different words: Marzelline enamored, Leonore disconcerted, Rocco satisfied, Jaquino exasperated:

MARZELLINE

*(During Rocco's praise of Leonore,
Marzelline watches with complete approval and throws
Leonore increasingly loving glances; to herself)*

Mir ist so wunderbar,
es engt das Herz mir ein;
er liebt mich, es ist klar,
ich werde glücklich sein.

It seems so wonderful,
my heart is as full as it can be;
he loves me, it's clear,
I'm going to be happy.

LEONORE

(to herself)

Wie gross ist die Gefahr,
wie schwach der Hoffnung Schein;
sie liebt mich, es ist klar,
o namenlose Pein!

How great is the danger,
how faint the ray of hope;
she loves me, it's clear,
oh, indescribable pain!

ROCCO

(who has meanwhile come downstage; to himself)

Sie liebt ihn, es ist klar,
ja, Mädchen, er wird dein;
ein gutes junges Paar,
sie werden glücklich sein.

She loves him, it's clear
yes, my girl, he'll be yours;
a good young couple—
they'll be happy.

JAQUINO

*(while eavesdropping has come closer and closer,
standing on the side and somewhat behind the others; to himself)*

Mir sträubt sich schon das Haar,
der Vater willigt ein;
mir wird so wunderbar,
mir fällt kein Mittel ein.

My hair is standing on end;
her father is consenting;
I feel so dumbfounded—
I can't think of any solution.

This is the usual procedure in operatic ensembles, with a few exceptions. The most famous is the quartet from *Rigoletto* by Verdi. As always in teaching, comparisons work well to deepen knowledge that might otherwise fall on deaf ears. Here's an exercise to get the students involved in discovering what's so special about this quartet.

In this climactic scene we see an incurable Don Juan, the Duke of Mantua, flirting with the landlady of the inn where he plans to stay the night. The woman, named Maddalena, doesn't fall for it: she knows a "player" when she sees one. This scene takes place inside the inn. Outside in the dark, another woman named Gilda is peering through the window; she's filled with sorrow by what she sees: the deceitful Duke had promised her his eternal love, and she had believed him. Now she hears him sweet-talking another woman. Gilda's father, Rigoletto, stands next to her, furious and

ready to take revenge on this hypocrite.

Before listening to the music, try this interesting experiment: have groups of four speak the text. Each group decides:

- the personality of each character;
- the register of the voice, its color, etc.;
- the order of the lines and interruptions;
- the potential places where the voices might overlap.

Each group will perform its version.

Now let's move on to listening to the characters as they sing in Verdi's opera, one at a time.¹⁹

Compare this with the students' results.

What does the music tell us about the characters? How is each one feeling? How are their personalities revealed?

The answers can be found chiefly by listening to the vocal lines.

DUCA DI MANTOVA

Bella figlia dell'amore,
schiavo son dei vezzi tuoi.
Con un detto sol tu puoi
le mie pene consolar.
Vieni e senti del mio core
il frequente palpitar.

DUKE OF MANTUA

Beautiful daughter of love,
I'm a slave to your charms.
With a single word you can
console my sufferings.
Come and feel the rapid beating
of my heart.

MADDALENA

Ha, ha. Rido ben di core,
ché tai baie [tali sciocchezze] costan poco.
Quanto valga il vostro gioco,
mel credete, so apprezzar.
Sono avvezza, bel signore,
ad un simile scherzar.

MADDALENA

Ha, ha! That's a good laugh—
that kind of foolishness comes cheap.
What your flirtation's worth,
believe me, I know only too well.
I'm accustomed, handsome sir,
to that kind of joking.

GILDA

Ah, così parlar d'amore
a me pur l'infame ho udito!
Infelice cor tradito,
per angoscia non scoppiar.

RIGOLETTO

Taci, il piangere non vale [non serve]:
ch'ei mentiva or sei sicura.
Taci, e mia sarà la cura
la vendetta d'affrettar.
Pronta fia, sarà fatale:
io saprollo fulminar!

Now here comes the surprise. Verdi doesn't let us hear the parts separately, one at a time: they enter gradually, overlapping each other in counterpoint. This is because this is how people really talk: they don't wait for one person to finish before they start talking, but overlap their words with the other characters. Now listen to the original version. In spoken theater it would be unthinkable to have four characters speaking at once. Music has an expressive component that is unavailable to spoken language!

Along the way we've come to notice that the orchestra is supporting the role of one particular member of the quartet: Gilda. By this choice Verdi is letting us know that at the heart of this episode is the victim of the tragedy that is about to strike: Gilda. This is different from Beethoven, who had no expressive hierarchy in his quartet.

Portraits

The preceding exercise can also introduce another crucial issue that applies every time we listen to a piece of music: to recognize, from the way characters sing and by the in-

GILDA

Ah, that monster talked about love
the same way to me!
Unhappy, betrayed heart,
don't break with anguish.

RIGOLETTO

Hush, your weeping is useless;
now you're certain he was lying.
Hush, and I'll avenge
you soon.
It will be quick and deadly:
I know how to kill him.

strumental accompaniment, their emotions, their intentions, and even their social class. We can only get vague information from the words (and if the students can't speak German, don't think of it as an obstacle, rather an opportunity to focus on the music). The most important thing by far, in listening to an opera, is what we can learn from the music. In class we can go back to the ideas stimulated by the *tableaux vivants*. Unlike portrait painting, which literally fixes the personality of the subject, a musical portrait, by its very nature, follows a psychological development. The video excerpts in the handsome "Vox Imago" dvd can serve as your examples. We should also add that the musical portrait of the characters changes gradually over the course of the opera as it responds to events. If we listen to an opera by Mozart, such as *Le nozze di Figaro* or *Don Giovanni* or perhaps an opera by Verdi, such as *Rigoletto* or *Il trovatore*, the nuances and the "colors" of the voice and the instrumental accompaniment make us feel that we are in the presence of well-defined characters: people with strong personalities. The protagonists in *Fidelio*,

on the other hand, "are types rather than individual characters, more abstractions than human beings of flesh and blood, and ultimately the mouthpiece for ideas of good and evil, loyalty and villainy, suffering and heroic will. Beethoven paints his principal characters in black-and-white."²⁰

We'll look at these in the order they appear onstage. The best way to stimulate the students' listening is to propose questions about the ideas we want them to consider. For example, in order to understand the way characters feel and how they change, listen first of all to the way they sing; second, listen to what the instrumentation has to tell us.

Marzelline, Jaquino and Rocco

The first two are Marzelline, daughter of the jailer Rocco, and Jaquino, her suitor. They appear together in a playful duet, as befits a lover's quarrel. As in the quartet, in a duet like this it's the magic of the music, as we remind our students, that gives the composer options: to sing one after the other (and here we must distinguish between the moments where one echoes the other using the same melody, and those in which the two voices overlap in counterpoint). The sunny atmosphere of this duet is also confirmed by the onomatopoeia Beethoven uses to imitate the sound of knocking at the door through grace notes in the strings. But the role assigned to the orchestra goes far beyond these light touches of color. In its own right it becomes a true interlocutor with the two characters. Sometimes it underlines their melodic ideas, but more often it introduces new melodic ideas in counterpoint. In short, we realize right from the beginning the great and decisive importance of the instruments in *Fidelio*: a

much greater dimension than in Italian opera, which delivers its expressive message through the voice. It is primarily this extra dimension—which critics called a "symphonic treatment" of the opera—that disconcerted the public that attended the first performances of *Fidelio*. We only need parenthetically to cite this outraged critic from a newspaper in 1806: "All of the impartial experts are completely in agreement that never has there been written anything so chaotic, so unpleasant, so confused, so repugnant to the ears. One distasteful modulation follows another in an abominable cacophony."²¹

Shortly before the duet finishes, Beethoven gives Marzelline one of the few melismas in the opera, which Beethoven uses to delineate the simple nature of an exuberant young woman. While Beethoven doesn't grant Jaquino his own aria, the next number sees Marzelline alone, exulting in her new-found love for *Fidelio*. The minor mode with which the aria begins could be read as regret for poor Jaquino (a little exercise: make sure the students hear the difference between the minor mode, C minor, in the beginning and its relative major mode halfway through each verse). Then the major mode (C major this time) resolutely interjects at the words "Die Hoffnung schon erfüllt die Brust" (Hope is already filling my breast), with Marzelline's joyous melody echoed by the oboe. The little cloud of the opening is quickly dissipated by the happy and naive dream of a young girl: that love lasts forever. The strophic form of the aria (AA) is another trait of the "Mozartean" simplicity of the character.

Rocco's aria, in which he extols his materialistic ideals, immediately follows the quartet. It is in strophic form, as we saw earlier. There's

no holding back here in aria that celebrates money. The melody based on chord tones illustrates the self-confident resolution of the character, changing from major to minor when confronting the idea of the troubles life has in store for us (and that money will alleviate). As in Marzelline's aria, Rocco's moves from a section in moderate tempo to a livelier *allegro*: with money, he sings, you can control your own fate.

Leonore

While Marzelline, Jaquino, and Rocco represent a "commonplace" world, secure in their instincts and emotions, insubstantial in their ideals, and representative of a society that

would soon be turned upside down by events larger than themselves, Leonore instead incarnates exactly the kind of grand idea that Beethoven envisaged for all humankind. In the opera she has a presence far superior to all the others. The piece that best represents her character is her extraordinary aria from Act I, which follows Pizarro's barbarous scene. The aria is in three parts, according to traditional classical opera tradition: recitative, aria, and cabaletta. Each part gives scope to one of three emotions, of which the words us offer us only a pale shadow: outrage over the wicked Pizarro's plan, confidence in the successful outcome of her own mission, and the impulse driving her to undertake it:

First section: recitative

Abscheulicher, wo eilst du hin?
was hast du vor in wildem Grimme?
Des Mitleids Ruf, der Menschheit Stimme,
rührt nichts mehr deinen Tigersinn?
Doch toben auch wie Meereswogen
dir in der Seele Zorn und Wut,
so leuchtet mir ein Farbenbogen,
der hell auf dunklen Wolken ruht;
der blickt so still, so friedlich nieder,
der spiegelt alte Zeiten wieder,
und neu besänftigt wallt mein Blut.

Second section: aria

Komm, Hoffnung, lass den letzten Stern
der Müden nicht erbleichen;
o komm,
erhell mein Ziel, sei's noch so fern,
die Liebe, sie wird's erreichen.

Monster, where are you running?
What are you planning in your wild fury?
Compassion's call, humanity's voice—,
does nothing move your tiger's soul?
Although like waves at sea
wrath and fury rage in your soul,
a rainbow shines on me
that brilliantly rests on the dark clouds:
it looks so calmly, so peacefully down,
it reflects old times,
and my blood flows peacefully once again.

Come, hope, keep a glimmer alive
for the tired;
oh come,
illuminate my goal, not matter how far away
love will attain it.

Third section: cabaletta

Ich folg dem Innern Triebe,
ich wanke nicht,
mich stärkt die Pflicht
der treuen Gattenliebe!
O du, für den ich alles trug,
könnt ich zur Stelle dringen,
wo Bosheit dich in Fesseln schlug,
und süßen Trost dir bringen!

This scene magnificently captures the scope of Leonore's emotion, her high moral ideas, and her great energy. The tension that explodes in the recitative is due to the vocal line, angular and broken up by frequent rests, as well as by the exclamations from the orchestra. The recitative, in which the instruments are as important as the voice, leaves the accompanied recitatives of the eighteenth century far behind. It imparts an energy to the action that even Fiordiligi's aria "Come scoglio" from Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (a parallel often made by critics) was never able to achieve.

The aria itself takes us far away from the previous mood. The hope evoked in the text suggests to Beethoven a picture of heavenly tranquility; it is expressed through the tenderness of the voice, introduced and wrapped in a warm mantle of three horns, which accompany it to the end.

The horns return to the foreground in the *allegro* finale, proclaiming on the notes of the major chord (B E B E G# E, the notes of a bugle call), the heroic fervor Leonore will bring to her plan. "Significantly, her part contains wide-spread arpeggios with tremendous leaps from high to low that contrast strongly with the predominantly step-wise progression in the lyrical section that preceded it."²²

I follow my internal drive,
I will not falter,
I'm strengthened by the duty
of true conjugal love!
Oh you, for whom I've endured everything,
if only I could force my way into the place
where evil cast you in irons,
and bring you sweet comfort!

Florestan

Florestan appears onstage for the first time only at the beginning of Act II. By now Beethoven has left behind the ease of domestic life and the world it represents to transport us abruptly into the heart of the drama—into the dungeon where the *deuteragonist* (in ancient Greek drama, the second-most important character) of the action languishes near death. He also stands for the historical world he incarnates: an oppressed people, as well as the composer's own personal tormentor—deafness.

"From the first bar, one feels that the unhappy man locked in this prison has had to abandon all hope when he entered."²³ The prelude that introduces the scene, which we have analyzed above in comparison with the march, is a small poem that in itself reveals Beethoven's symphonic vocation, which leads from the symphonies to *Fidelio*. "The power and originality of this piece stem chiefly from the fusion of the purely instrumental prelude and the aria and recitative that follow it ... it is the first time in the history of opera that such a fusion, which leads to unforeseen heights of dramatic intensity, has been realized."²⁴ The unequivocally painful and dark tone of the instrumental

prelude imperceptibly flows into the sudden cry, "Gott!" "Florestan is, dramatically speaking, an anti-hero. He takes no active part whatsoever in the action.... Yet from the moral point of view, the point of view that mattered most to Beethoven, Florestan is a hero bearing, with despairing fortitude, his unmerited fate, in the knowledge of having done his duty in denouncing Pizarro." The aria that Beethoven dedicated to him reveals a "fine psychologist in that he tones down the heroic element to an imperceptible level of which we are only subliminally aware, except for the phrase in the *adagio*, 'und die Ketten sind mein Lohn' where Florestan breaks out into a more forceful lament over his fate.... After an initial feeling of desolation and anguish Florestan's mood alters to one of resigned acceptance of his lot and

trust in God's will."²⁵ Florestan "is like a dumb man who struggles to speak, to whom every word is a battle and sharp pain, yet who does speak, first spasmodically, then steadily, with self-denying heroism."²⁶

As usual, the orchestra plays an important role, in particular with the counter melody in the oboe that accompanies the entire aria. It is like a comfort from outside that eases the suffering of Florestan in his decision to accept his fate.

Pizarro

Returning to Act I, Pizarro's appearance moves the linguistic style of the entire opera from comedy to intense drama, which continues until the end of the opera. We hear him after he has read the message that announces the coming of the minister:

Ha, welch ein Augenblick,
die Rache werd ich kühlen,
dich rufet dein Geschick!
In seinem Herzen wühlen,
o Wonne, grosses Glück!
Schon war ich nah, im Staube,
dem lauten Spott zum Raube,
dahin gestreckt zu sein!
Nun ist er mir geworden,
den Mörder selbst zu morden!
Ha, welch ein Augenblick u.s.w.
Nun ist er mir u.s.w.
in seiner letzten Stunde,
den Stahl in seiner Wunde,
ihm noch ins Ohr zu schrein:
Triumph, der Sieg ist mein!

Ah, what a moment,
I'll slake my revenge,
your fate is calling!
To tear out his heart—
oh rapture, the greatest happiness!
Once I was nearly—in the dust
prey to open ridicule—
laid so low!
Now it has fallen to me
to murder the murderer!
Ah, what a moment, etc.
Now it has fallen to me, etc.
in his last hour,
with my steel in his wound,
to cry into his ear:
Triumph, victory is mine!

"In this tremendous piece, the ferocious joy of a villain about to take his revenge is depicted with the most shocking verisimilitude.... Here, for the first time, the orchestra unleashes ... shuddering, agitation, shouting, and blows."²⁷ The motive of the character can be explained in psychological terms:

As this century has cause to know, the most fearful tyrant is the psychopath whose vindictiveness is thinly disguised, whose self-control is fragile, whose outbursts are unpredictable. Thus Pizarro. His inner agitation is expressed, in the time honoured way, by the orchestra: the ominous drum roll, the twisting string figure ... the stabbing accents, the blaring brass. His own line begins with the angular interval B flat – C sharp, and it is characterized throughout by short phrases whose irregular outlines and leaps seem to be intent on breaking the bounds of normal musical restraint. The transition from minor to major as he gloats in anticipation of his revenge is a travesty of the meaning the progression generally conveys in Beethoven's music. And the cowed murmurings of the chorus serve to emphasise his invulnerability.²⁸

The prisoners

While the minister who arrives at the end serves as the capstone of the action, ensuring the happy ending with his proclamation—the liberation of Florestan and denunciation of Pizarro—an independent and essential role is played by the prisoners, who form the chorus. In the first chorus in Act I only tenors and basses sing, while in the Act II finale sopranos and altos are added. This seems contradictory: there are no women in the prison! A stage director might imagine

that the wives, daughters, and friends of the prisoners were coming to meet them (in actuality, in his score Beethoven indicated "Chorus of Prisoners" and "Chorus of the People.") The listener who pays attention to the music doesn't need a rationale for this: the addition of female voices allows Beethoven not only to enrich the harmonic variety of the ensemble, but to replace the prevailing dark sonority of the male chorus with the brightness of the female sound. It so aptly expresses the change, not only in the physical, but above all the spiritual environment in which the work ends.

Again, comparison is a valuable didactic tool: this time between the two ways Beethoven chose to handle the chorus. In the finale of Act I, the prisoners climbing up from the darkness of their underground cells into the light of the courtyard is realized at the opening by the line in the strings that gradually ascends. Again, Beethoven's symphonic vocation leads him to create a texture in which the ecstatic song of the male voices is interwoven with the contrasting threads of the bassoons and the other winds, one by one. The painstaking care Beethoven took with this score is evidenced through many details, upon which musicologists have written entire books. One small example: have the students observe how the polyphonic singing at the beginning is melded into a unison at the words "der Kerker ist eine Gruft" (the prison is a tomb).

The final chorus opens with an orchestral introduction. Marked by an almost Rossinian crescendo, it is based on typical military march music, energetically moving. When they enter, the voices join in this rhythm, but the expansion of the sound palette to

include the brighter female voices is striking. From here we can go on to point out many details, such as the brief parenthesis amidst the rejoicing on the same image of the tomb, “Grabes,” that seemed to seize the frightened prisoners in the first chorus. With the quasi-religious solemnity of their singing, from, shall we say, the *miserere* of the first chorus to the *alleluia* of the second, the prisoners come to embody all humanity. It is this humanity with which Beethoven, apostle of the ideals of the French Revolution, celebrates liberation from the darkness of social and spiritual oppression.

From opera to symphony

As we have seen several times now, the spirit of the symphony pervades *Fidelio* to the extent that, in certain cases, it is a more important character than the voice. By paying attention to what the instruments have to tell us, we can understand the entire meaning of this theatrical work.

But the opposite can also apply: *Fidelio*, with the semantic denotations we have uncovered, allows us to help the students grasp meanings in Beethoven’s symphonies that otherwise might have remained obscure. First of all, let’s examine the entire series, seen from above, so to speak. We can encapsulate this with an oft-quoted line Beethoven wrote to Countess Erdödy on 10 October 1815, “durch Leiden Freude,” joy achieved through suffering. This motto would represent the spirit of Beethoven even better—the spirit that pervades the Symphony n.º 3 (*Eroica*), as well as the Fifth and the Ninth—if we were to interpolate, “joy achieved *through victory over suffering*.” Like *Fidelio*, these symphonies enact a struggle no less heroic. They do it purely through musical

means, although in the Ninth Symphony Beethoven wanted to make his ideals more explicit by setting verses by his favorite poet, Schiller, drawn from his *Ode to Joy*.

The students could listen to the salient movements of one or more symphonies. In each case, the story told in the opening *allegro* movement has a heroic finish in the last movement. The opening *allegro* movements are characterized by continuous, intense conflict. The final *allegro* movements are victorious over the conflict in ways that often achieve an apotheosis, glorification, and celebration. Between the first and last scenarios, the plots unfold in surprisingly different ways. The Symphony n.º 3 visits one of those desolate abysses in Beethoven’s world, the funeral march, which begins softly and arrives at an overwhelming emotional tension caused by the overlapping of motives until the final appearance of the opening theme. Here the violins that play the theme seem overcome by emotion; the rhythm is disrupted, and the theme dissolves.

The march is followed by a brisk return to vitality, which even seems to erase the memory of the preceding tragic atmosphere. The third act of the drama is the shortest and most compact, marked by a persistent galloping rhythm.

The finale of the Third Symphony has a long history that can shed light on Beethoven’s compositional processes, his method of constructing the grand arcs of his musical dramas. He had come up with the main theme a couple of years earlier for the conclusion of the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*. The choreographer intended to celebrate the Enlightenment’s belief in human reason and science. The tale concludes with a splendid

celebration, in which all humanity, ennobled by culture, participates by dancing. This piece has the flavor of an occasional piece destined for a not-too-demanding public, and for which the composer did not want to waste too much effort. But in his hands the theme is not mere inert material, abandoned by the way after being developed.

It is more like an idea to be explored, analyzed for its assets, for its potential. This is demonstrated by his many compositions in the form of theme and variations, where the theme may well be a humble little tune you might whistle around the house, but on which the inexhaustible fantasy of Beethoven builds a storyline of events in sound. On his theme from *Prometheus* Beethoven built 15 variations for piano, followed by a fugue. This composition can be considered a preparatory study for the finale of the *Eroica* Symphony. Here too, for the glorious conclusion Beethoven uses the *Prometheus* theme, rendered even more heroic than at its first appearance, through the stentorian statements of the trumpets.

To round off the drama we hear the impetuosity of a military march, not a funeral one. “Freudig wie ein Held zum Siege” (Joyful like a hero to battle) says Schiller’s text. Setting

it to music in his Ninth Symphony, Beethoven used a military setting: one of the variations which make up the last movement of the Ninth was inscribed *Alla marcia* (like a march). To clarify his reference to a war—a moral war—Beethoven added instruments that would have sounded warlike to the audiences of the early nineteenth century. These colorful percussion instruments—bass drum, cymbals, triangle—were introduced into the orchestra in the late eighteenth century in imitation of the military bands of the Janissaries, the ferocious corps of the Turkish army. Bass drum, cymbals, and triangle came to be known as “Turkish music,” and when a composer used them, the allusion to the military world was clear. *Joyful like a hero to battle*. Here, as in the previous symphonies and in *Fidelio*, the bellicose tumult that defeats evil and suffering leads to the achievement of justice and happiness. To listen to the heroic moments of these symphonies (and we could add other compositions, such as the concertos for piano and violin) is to shine a searchlight on the deep comprehension of Beethoven’s message, just as *Fidelio* in its turn will allow the students to listen with greater awareness to the drama underlying purely instrumental compositions.

NOTES

1. CATHERINE CLÉMENT, *Opera, Or, The Undoing of Women*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1988, 59 and 30-31. Teachers of history or literature who are interested in delving more deeply into this topic will find an inexhaustible trove of material in the encyclopedic *History of Women in the West*, edited by Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, 1992. The five-volume set, spanning antiquity to the twentieth century, belongs in every scholastic library. The sole drawback from our perspective is that there is no mention of music amongst the vast entries on literature. Only the fifth volume on the nineteenth century has the briefest of discussions about opera, beginning with *La traviata*; however, only the libretti are discussed, and *Fidelio* does not appear. It is a limitation that shows once again the difficulty of the cultural elites in understanding the contributions that musical works can bring to the understanding of society and its history.
2. GIOVANNI CARLI BALLOLA, *Beethoven*, Milano, Accademia, 1977, 406.
3. MOSCO CARNER, *Major and Minor*, London, Duckworth, 1980, 194.
4. DONALD JAY GROUT - HERMINE WEIGEL WILLIAMS, *A Short History of Opera*, 4th ed., New York, Columbia University, 2003, 351.
5. PAUL ROBINSON, *Ludwig van Beethoven: "Fidelio,"* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 70.
6. ROBINSON, *Ludwig van Beethoven*, 96.
7. MARTIN COOPER, *Ideas and Music*, London, Barrie & Rockliff, 1967, 45-46.
8. CARL DAHLHAUS, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to His Music*, Oxford, Oxford University, 1991, 181-182.
9. ERNST H. GOMBRICH, *Arte e illusione*, Torino, Einaudi, 1965, 198 and 361.
10. *The Beethoven Companion*, edited by Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune, London, Faber, 1971, 374.
11. This exercise is suggested in this author's textbook *All'opera insieme/online* (Milano, Principato, 2011), where the comparison is made between a prelude by Chopin and *Wolverine Blues* by Jerry R. Morton; and in the textbook *Concerto* (Milano, Principato, 2015), where the comparison is suggested between Massenet's tender *Meditation* and the Napoleonic *Salute to the Eagle*.
12. CARNER, *Major and Minor*, 208.
13. ROMAIN ROLLAND, *Beethoven: les grandes époques créatrices. De l'"Héroïque" à l'"Appassionata"*, Paris, Sablier, 1928, 235 and 243.
14. ROLLAND, *Beethoven*, 249. The writer Romain Rolland, "a wounded witness to the bloody catastrophe of our Europe" and courageous opponent of France's entry into World War I in 1914, finds in *Fidelio* "a monument to the anguish of the period, to the soul of the oppressed, and his call for freedom: a formidable crescendo from suffering into joy, a journey through hope and struggle. An ascent from the abyss into heaven" (243). More broadly, the author saw in Beethoven the incarnation of his own humanitarian and pacifist ideals. Seven volumes and fifty years of his life were devoted to writing his biography.
15. MICHAEL C. TUSA, "Music as drama: Structure, style and process in *Fidelio*," in ROBINSON, *Ludwig van Beethoven*, 108.
16. ROBINSON, *Ludwig van Beethoven*, 83.
17. COOPER, *Ideas and Music*, 48. The author compares Florestan's circumstances to those described by Silvio Pellico in *Le mie prigioni*.
18. ROBINSON, *Ludwig van Beethoven*, 91-92.
19. The voices can be heard separately in the discography of the textbook by CARLO DELFRATI, *I colori della musica*, Milano, Principato, 2003, 196-197.
20. CARNER, *Major and Minor*, 196.
21. This report, together with others of similar tone, in ROLLAND, *Beethoven*, 231.
22. CARNER, *Major and Minor* cit., 216.
23. HECTOR BERLIOZ, *À travers chants*, Paris, Lévy, 1862, 82.
24. RENÉ LEIBOWITZ, *Histoire de l'opéra*, Paris, Bouchet-Chastel, 1957, 95.
25. CARNER, *Major and Minor*, 217 and 219.
26. PAUL HENRY LANG, *The Experience of Opera*, New York, Norton, 1973, 107-108.
27. BERLIOZ, *À travers chants*, 76-77.
28. BASIL DEANE, "*Fidelio*: An operatic marriage," in *Fidelio*, English National Opera Guides 4, London, Calder, 1986, 20.