

Fidelio, by Ludwig van Beethoven – Performed by the Princeton Festival, June 18  
Reviewed by Tobias Grace

Fidelio, Beethoven's only opera, has had intense political connotations since its first performance in 1805. In order to discuss this work and appreciate a production of it, it is absolutely necessary to know something of its history. Ostensibly about the love of Leonora for her husband Florestan, a political prisoner, the opera is much more than that. In a larger sense it is a protest against fascist oppression and tyranny. The first performance took place at Vienna's *Theater an der Wien* while Vienna was occupied by Napoleon's army. If anyone doubts Napoleon's conquest of much of Europe was fascistic, one only need look at Goya's very graphic series of engravings on the horrors of war. The courage it took to present this opera in which many of the cast are political prisoners and much of the music is a hymn to freedom, to an audience which consisted primarily of French officers, many of whom were doubtless engaged in rounding up political prisoners, is remarkable indeed.

Continuing in this tradition, the first London performance was in 1832, a time of intense political upheaval and reform in England. Fidelio was first performed in Berlin at the end of World War II, sending a clear message that the day of the Nazis was over. Fidelio was chosen to re-open the Vienna State Opera in 1955, following its reconstruction from war damage. Most significantly, the opera was performed in Dresden, East Germany, at the time of the violent train station riots and only four weeks before the fall of the Berlin Wall. At that performance applause for the prisoner's chorus interrupted the show for some time and clearly demonstrated the political mood of the general public – a mood that only a few weeks later would bring the communist regime of East Germany crashing down.

Conductor **Wilhelm Furtwängler** remarked in Salzburg in 1948: “Now that political events in Germany have restored to the concepts of human dignity and liberty their original significance, this is the opera which, thanks to the music of Beethoven, gives us comfort and courage.... Certainly, *Fidelio* is not an opera in the sense we are used to, nor is Beethoven a musician for the theater, or a dramaturgist. He is quite a bit more, a whole musician, and beyond that, a saint and a visionary. That which disturbs us is not a material effect, nor the fact of the 'imprisonment'; any film could create the same effect. No, it is the music, it is Beethoven himself. It is this 'nostalgia of liberty' he feels, or better, makes us feel; this is what moves us to tears. His *Fidelio* has more of the Mass than of the Opera to it; the sentiments it expresses come from the sphere of the sacred, and preach a 'religion of humanity' which we never found so beautiful or necessary as we do today, after all we have lived through. Herein lies the singular power of this unique opera.... Independent of any historical consideration ... the flaming message of *Fidelio* touches deeply.

We realize that for us Europeans, as for all men, this music will always represent an appeal to our conscience.”

The Princeton Festival's production fully upheld this long standing tradition and comes at a time of political unrest in our own nation – a time when a great many citizens have little or no trust and confidence in the government and when many feel the fundamental freedoms of our society are under attack. Very appropriately, the opera was staged in contemporary dress (as has been done in previous productions.) The sets and lighting by Jonathan Robertson and Norman Coates were minimal, grim and severe, creating perfectly the atmosphere of the political prison.

The performance opened with what might almost be termed a ballet during the overture, in which a political rally is attacked by black uniformed police and the demonstrators are violently arrested. This effectively “set the scene” without actual words and let the audience know very plainly what was going on and why Florestan was in prison. Therein, Florestan is subject to the cruelties of Rocco, the head jailer, played with plenty of attitude by Gustav Andresson and outfitted in a uniform that would have delighted Mussolini. It is up to Leonora, disguised as a male prison guard, to rescue her beloved. Marcy Stonikas as Leonora and Noah Baetge as Florestan gave us powerful performances with magnificent voices that filled the hall.

There were no less-than-superb performances by any of the cast. Danielle Talamantes as Marzeline, Rocco's daughter and Joseph Barron as Don Pizarro were excellent. Michael Kuhn as Jacquino was entertaining indeed and Cameron Jackson was impressive as the prime minister who comes at last to restore justice.

The orchestra, under the direction of Richard Tang Yuk, who is also the overall director of the entire festival, was really excellent. The entire production certainly fulfils the high expectations we have come to have of Princeton Festival programs and the standing ovation given by the packed house audience shows that to be the general opinion.

There will be a second performance on June 25<sup>th</sup>. For more information on this and other festival programs, see [www.princetonfestival.org](http://www.princetonfestival.org).