

Insula orchestra/Laurence Equilbey: Fidelio

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate running time: 135 minutes with no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Programme

Ludwig van Beethoven *Fidelio*

This is a concert performance from the production at La Seine Musicale directed by David Bobée

Act I

In eighteenth-century Spain, Leonore's husband Florestan has been arrested and imprisoned by his villainous noble rival Don Pizarro, for attempting to expose the latter's crimes. Determined to rescue him, Leonore disguises herself as a boy, Fidelio, and takes a job at the prison where he is being held. Both the prison governor Rocco and his daughter Marzelline take a liking to 'Fidelio' causing problems for Leonore and for Jaquino, who loves Marzelline and is jealous of this new rival. 'Fidelio' works hard to gain Rocco's trust, hoping that he will allow her to accompany him to the underground cell where her husband is imprisoned. She persuades Rocco to let the other prisoners out into the garden for a rare glimpse of sunlight. But when Pizarro discovers this he is furious, and orders them all immediately back to their cells.

Act II

On Pizarro's orders, Rocco has been slowly starving Florestan to death. But when Pizarro hears that Don Fernando, a king's minister, will visit shortly to investigate claims of Pizarro's cruelty, he vows to murder his captive. But just as Pizarro is about to kill Florestan, 'Fidelio' throws himself between them. The stand-off is ended when a trumpet-call announces Don Fernando's arrival: Florestan is saved, Pizarro led away to prison, and all sing the praises of brave Leonore.

Synopsis by Alexandra Coghlan, courtesy of Glyndebourne Productions Ltd.

Composed and re-composed for almost a decade, surviving in three different versions with four different overtures, *Fidelio* – Beethoven's only opera – was hard-won, writes Alexandra Coghlan.

Even by the standards of a composer whose genius was the product of relentless labour, doubt, self-examination and reflection, as both his letters and sketchbooks vividly testify, *Fidelio* was a work apart – a 'martyr's crown', as the composer himself described it.

An exception within Beethoven's own output, dominated by orchestral and chamber works, *Fidelio* also represented something new within the 19th-century opera house. The composer stepped onto a stage filled with fashionable French tragedies and Italian comedies and offered Austria something else: a serious, moral drama in the nation's own language, a powerful manifesto for democracy, freedom and the power of the individual at a time of war and occupation.

But there's another side to *Fidelio*, as the work's subtitle – 'Leonore, Or The Triumph of Marital Love' makes clear. This politically charged, public piece also has a private face. It's a domestic drama that – unusually – rejects the thrills of courtship and romantic conflict, to celebrate instead the enduring, quiet virtues of marriage.

Fidelio is an opera of dualities and conflicts: a stage work by a great symphonist; an intimate drama and a loud shout of political protest. It's a piece whose tensions – both dramatic and musical – are played out in full view of the audience, a poignant testament to the irresolutions and imperfections, the untidiness of the human condition.

barbican

When *Fidelio* premiered at Vienna's Theater an der Wien on 20 November 1805, it was in a city that had been occupied just six days earlier by Napoleon and his troops. The performance was a notorious flop, the start of a long process of revisions that would never fully seem resolved: not after the premiere of the shortened, two-act adaptation in 1806, nor even after the triumphant staging of the final version (the score we know as *Fidelio* today) in 1814.

The opera's plot is, at first glance, typical of its age – a 'rescue opera' of the kind made fashionable during the French Revolution, pitting idealistic, honourable individuals against a corrupt regime. But Beethoven's opera is far from conventional. Not only does the plot (adapted by librettist Joseph Sonnleithner from Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's original French drama) turn the genre on its head with a dynamic, female rescuer (Leonore) and an imprisoned hero (Florestan), but the opera shows less interest in action than in ideas. *Fidelio* is less a rescue drama, than a meditation on one: a philosophical and musical exploration of concepts of justice, freedom, fidelity and virtue.

Critics have long pointed to this abstraction as the fatal flaw in *Fidelio*, arguing that the work lacks the instinct for drama that a Mozart or Verdi might have brought to the story. It's true that the characters scarcely deviate from their archetypes – the loyal wife; the flirtatious young girl; the wicked tyrant. But Beethoven's score fills out these stock types and situations with an urgency, a specificity, that's hard to ignore.

You only have to look at the orchestral costume the composer gives Leonore to put on in her Act I aria 'Abscheulicher!' (Monster!). We see a wife concealing her identity and dressing herself as a man to rescue her husband. But we hear so much more in the three horns and bassoon – a strikingly martial, masculine ensemble – in which she clothes herself for the battle ahead, their battlefield power cuttingly tellingly against the infinitely gentle beauty and control of her central melody.

Or, perhaps, examine instead the famous Act I quartet 'Mir ist so wunderbar' (I feel so wonderful). The decision to set the very different (and often actively conflicting) emotions of four characters – jailer Rocco, his love-struck daughter Marzelline, her jealous would-be lover Jacquino and the disguised Leonore – as a canon, in which each singer treads an identical musical path, is provocative. But how much more powerful than the confessional release of private, particular emotions, is this unexpected formal unanimity? All pay lip-service to musical and social etiquette: polite, orderly, controlled. Yet underneath passions churn, unexpressed. The drama here emerges from the chasm we perceive between what is expressed, and what must remain concealed.

Beethoven understood enough of the theatre to transform Don Pizarro completely, from the speaking-part originally presented in the libretto – a cardboard cut-out of a villain – into a figure alive with musical agency, whose 'Ha! Welch' ein Augenblick' (Ha! What a moment) paints a disturbing portrait of a violent, vengeful despot in its unsettled, chromatic tonality and stabbing, staccato phrases. And what about the coup of Florestan's first entry? Having delayed the appearance of his hero until Act II, Beethoven has him take shape gradually out of the darkness, emerging in musical silhouette – a craggy outline that gropes and grasps its way out of darkness to find light and clarity only as his thoughts and aria turn to his beloved wife.

Whether in its vast architecture of tonality and key relationships – a move from darkness to light that underpins the entire opera – or its carefully shaded orchestral atmospherics – thoughts of money flickering through the score with jingling brilliance, the exhilarating joy in freedom and reunion that courses through the closing duet, with its chasing firework-streaks of melody – *Fidelio* is the product of a great symphonist in the opera house. For better or worse.

© Alexandra Coghlan

Produced by the Barbican

Performers

Laurence Equilbey conductor
Stanislas de Barbeyrac Florestan
Sinéad Campbell-Wallace Léonore
Christian Immler Rocco
Sebastian Holecek Don Pizzaro
Hélène Carpentier Marzeline
Anas Séguin Don Fernando
Patrick Grahl Jacquino
Lancelot Lamotte prisoner tenor
Matthieu Heim prisoner bass

Insula orchestra

Stéphanie Paulet concertmaster

violin I

Laure Massoni
Catherine Ambach
Arnaud Bassand
Roldán Bernabé Carrión
Karine Gillette
Mojca Jerman
Martin Lissola
Cécile Moreau
Bénédicte Pernet

violin II

Pablo Gutiérrez Ruiz
Nathalie Cannistraro
François Costa
Cécile Garcia
Cécile Kubik
Noé Sainlez
Heide Sibley
Byron Wallis

viola

Brigitte Clément
Dahlia Adamopoulos
Lika Laloum
Julien Lo Pinto
Michel Renard
Jean-Luc Thonnérieux

accentus

soprano

Laurence Favier Durand
Pauline Feracci
Karine Godefroy
Émilie Husson
Charlotte Plasse
Juliette Raffin-Gay
Apolline Raï-Westphal
Marie Serri
Kristina Vahrenkamp

alto

Élise Beckers
Caroline Chassany
Marie Favier
Maria Kondrashkova
Émilie Nicot
Thi-Lien Truong
Marion Vergez-Pascal

David Bobée director

Nicolas Girard-Michelotti assistant director

Sabine Siegwalt costume designer

Beate Haeckl libretto revisions

Chloé Dufresne assistant conductor

Marc Korovitch choirmaster

Nicolai Maslenko vocal coach

Johannes Koegel-Dorfs language coach

cello

Damien Ventula
Anne-Charlotte Dupas
Pablo Garrido
Pauline Lacambra
Eglantine Latil

double bass

David Sinclair
Gautier Blondel
Marion Mallevaës
Charlotte Testu

piccolo

Johanne Favre Engel

flute

Anna Besson
Morgane Eouzan

oboe

Jean-Marc Philippe
Anne Chamussy

clarinet

Vincenzo Casale
Ana Melo

tenor

Matthieu Chapuis
Antoine Chenuet
Alexandre Jamar
Maciej Kotlarski
Mathys Lagier
Lancelot Lamotte
Mathieu Montagne
Sébastien D'Oriano
Pierre Perny
Maurizio Rossano

bassoon

Philippe Miqueu
Niels Coppalle

contrabassoon

Emmanuel Vigneron

horn

Georg Koehler
Gilbert Cami-Farras
Yannick Maillet
Pierre Rougerie

trumpet

Serge Tizac
Emmanuel Mure
Alejandro Sandler

trombone

Jonathan Leroi
Adrian Muller

timpani

Koen Plaetinck

bass

Frédéric Bourreau
Sébastien Brohier
Pierre Corbel
Sorin Adrian Dumitrascu
Vincent Eveno
Cyrille Gautreau
Matthieu Heim
Jean-Christophe Jacques
Laurent Slaars

choir rehearsal pianist

Edward Liddal



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