

Ludwig van Beethoven's FIDELIO

Study Guide to the Opera

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Beethoven's Only Opera—Why?

Beethoven is best known for his symphonies (9), masses (2), orchestral overtures (5), concerti (6), string quartets (16), piano trios (16), violin sonatas (10), piano sonatas (32), and piano variations (29). And, for *Fuer Elise*, his great hymn to unrequited love and cell phone rings. But why did he only write one opera?

Could it be because his strength was in instrumental music and not for the voice? Could it be that his musical composition style excelled in abstract formal expression of ideas rather than theatrical

underpinnings? Could it be that his patrons supported his instrumental music and he continued to produce what could support him and his relatives? And, if all of these were true, what prompted him to actually write an opera?

An examination of the historical circumstances surrounding the composition, revision, and performance history of *Fidelio* are complex, involving the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Beethoven, the idealist, shredded the dedication page of his *Eroica* Symphony when he learned that Napoleon had declared himself emperor. Gone were Beethoven's visions of rights for all men, of an ideal monarch who benevolently cared for his subjects. At the beginning of the 1800s, the patronage system was eroding for artists. And in the air were stories of faithful mates who risked all to rescue their loved ones from unjust circumstances. Beethoven's *Fidelio* was one of many theatrical works of the "rescue" genre. The libretto by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly was based on supposedly true incidents while he was head of the Military Commission in Tours, while the Terror raged in France.

In addition to the continental unrest, the financial strains, the challenged idealism, were real issues to deal with locally in the cultural political landscape. Beethoven had had premieres at the *Theater an der Wien*, but with the changes in management and the fluctuating fortunes of Schikaneder, the intrigue increased. The strains of dealing with the shifting artistic climate could only have been a distraction to Beethoven's artistic temperament. Schikaneder had been Mozart's collaborator and librettist, had built the new "suburban" theater, but had fallen out of favor with Baron Peter von Braun. But because Beethoven mistrusted Braun, the new theater owner, he insisted that Schikaneder be reinstated as his producer. One can only imagine the charged political climate in the Viennese theater world in 1805, set against the backdrop of Napoleon's army's approach.

Add to this Beethoven's great desire to perfect every composition so it fully expressed his ideas and ideals—is it any wonder that he wrote four overtures for the opera? So, in 1805, while Thomas Jefferson was beginning his second term as US president, and Napoleon was crowned King of Italy, and Paganini began to tour Europe as a violin virtuoso, Beethoven struggled with his deafness, his crushed idealism, a volatile artistic climate, and a major shift in the continental political powers. Themes of undeserved suffering and heroic resolve were very much in Beethoven's mind. The question perhaps should not be why Beethoven only wrote one opera, but an exclamation of how a composer could so embody the theme of liberation in a stage work. *Fidelio* is liberation, not just of Florestan from his dungeon cell but of all humanity from its chains. *Fidelio* is emblematic of all of Beethoven's idealism; even a small role like Rocco demonstrates how a jailor who starts the opera as a moneygrubber later demonstrates a code of ethics. Beethoven only needed to write one opera!



Production photo of Florestan from Seattle Opera

Fidelio SYNOPSIS

Fidelio Overture

ACT ONE

Jacquino, the prison gatekeeper, is wooing Marzeline, who is the daughter of Rocco, the head jailer. Jacquino is having little success; Marzeline refuses his advances because she loves Fidelio, Rocco's new assistant. Fidelio, however, is really a woman named Leonore; she has disguised herself and is looking for her husband, Florestan, who was imprisoned two years earlier for his political views. Rocco, pleased with Fidelio's industriousness, announces that Fidelio will marry Marzeline in a few days. Continuing her search for her husband, Leonore offers to help Rocco with the lower prison cells, an area forbidden to her. The governor Don Pizarro must approve such a request, says Rocco, and even so there would still be one cell Fidelio can never enter. Marzeline asks if that is the location of the "special prisoner" that Rocco has mentioned. Upon learning that the prisoner has been there for two years, Leonore realizes it could be her husband. Don Pizarro receives a letter alerting him to a visit by the Minister of State Don Fernando, who is coming to investigate charges that several victims of political tyranny are jailed in the dungeons. Distressed by the possibility that Fernando will discover Florestan (who Fernando thinks died two years ago), Pizarro orders Rocco to murder Florestan. When Rocco refuses, Pizarro orders him to dig a grave while he himself kills the prisoner. Overhearing the plot, Leonore denounces Pizarro's treachery and resolves to save her husband. When Rocco returns from his discussion with Pizarro, Leonore persuades him to let the prisoners walk in the yard. Blinded by daylight, the prisoners enjoy a moment of freedom as Leonore looks for Florestan among them. Rocco, who has gained Pizarro's consent, asks Leonore to accompany him to the forbidden cell to dig a grave. Marzeline and Jacquino enter with the news that Pizarro is in a rage about the prisoners' walk in the yard. Pizarro enters and confronts Rocco, who hints that this is a diversion for him while he kills Florestan. Pizarro orders the prisoners locked up, however, and urges Rocco to dig the grave.

INTERMISSION

Leonore III Overture

ACT TWO

Alone in the dark, the half-starved Florestan is despondent, but he accepts his misfortune because he stood against injustice. For a moment, he imagines Leonore as an angel, leading him to heavenly freedom, and then he falls back exhausted. When Rocco and Leonore enter the cell, Leonore does not recognize the prisoner. When he speaks, however, she realizes that it is her husband. As Rocco signals that the grave is ready, Florestan realizes his death is imminent. Pizarro enters and identifies himself as the man Florestan had sought to overthrow years ago. As Pizarro moves to murder Florestan, Leonore rushes between them, exclaiming, "First kill his wife!" She declares that she will not let him die, no matter how powerful Pizarro may be. Pizarro decides to kill them both, but she forces him back. Suddenly, trumpets signal the arrival of Don Fernando. Jacquino enters with guards to escort Pizarro away. Overcome with joy and relief, Leonore and Florestan embrace. Outside, people fill the prison courtyard as Fernando, Pizarro, and the prisoners march in. The crowd hails Fernando as an emissary of their enlightened leader, releasing them from unjust imprisonment. Rocco presents Leonore and Florestan to Fernando, who is astonished that his friend is alive. After hearing of Florestan's misfortunes and Leonore's heroism, the crowd calls for Pizarro's immediate punishment and he is arrested. Fernando gives Leonore a key so she can remove Florestan's chains, and the crowd salutes the depth of her courage and love.

Characters of *Fidelio*

Florestan *Tenor*

Leonore's husband who has been imprisoned in solitary confinement for two years by the evil Pizarro.

Leonore *Dramatic Soprano*

Florestan's faithful wife, who has disguised herself as a young man, Fidelio, and is on a mission to find and free her husband from jail. Fidelio comes from the Latin *Fidelis*, meaning faithful.

Don Fernando *Baritone*

Trumpets signal the arrival of Don Fernando, the enlightened minister of state, in the second act.

Don Pizarro *Baritone*

The stereotypical villain, the governor of the state prison is evil and vengeful.

Rocco *Bass*

Marzelline's father, who is the chief jailer in Pizarro's prison. He is sympathetic to Florestan's plight but realizes that money can be useful.

Marzelline *Soprano*

Rocco's daughter. Jacquino has amorous thoughts for her, but her mind is on Fidelio.

Jacquino *Tenor*

A doorkeeper in the prison whose mind is on wooing Marzelline.

First prisoner *Tenor*

Second prisoner *Bass*

Chorus of watchmen, prisoners, and townsfolk.

Supernumeraries of prisoners, guards, reporters, widows, and children.

Beethoven's *Heiligenstadt Testament*

Beethoven wrote this document in 1802 to his brothers as a heartfelt plea for understanding and sympathy. His despair about his hearing loss had caused him to become almost suicidal, as he realized that his deafness was progressive and, probably, incurable.

For my brothers Carl and [Johann] Beethoven,
O ye men who think or declare that I am hostile stubborn or Misanthropic, how you wrong me you do not know the secret motive of what seems thus to you, from Childhood my Heart and Mind were inclined to the Gentle Feeling of goodwill, indeed I was ever disposed to accomplish great Feats, but only reflect that for the last 6 years an incurable condition has seized me, worsened by senseless physicians, cheated from year to year in the Hope of improvement, finally compelled to the prospect of a *lasting Ailment* (whose Curing may perhaps take years or indeed be impossible). Born with a fiery Lively Temperament susceptible even to the Diversions of Society, I soon had to keep to myself, pass my life in solitude, if I attempted from time to time to rise above all this, o how harshly then was I repulsed by the doubly sad Experience of my bad Hearing, yet I could not say to People: speak louder, shout, for I am deaf, alas how could I then acknowledge the Weakness of a *Faculty* which ought to be more perfect in me than in others, a Faculty I once had to the highest degree of Perfection, such Perfection as only few of my Calling surely have or have had—o I cannot do it. Therefore forgive me if you see me withdrawing when I should gladly join you. My misfortune afflicts me doubly, since it causes me to be misunderstood. Diversion in Human Society, civilized Conversation, mutual Effusions cannot take place for me. All but alone, I enter society no more than is required by the most urgent Necessity. I must live like a Banished man; if I approach a company, a hot anxiety invades me, because I am afraid of being exposed to the Danger of letting my Condition be noticed—and thus has it been this half-year too, which I have spent in the country, my wise Physician having ordered me to spare my Hearing as much as possible.

He nearly met my present Disposition, even though I have sometimes let myself be led astray by an Urge for Society. But what Mortification if someone stood beside me and heard a flute from afar and *I heard nothing*; or someone *heard a Shepherd Singing*, and I heard nothing. Such Happenings brought me close to Despair; I was not far from ending my own life—only Art, only art held me back. Ah, it seemed impossible to me that I should leave the world before I had produced all that I felt I might, and so I spared this wretched life—truly wretched; a body so susceptible that a somewhat rapid change can take me from the Best Condition to the worst. *Patience*—so now I must choose Her for my guide, I have done so—I hope that my decision to persevere may endure until it please the inexorable Fates to break the Thread; perhaps I will improve, perhaps not. I am resigned—to be forced already in my 28th year to become a Philosopher is not easy, and harder for an Artist than for anyone else. Deity, thou lookest down into my innermost being; thou knowest it, thou seest that charity and benevolence dwell within,—o Men, when you read this some day, think then that you have wronged me, and let any unhappy man console himself by finding another one like himself, one who, despite Nature's impediments, yet did what was in his Power to do to be admitted to the Ranks of worthy Artists and Men. And so it is done—I hasten with joy toward my Death—should it come before I had had an Opportunity to disclose all my Artistic Capacities, then it shall still have come too soon despite my Hard Destiny, and I should indeed with it come later—yet even then am I content. Does it not free me from an endless Suffering State? Come *when* you will, I'll meet you bravely—farewell and do not wholly forget me in Death. I have deserved it of you, for in Life I thought of you often, in order to make you happy, so may you be—

Heiligenstadt
6th October 1802

Ludwig van Beethoven

Music in the Western World: A History in Documents

Selected and Annotated by Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin
New York: Schirmer Books © 1984

Timeline of Significant Events in Beethoven's Life

1770	Beethoven's birth	There is still slight doubt about the precise date.
1800*	Symphony #1 in C	Dedicated to Prince Lichnowsky.
1802	<i>Heiligenstadt Testament</i>	This famous document was found after Beethoven died.
1803	Symphony #2 in D	Dedicated to Prince Lichnowsky.
1805	Symphony #3 in Eb (<i>Eroica</i>)	Dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz, although Napoleon Bonaparte was



originally intended as dedicatee.

1805 *Leonore*
Beethoven's "rescue opera" was performed on November 20 to a small audience because the French invasion had driven away the aristocratic Viennese. *Fidelio* was originally commissioned by the Theater an der Wien.

1807	Symphony #4 in Bb	Dedicated to Count Oppersdorff.
1808	Symphony #5 in c	Dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz and Count Razumovsky.
1808	Symphony #6 in F (Pastoral)	Dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz and Count Razumovsky.
1813	Symphony #7 in A	Dedicated to Count Fries.
1814	Symphony #8 in F	No dedication.

1814 *Fidelio*
Beethoven's opera performed in its revised, renamed version.

1824	Symphony #9 in d ('Choral')	Dedicated to King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia.
1827	Beethoven's death	According to Hüttenbrenner, Beethoven's death followed a flash of lightning and a violent clap of thunder.

* Dates for musical works indicate first performance.
 Source: *The Beethoven Compendium* by Barry Cooper.

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Beethoven's words about *Fidelio*:

This child of my spirit has cost me greater birth pangs than any other and therefore is also my favorite; I consider [the manuscript] particularly worthy of being preserved.

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Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.
 Director of Education
 megan@pittsburghopera.org
 412-281-0912 ext 242

Manager of Education Programs
 jlapeer@pittsburghopera.org
 412-281-0912 ext 227

The Pittsburgh Opera, Inc.
 801 Penn Avenue
 Pittsburgh, PA 15222-3681
 412-281-0912
 Fax 412-281-4324
 www.pittsburghopera.org