

Allegory and Ethics in Beethoven's *Fidelio* Allégorie et éthique dans le *Fidelio* de Beethoven

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Article abstract

Few operas foreground ethics as clearly as Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Yet the heroic tale of liberation from political oppression resists narrowly historical interpretations, availing itself equally to revolutionary and reactionary interpretations. Allegory theory offers a new approach to the ethical meanings of *Fidelio*. Allegory, in which characters embody moral qualities, preserved a hierarchical and theocentric view of society, in opposition to the humanistic outlook of Enlightenment mimesis. Allegory and mimesis coexist in *Fidelio*, whose title character traces a lineage to the Christian morality play. This essay compares the 1805 original of Beethoven's opera (*Leonore*) with the 1814 version (*Fidelio*), concentrating on the final scene and the character of Marzelline. I argue that the 1814 version enhances the allegorical dimension, simplifying the characters and reducing moral complexities. *Fidelio* models the traditional "consensus society" of pre-Revolutionary Europe, offering a vision congenial to Congress of Vienna audiences.

ENJEUX ÉTHIQUES ET VALEURS MORALES EN HISTOIRE DE LA MUSIQUE

ETHICAL STAKES AND MORAL VALUES IN MUSIC HISTORY

Few operas foreground ethics as clearly as Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Set in a state prison, the opera circles about issues of crime, punishment, and justice. The innocent Florestan, languishing in a subterranean prison cell, finds solace in his moral code:

Willig duld'ich alle Schmerzen,
Ende schmähhlich meine Bahn;
Süßer Trost in meinem Herzen:
Meine Pflicht hab' ich getan!

I gladly bear all suffering,
End my life in disgrace.
The sweet comfort in my heart:
I have done my duty.

His faithful wife Leonore draws strength from the same pure source:

Ich folg' dem inner'n Triebe,
Ich wanke nicht,
Mich stärkt die Pflicht
Der treuen Gattenliebe!

I follow the inner urging,
I do not waver.
I am fortified by the duty
Of true marital love.

The jailer Rocco faces ethical challenges less heroically, if more humanly, as fear and greed compete with his native compassion.¹

Ethics and politics intertwine closely in *Fidelio*, yet the opera's political meanings prove frustratingly elusive. Composed in 1804-05, reworked in 1806, and revived in its familiar version in 1814, *Fidelio* spans a period of radical political change, and its heroic tale of liberation from unjust oppression lends itself to diverse interpretations. The opera reads with suspicious ease as an allegory of the French Revolution, especially in the glow of the heroic symphony Beethoven had just dedicated to First Consul Bonaparte. Beethoven's alleged words upon learning of Napoleon's coronation, "Er wird sich nun höher wie alle andern stellen, ein Tyrann werden!" ("Now he will set himself above all others, become a tyrant!"), echo in Don Fernando's magnanimous decree: "Nein, nicht länger kniet sklavisch nieder,/ Tyrannenstrenge sei mir fern!" ("No, kneel no

Allegory and Ethics in Beethoven's *Fidelio*

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longer like slaves; far from me be tyrannical oppression!") (see Wegeler and Ries 1972, 78). Paul Robinson has noted the pervasive references to freedom in the libretto—"Freiheit", "frei," "befreien," "in freier Luft" (1996, 75-80). Beethoven enhanced this emancipatory message with a musical quotation from his early *Cantata on the Death of Joseph II*, played by the solo oboe as Leonore is permitted to unchain Florestan. The original words of the melody, "Da stiegen die Menschen ans Licht" ("Then mankind ascended towards the light"), economically fuse images of enlightenment, freedom, and human ennoblement. On this reading, Don Pizarro would embody the oppressive aristocracy of the *ancien régime*, trampling underfoot the rights of man. Moreover, the emancipation of political prisoners from a *Staatsgefängnis* cannot have failed to awaken memories of the Bastille. John Bokina has summed up this reading: "Fidelio is an allegory of the French Revolution, the supreme example of bourgeois republican virtue" (1997, 75).

Fidelio avails itself just as easily, however, to counterrevolutionary allegories. Jean-Nicholas Bouilly's *Léonore ou L'amour conjugal*, source of Beethoven's libretto, seems to have been inspired by accounts of aristocratic resistance to the Terror.² Bouilly was an outspoken royalist, as was his collaborator Pierre Gaveaux who composed the song "Le Réveil du peuple,"

¹ All German translations are my own. I am grateful to Michael Tusa for his valuable comments on the draft of this essay.

² David Galliver (1981) has challenged the longstanding belief that Bouilly based his libretto upon a single incident from the Terror.

an anti-Jacobin riposte to the “Marseillaise”. As David Charlton has pointed out, *Léonore* premiered in the Théâtre Feydeau, an “ultra-royalist institution” whose elite Italian fare distinguished it from the Opéra-Comique (in Robinson 1996, 62). A review of the 1798 premiere, quoted by Charlton, explicitly identifies Florestan’s sufferings with “the tyranny of fifteen months, of which we were victims” (in Robinson 1996, 67). For post-Thermidorian audiences, Don Pizarro would more likely have evoked Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety than aristocratic elites. In May of 1814, amidst preparations for the Congress of Vienna, the same character might well have reminded Viennese audiences of Napoleon, another monster tossed up by the Revolution. According to Lewis Lockwood: “The *Fidelio* of 1814 is now generally regarded as a glorification of contemporary political authority at a time when the balance of power in Europe was palpably shifting toward the restoration of the monarchies” (2005, 473).

As a political allegory, then, *Fidelio* would seem to float free of narrowly historical interpretations, supporting diametrically opposed readings. Yet if we concentrate not on what *Fidelio* means, but rather on how it produces those meanings, a less ambiguous picture comes into focus. Allegory itself, a mode of representation in which human characters embody virtues, vices, or archetypal figures, carries its own political and ethical implications. As Angus Fletcher demonstrated in a classic study, allegory reinforced a hierarchical outlook that subordinated the visible world to an invisible metaphysical realm:

The mode is hierarchical in essence, owing not only to its use of traditional imageries which are arranged in systems of “correspondences,” but furthermore because all hierarchies imply a chain of command, of *order* in the secondary sense that is meant when we say “the general *ordered* his officers to command their subordinates”. (1964, 22-23)

Allegory fell out of favor during the Enlightenment, Fletcher explained, as traditional sources of authority came under attack:

By the mid-eighteenth century the old belief in a cosmic hierarchy of spiritual and temporal powers had undergone a softening, if not by any means a total alteration. The cosmic matrix for imagery such as Spenser, Shakespeare or even Milton could draw on no longer carried conviction with the poet who must equally reckon with the rising waves of scientific skepticism and

with the progressive widening of middle-class materialist values. (1964, 237-238)

As Jane Brown argued in a recent book, this ideological shift correlated with the ascendancy of a mimetic aesthetic:

The older, allegorical mode of representation, in which the supernatural was rendered visible, was less suited to the Enlightenment’s internalized grounding of significance, and gradually gave way to more mimetic modes of representation, in which nature and material objects represented themselves, not aspects of an invisible supernatural order. Instead of representing some function of the soul as conceived by the church, dramatic characters came to represent particular human beings. (2007, 7)

Yet, as Brown demonstrated, the allegorical tradition of the medieval and Renaissance morality play did not instantly succumb to Enlightenment mimesis, but maintained a dialogic presence well into the eighteenth century. Interestingly, Brown found a *locus classicus* of residual allegory in Beethoven’s favorite Mozart opera, *Die Zauberflöte*, whose influence can be heard throughout *Fidelio* (see Brown 1996, 142-156).³

The ideological entailments of allegory appear clearly in the work of the Nazarene painters, Viennese contemporaries of Beethoven. In 1809, a year marked by Napoleon’s defeat of Austria and second occupation of Vienna, Johann Friedrich Overbeck, Franz Pforr, and four other students from the Viennese Academy formed the *Lukasbund*. They rejected French neoclassicism and dedicated themselves to a “New-German, religious-patriotic art.” Swept up by the wave of romantic Catholicism, the Nazarenes decamped for a Roman monastery and sought spiritual regeneration in the sacred art of the Italian Renaissance. As Overbeck wrote to his father in 1808, the true artistic path led “through religion, through a study of the Bible that alone made Raphael into Raphael” (quoted in Schindler 1982, 19). The *Lukasbund* belongs to the patriotic, anti-Napoleonic movement that emerged in Vienna during 1809, which seems also to have impacted Beethoven (he sketched a battle symphony and began setting a poem from Heinrich von Collin’s *Lieder Oesterreichischer Wehrmänner*, “Wenn es nur will, ist immer Oesterreich über Alles”; see Nottebohm 1887, 262). Lionel Gossman has summarized the anti-modernist political vision of the Nazarenes:

³ Mark Brunswick (1945, 29-32) has explored Beethoven’s possible allusions to Mozart’s opera.

One might say that the vision of the world communicated by their work was more compatible with an older version of Empire or international order as a close association of independent yet not dissimilar entities, as in the Holy Roman Empire, than with the new version represented by the Napoleonic Empire; with the national ideal of a union of all the German states and cities rather than with the model of a centralized state such as France; and with the political ideal of the German and Swiss liberals of the Restoration period rather than with modern mass democracy. (2003)

Nazarenes drew inspiration from the allegorical tradition for their patriotic-religious project, as in Overbeck's *Italia und Germania* (1811-1820). As Albert Boime has explained, "Germania is an extension of the nationalist romanticism that initially inspired the fraternity in Vienna, now fused with Italia as the perfect union of political and cultural ideals" (2004, 44). The divided background, with Romanesque monastery to the left and Gothic spire to the right, demonstrates the subordination of mimetic verisimilitude to allegorical representation (see Plate 1). More relevant for *Fidelio* is Heinrich Maria von Hess' *Glaube, Hoffnung, und Liebe* of 1819, which presents the Christian gifts in female form. Faith, Hope, and Charity sit beneath the Tree of Life in a pyramidal composition that directs the viewer's gaze heavenward (see Plate 2). Philipp Veit's later "Germania" (1834-36) puts allegorical representation more overtly at the service of nationalism; the profusion of symbols and attributes include the Hapsburg eagle, the sacred oak tree, the Golden Bull, and the arms of the seven imperial electors (see Plate 3, next page).

Beethoven was well acquainted with the allegorical mode. In 1801 he set a *balletto allegorico*, Salvatore Viganò's *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus*. Ballets had long featured allegorical characters, like the figures of Le Temps, La Gloire, or La Sagesse who flatter Louis XIV in Jean-Baptiste Lully's *divertissements*. The defiant Prometheus had proved an attractive symbol for *Sturm und Drang* writers during the 1770s. By 1801, the mythological benefactor of humanity had become associated with Napoleon, which may help explain why Beethoven adapted the final contredanse of *Prometheus* for the *Eroica* finale (see Floros 1978; Maruyama 1987, 46-82; Geck and Schleuning 1989).

Allegory also persists within Beethoven's sole opera, composed immediately after the



Plate 1. Johann Friedrich Overbeck, *Italia und Germania* (1811-1820).



Plate 2. Heinrich Maria von Hess, *Glaube, Hoffnung, und Liebe* (1819).

Eroica. The allegorical element is most evident in the name *Fidelio*, which identifies the heroine as a moral archetype as well as a character in the human drama. As a symbol of faithfulness, Leonore suggests the lineage of the medieval and Renaissance morality play, which featured such characters as Prudence, Equity, Justice, or the Seven Deadly Sins.⁴



Plate 3. Philipp Veit, *Germania* (1834-36).

The theological implications of Leonore's assumed name emerge as she administers bread and wine to Florestan, sets captives free, and (in the 1814 version) appears as an angel of light to guide her spouse "ins himmlische Reich" ("into the heavenly kingdom"). Maynard Solomon (1977, 200) has argued that Florestan's name also points to an allegorical level of meaning, suggesting the springtime god of both Christian and pagan mythology whose flowering-resurrection brings renewal to the earth, while Matthew Head has noted the hero's specifically "Christ-like qualities (his higher cause, his arrest, his imprisonment as a kind of entombment)" (2006, 104).

⁴ The same tradition informs Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, in which Imogen dons men's clothing and changes her name to Fidele (see Simonds 1992).

Head has called attention to the role of allegory in Beethoven's incidental music to Goethe's *Egmont* (1809-1810), which sheds important light on the 1814 *Fidelio*. The heroic plot of *Egmont*, a Flemish patriot sentenced to death for leading a revolt against the occupying Spanish, resonated with the anti-Napoleonic sentiment of Vienna in 1809. In a final scene, *Egmont*'s dead lover Klärchen (another cross-dressing heroine) appears to him in a dream as the allegorical figure of Liberty. As Head pointed out, Klärchen's apparition directly prefigures the revised ending of Florestan's aria: "Just as Leonore appears to the imprisoned Florestan as an angelic vision leading him to freedom, Klärchen appears in *Egmont*'s sleep 'shining...on a cloud' as 'Liberty in heavenly raiment'" (2006, 123). Klärchen's celestial apparition, Head argued, diminishes the active, human aspect of *Egmont*'s character: "He is rendered passive, an ideal; he is initiated into precisely that allegorical realm inhabited *already* by woman" (2006, 111). In the same way, the angelic vision of Leonore, which replaced a stoic F-minor lament, abstracts Florestan from the horizontal unfolding of the earthly drama and aligns him with the vertical, theological order characteristic of allegory.

Beethoven's most purely allegorical work dates from the same year as the revised *Fidelio*. *Der glorreiche Augenblick*, his cantata in honor of the Allied victors, was composed shortly after *Fidelio* for the Congress of Vienna festivities and even featured Anna Milder, the soprano who sang Leonore. The cantata enacts the salvation of Europe with an allegorical cast that includes Führer des Volks (Leader of the People), Genius, Sibyl, and Vienna herself. The conservative connotations of allegory, as explained by Brown, float close to the surface in this paean to Napoleon's conquerors, performed before the King of Prussia and several empresses. The cantata, which captured the mood of post-Napoleonic Vienna (if not the hearts of later listeners), may shed light on its operatic companion.

Readers will perhaps object, and rightly so, to the comparison between a meretricious *pièce d'occasion* and Beethoven's deeply personal, lovingly crafted opera. As William Kinderman (1995, 167-180) has trenchantly argued, drawing upon Hermann Broch's theory of kitsch (1975, 119-57; 158-173), the flimsy construction of *Der glorreiche Augenblick* sets it apart from works like *Fidelio*, whose formal integrity resists appropriation by political or social movements. This objection vanishes, however,

if instead of comparing Beethoven's opera to the cantata we consider it alongside his original version of 1805. Indeed, the 1814 *Fidelio* differs so substantially from the earlier version (hereafter, *Leonore*) that we may almost consider it a separate work. Beethoven and his librettist replaced the programmatic overture, cut several arias and ensembles, retained the 1806 reduction to two acts, trimmed orchestral introductions, and radically altered the final scene. These revisions, which finally rendered the awkward *Leonore* stageworthy, significantly reshaped its aesthetic and ideological worlds. As Michael Tusa has stressed: "With the *Fidelio* of 1814 we confront a composer at a significantly different stage of his life and career and a fundamentally different moment in the history of Austro-German society" (2000, 202).

As I shall argue, the 1814 revisions enhance the allegorical aspects of *Leonore* while diminishing its more humanistic, mimetic features. *Fidelio* simplifies the characters of *Leonore*, reducing them to idealized types, even as it smooths out the moral complexities of the 1805 drama. We shall consider two major targets of revision, the final scene and the role of Marzelline. While chronological issues bedevil the early version of Beethoven's opera, all of the examples below can be securely assigned to the 1805 version. We shall conclude with a reflection on how this allegorical turn affects the ethical dimension of *Fidelio*.

§

Leonore and *Fidelio* diverge most radically in the final scene, following the duet "O namenlose Freude". The finale originally took place in Florestan's prison cell, not the sunlit courtyard, and began with an angry offstage chorus in C minor rather than a triumphant C-major hymn. Without a doubt, the offstage chorus is the most grievous casualty of the 1814 revision. The unaccompanied cry of "Zur Rache! Zur Rache!" ("Revenge! Revenge!"), make a truly harrowing effect, as the chorus discharges the energy of the orchestral introduction (see Example 1, next page). The menacing sound does not reassure the lovers who have been left unarmed and uncertain of their fate. On the contrary, the call for revenge sparks an agitated ostinato that persists until *Leonore* and Florestan recognize Don Fernando. Following an anxious exchange between the lovers, the offstage voices repeat their double imprecation a step higher, so that the sopranos now enter on high A. As the chorus rushes onstage,

it repeats "Zur Rache!" six times, reaching a climax on a stentorian diminished-seventh chord with the sopranos sustaining the high A.

The spectacle of an angry mob storming a prison already carries strong political connotations, but Beethoven's musical design lends it deeper meaning. The chorus echoes another offstage sound, the famous trumpet call that has just interrupted the quartet "Er sterbe!" to signal the arrival of Don Fernando. Like the trumpet call, the offstage chorus begins with two long notes separated by fermatas; and it also returns a second time to interrupt the ensemble. Of course, the trumpet's signal first occurs in the original ("Leonore") overture, where it forecasts the eventual rescue of Florestan and *Leonore*. From the beginning of *Leonore*, then, Beethoven establishes offstage music as a sign of salvation, which returns at the crucial moment in the opera. While the trumpet functions literally as a symbol of secular authority, it also awakens memories of the Last Trumpet, symbol of divine judgment.⁵ As the chorus comes to rescue the lovers, it appropriates this authoritative space. Indeed, the angry mob serves as the mediator between onstage and offstage realms as it carries its vindictive chant into the prison cell.

Fidelio, on the other hand, relegates the chorus to a ceremonial role. The swaggering C-major march leaves little doubt about the happy outcome, and the jubilant chorus celebrates a *fait accompli*, introducing Don Fernando who sings a new recitative and solemn hymn to brotherhood worthy of Sarastro. The minister establishes his royal authority with his opening words, punctuated by the dotted rhythms reserved for exalted characters: "Des besten Königs Wink und Wille führt mich zu euch, ihr Armen, her" ("Our gracious king's command and will has led me to you, oh miserable ones"). If the vindictive mob of *Leonore* awakens memories of the Bastille, this docile crowd seems ideally suited to the Congress of Vienna. We might even draw a cautious parallel (with apologies to Kinderman) to *Der glorreiche Augenblick*. "Heil Vienna dir und Glück!" sings the grateful cantata chorus, "Feiere den glorreichen Augenblick" ("Hail to you, Vienna and good fortune! Celebrate the glorious moment!"). In *Fidelio*, an equally passive chorus sings "Heil sei der Tag, heil sei dem Stunde!" ("Hail to day, hail the hour!"), as its noble savior approaches.

While *Leonore* certainly empowers the chorus, it by no means preaches a populist gospel.

⁵ Beethoven was inspired by Méhul's *Hélène* (1803), in which a trumpet call from the overture returns to herald the arrival of a just governor-judge. A similar example occurs in the « Marcia funebre » of the *Eroica* (mm. 158-168), which may have carried apocalyptic connotations (see Geck and Schleuning 1989, 128)..

Nr. 18. Schlusschor.

Allegro molto.

Str. *pp*

Chor (von Innen, entfernt).

Sopran.

Alt. Zur Ra - che, zur Ra - che, zur Ra - che, wir müs - sen ihn

Tenor.

Bass.

Pos. *pp*

Leon.

0

sehn, ja, wir müs - sen ihn sehn, ja, wir müs - sen ihn sehn!

Gott, o Gott, nun ist's um uns ge-

Str.

sp r. H. *sp* *sp* *sp* *sp* *sp* *sp*

Hörner.

Fagott. Bass.

Ex. 1. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Leonore*, Act 3 finale.

Neither Beethoven nor his librettist displays the common people in a particularly favorable light. Their angry cries initially terrify Florestan and Leonore and trigger some of the most agitated, violent music in the opera. Even Don Fernando briefly becomes caught up in the

mob spirit, calling down a most un-Sarastrian vengeance upon Pizarro:

Du konntest dich an seinen Leiden
zwei schreckensvolle Jahre weiden?
Du wirst nun an denselben Stein
dein Leben durch geschmiedet sein.

You gloated over him
For two horrible years?
You shall be chained to the same stone
For the rest of your life.

To which the chorus shrieks, “O, zu gelind ist er bestraft!” (“Oh, too mild is his punishment!”). When Florestan and Leonore urge restraint, the chorus shouts them down, redoubling their cry for blood. Only later does Don Fernando collect himself, informing Pizarro that “Der König wird dein Richter sein” (“The King will be your judge”).

Ironically, a chorus had last appeared on stage at the end of Act 2 cheering on Don Pizarro. The soldiers join lustily in Pizarro’s second aria, pledging their lives to his service:

Fest könnt Ihr auf uns bauen,
Und flöss auch unser Blut.
Uns ziemet das Vertrauen
Wir sind voll Treu und Mut.

You can rely firmly upon us,
Even should our blood flow.
Your trust is well-placed;
We are faithful and true.

The 1814 score replaces this aria with the prisoners’ elegiac “Leb wohl, du warmes Sonnenlicht”, transforming the male chorus into passive victims. Even the soldiers now cringe before Pizarro, muttering a new aside under his aria “Ha! Welch’ ein Augenblick”:

Er spricht von Tod und Wunde!
Nun fort auf unsre Runde,
Wie wichtig muss es sein!

He speaks of death and wounds!
Let’s take our posts,
It must be important!

The menacing choral finales of 1805 create a complex, ambivalent representation of the chorus. *Leonore* portrays the crowd as a volatile force whose violent energy can be harnessed for good or evil. While the opera may summon the heroism of 1789, it also recalls the violence of 1794-1795 that turned so many German artists and intellectuals against the French Revolution.

Rocco displays the same moral ambivalence in *Leonore*. His petty bourgeois credo “Hat man nicht das Gold beineben”, a harmless lampoon in *Fidelio*, has darker connotations in *Leonore*. In the duet “Jetzt, Alter”, Rocco will offer his services eagerly to Pizarro, balking only at murder. He remains complicit in Pizarro’s scheme, salving his conscience with a bit of moral casuistry:

Verhungern in den Ketten,

Ertrug er lange Pein,
Ihn töten, heißt ihn retten,
Der Dolch wird ihn befrei’n.

Starved in chains,
He has endured long suffering;
To kill him is to save him,
The dagger will bring him freedom.

Rocco’s pragmatic instincts win out in the prison scene. At the end of the quartet, with the lovers’ fate still hanging in the balance, he seizes Leonore’s pistol and rushes after Pizarro. Only after Pizarro’s doom is assured does Rocco return the weapon, offering a dubious justification:

Laßt Euch auch über mich belehren.
Verfolgt hab’ ich Euch nur zum Schein,
Ich kann nicht unbarmherzig sein.
Als Retter wollt’ ich widerkehren.
Das hab’ ich mit Gewalt gebort,
Für Mißbrauch war ich nur besorgt.

Let me explain myself:
I only pretended to punish you;
But I cannot remain unmerciful,
And I wanted to return and save you.
I only seized this
To prevent an accident.

This unattractive episode disappears in *Fidelio*. At the end of the quartet, Rocco does not disarm Leonore, but instead offers the lovers a pious sign of encouragement, pressing their hands to his bosom and pointing heavenwards.

Both Rocco and the chorus end up more virtuous, yet less human, in *Fidelio*. The 1814 version presents them as innocent victims, good subjects oppressed by an evil ruler. In *Leonore*, by contrast, good and evil mix freely in subject and ruler. The chorus brings both liberation and violence; Rocco and Pizarro fall prey to the same immoral self-interest; and even Don Fernando succumbs briefly the bloodlust of a lynch mob. Evil does not lodge within isolated individuals, but pervades the entire system of human relationships. Unlike the figures of allegorical drama, the morally ambivalent characters of *Leonore* do not uphold the theological architecture of traditional society. Rather, they call into question its fundamental structures.

§

The character most affected by the 1814 revision was Marzelline. *Fidelio* limits the jailer’s daughter almost entirely to the comic sphere: she squabbles with Jaquino, plays the coquette with Leonore, wheedles her father,

and ends her role with a single undignified cry of despair when her idol reveals his true identity. The awkward division between the opening comic scenes and the lofty political drama, a perennial stumbling block for critics, enforces Marzelline's lowly status, but it was not always so. Marzelline plays a far more interesting and integral role in *Leonore*, and the revisions of her character provide important insights into the political and ethical world of *Fidelio*.

Marzelline's demotion begins with the first number. Originally, the opera opened with her aria "O wär' ich schon mit dir vereint", followed by the quarrelsome duet with Jaquino. The reversal of numbers in 1814 marks Marzelline from the start as a stock comic figure, on a level with her oafish suitor. In *Leonore*, on the other hand, she begins with a moment of inward reflection that elevates her above the *commedia dell'arte* antics. Indeed, the strophic aria aspires to a modest heroism in the C-major refrain, with its soaring vocal lines and martial gait. "O wär' ich schon mit dir vereint" makes demands that exceed the abilities of a comic singer like Jaquino or Rocco; it keeps the soprano in a relatively high tessitura, competing against a full scoring of flute, oboes, clarinets, and horns. The coda includes a three-bar crescendo on high G, a feat that requires a fair degree of breath control, followed by a full-throated high A (see Example 2, next page). Admittedly, these technical challenges pale beside the formidable coloratura and register leaps in Leonore's aria. Yet they remain beyond the reach of a purely comic singer.

In short, Marzelline's aria suggests the category of *mezzo carattere*, or intermediate character. The *mezzo carattere* type originated with the sentimental heroines of Goldoni and Piccini, and Marzelline's strophic aria recalls their winsome simplicity (see Goehring 1997, 115-145 and Hunter 1999, 66-70). The new character type mediated between the *parti serie* and *parti buffe*, permitting a fluid movement between rhetorical registers and social classes. While Marzelline's name and plot function place her in the lower soubrette category, her aria allies her with Piccini's Cecchina (*La buona figliuola*), Mozart's Sandrina (*La finta giardiniera*), or Rossini's Angelina (*La Cenerentola*), characters who traverse the boundary between commoners and nobility.

"O wär' ich schon mit dir vereint" draws together numerous musical and dramatic

threads. Marzelline's C-major refrain sustains the triumphant key and mood of the overture; it also forecasts the radiant chorus that concludes both *Leonore* and *Fidelio*. The tonal parallel appears more clearly in the 1805 finale, whose victorious trajectory from C-minor to C-major replicates the progression within Marzelline's strophes: "O wär' ich schon mit dir vereint" predicts not only the tonal goal of *Leonore*, but also its theme of love triumphant. Marzelline exults, "Die Hoffnung schon erfüllt die Brust/mit unaussprechlich süßer Lust" ("Hope already fills my heart/With unspeakably sweet joy"), foreshadowing the inarticulate rapture of "O namenlose Freude". Her hopeful text also looks ahead to the opening words of Leonore's prayerful aria, "Komm, Hoffnung, laß den letzten Stern/der Müden nicht erbleichen!" ("Come, Hope, let not the last star/Of the weary fade away!"). As Philip Gossett (1978/1981, 141-183) has shown, Beethoven lavished considerable effort on this opening aria, and it is easy to understand why: it encapsulates the musical and dramatic progression of the opera, uniting overture and finale, lowly mob and exalted heroine.

The deepest cut to Marzelline's role was her duet with Leonore, "Um in der Ehe froh zu leben". This tender piece with solo cello and violin obbligato, set in a pastoral 12/8 meter, recalls the songful naïveté of Paisiello's *Nina* or Martin y Soler's *Una cosa rara*. As Leonore and Marzelline reflect upon the joys and sorrows of conjugal love, they trade lines and join in delicious parallel harmonies (see Example 3, p. 56). The duet most obviously recalls the Letter Duet from *Le nozze di Figaro* ("Sull'aria"), in which Susanna and the Countess jointly compose a *billet-doux* for the Count. Mozart's swaying 6/8 meter evokes the same pastoral mood, overlapping vocal lines, and parallel thirds. Beethoven may also have been remembering the Pamina-Papageno duet from *Die Zauberflöte* ("Bei Männern"), a hymn to conjugal love that shares the 6/8 meter and pastoral simplicity of "Sull'aria".⁶ Both Mozart duets also bridge social classes, pairing a noblewoman and a commoner. Anna Milder's surprisingly young age (she was only twenty when she created Leonore) would have enhanced her sisterly bond with Marzelline.

The painful irony of "Um in der Ehe" lends Marzelline a pathos missing from *Fidelio*. Her vain love for the disguised Fidelio, far from appearing farcical, gains poignancy from Leonore's compassionate response. The duet also adds to the complexity of Leonore's character. As she expresses her remorse at

⁶ Beethoven had written a set of cello variations on "Bei Männern" in 1801; although the duet does not appear among the *Fidelio* sketches, Beethoven did copy out the neighboring Act 1 quintet from *Die Zauberflöte* in 1804 (see Churgin 1987, 476).

deceiving Marzelline, she betrays a conflict of conscience absent in *Fidelio*. More importantly, the duet allows Leonore to express her suppressed femininity, even as she feigns the male role. The gently swaying rhythms and euphonious harmonies evoke a domestic world, shielded from heroic rigors, but it is not the bourgeois household of Rocco. “Um in der

Ehe” accesses the utopian garden of pastoral imagination where tender sensibility smooths away the rigid divisions of class and gender. It provides a glimpse of that conjugal happiness for whose sake Leonore unsexes herself and plunges into the harsh world of men.

The Marzelline-Leonore duet, the only female ensemble in the opera, provides, thus,

M. Brust mit un - aus - sprech - lich sü - sser Lust, *cresc. poco a poco*

M. ich wer - de *Clar.* *Fl.* *Ob.* *Horn.*

M. glück - lich, ich wer - de glück - lich sein, ja, *Ob.* *Clar.*

M. ja, ich wer - de glück - lich sein! *Fl.* *Hörner.* *Fl. in G#* *Ob.* *Streicher.* *cresc.*

EX. 2. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Leonore*, “O wär’ ich schon mit dir vereint”, mm. 82-91.

Leon. Marc.

L. M.

Ja Arg-wohn ist der Lie-be Pein. Da-

Violoncell.

M. L.

rü-ber stim-men wir nun ein, da-

Violins in 8 Violoncell in 8

M. L.

rü-ber stim-men wir nun ein.

rü-ber stim-men wir nun ein.

cresc. cresc.

Ex. 3. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Leonore*, "Um in der Ehe froh zu leben", mm. 48-53.

an important counterbalance to the stern heroism of Beethoven's rescue opera. It suggests that uniquely feminine perspective identified by Wye J. Allanbrook in *Le nozze di Figaro* (in an article aptly entitled "Pro Marcellina"). As Allanbrook explained, women enjoy a gentle, receptive love that allows them to transcend the fragmentation of the masculine world:

Men must act, rule and make things, which necessity enforces on them a circumscribed and idiosyncratic view of the world, impenetrable to ways of being foreign to their own. Women, on the other hand, move in the background, the penumbra of life; they are not defined, as men are, by being counts or music masters, but by being women. They watch and wait, observing the cosmos entire, and are the ones to demonstrate the final and proper relations

between things to the men around them. (1982, 2)

Sensibility had class connotations as well as a bourgeois alternative to the heroic aesthetic of absolutist court culture. Nestled between Pizarro's *aria di vendetta* and Leonore's grand rondo, "Um in der Ehe" provides a refuge from the aristocratic heroics that dominate the main action of Beethoven's opera.

In this spirit, we may perhaps listen with new ears to the famous canon "Mir ist so wunderbar". The quartet has inspired a reverential awe among conductors and critics, expressed in ponderous tempos and philosophical musings. As Paul Robinson enthused:

The canon is a kind of visionary moment in which we are given a foretaste of the

music, and the world, of the future, the music of the opera's conclusion. 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. (1996, 91)

Robinson captures an undeniably spiritual quality in the canon. Yet he unjustly bracketed the ensemble from its humble surroundings. In fact, the canon exhibits typical features of the pastoral genre—6/8 meter, slow harmonic rhythm, simple triadic melodies, solo woodwind. Played at a true *Andante sostenuto*, it sheds much of the churchly aura and draws closer to the idyllic spirit of “Um in der Ehe.” The pastoral tone need not diminish or disenchant “Mir ist so wunderbar”; on the contrary, the canon elevates its humble neighbors, revealing the presence of the sacred in the ordinary. Fittingly, it is the intermediate character Marzelline who both begins the quartet and furnishes its subject.

Marzelline's mediating role also helps make sense of *Leonore's* sprawling three-act structure. If we understand the Marzelline-Leonore relationship as essential to the drama, rather than a trivial distraction, we may perhaps endure with greater patience the opening procession of strophic arias and comic ensembles. On this reading, the entire first act, beginning with Marzelline's aria and ending with her trio with Rocco and Leonore, serves to construct the feminine domestic world that Pizarro will invade in Act 2. This sentimental realm provides the equilibrium point in *Leonore*, where male and female, noble and plebeian, heroic and comic find their proper balance.

The opera returns to that world in *Leonore* (see Example 4, next page). The final chorus (“Wer ein holdes Weib errungen”) does not begin with the full ensemble as in *Fidelio*. It is introduced instead by an intimate quartet composed of Jaquino, Rocco, Don Fernando, and, singing the melody, Marzelline. Faced with *Fidelio's* true identity, the jailer's daughter reacts with a generous line cut from the 1814 version: “Zum Staunen kann ich mir nicht wehren,/Doch will ich ihres Glücks mich freuen” (“I cannot help being astonished,/But I will rejoice in her happiness”). Marzelline opened the opera with her modest love aria; she now closes it by introducing the hymn of praise to Leonore.

§

Fidelio presents a simpler ethical universe than *Leonore*. The 1814 revisions sand away the human grain from the characters, leaving behind smooth quasi-allegorical figures—the Evil Governor, the Faithful Wife, the Greedy Bourgeois, the Just Minister. A strict social and ethical divide separates the classes in 1814. The noble characters are moral creatures, capable of both heroic sacrifice and self-conscious evil; the common folk do not rise to ethical reflection, but confine themselves Papageno-like to money-making and mating. Bokina has explained this distinction:

Within the aesthetic universe of *Fidelio*, Rocco and Marzelline are neither villains nor virtuous heroes. Rather, they establish a set of expectations about nonheroic, morally and politically human behavior... one of this opera's paradoxes is that truly virtuous actions are reserved for the heroic tenor Florestan and the heroic soprano Leonore, two nominal members of the aristocracy. (1997, 75)

Yet Bokina was only considering the 1814 *Fidelio*. In *Leonore* the nobility do not enjoy a monopoly on moral behavior. A humble bourgeois girl shares the same hopes and travails as the noble heroine, while a royal minister descends to mob vengeance. The opera may portray grandiose villainy, but it also exposes the banal failings of ordinary people. Good intentions do not always overcome self-interest, and even the high-minded Leonore resorts to hurtful deceit. These characters are not allegorical types, but rather sketches of fallible human nature.

The contrasting representational modes of *Leonore* and *Fidelio* suggest the distinction that Anthony Upton has drawn in *Europe 1600-1789* (2001) between modern political life and traditional “consensus society”. Prior to the French Revolution, Upton argued, European society was governed by the faith in an unchanging and fundamentally healthy system. Such a worldview, shared by nobility, townspeople, and peasants alike, did not admit the modern dialectic of opposing political opinions:

The basis of political activity is the making of choices between different solutions to problems. In a consensus society this need does not usually arise, for the kinds of problems that occurred were familiar to all, as were the accepted remedies...If the traditional solutions were not working, then it must be that somewhere in the system there was a malevolent conspiracy of self-interested persons, who put personal interest above the common welfare. (2001, 19)

Maestoso. Marc.

M. Jaqu. Wer ein holdes Weib er-run-gen, stimm in un-tern Ju-bel

J. D. Fern. Wer ein holdes Weib er-run-gen, stimm in un-tern Ju-bel

D.F. Wer ein holdes Weib er-run-gen, stimm in un-tern Ju-bel

R. Roc. Wer ein holdes Weib er-run-gen, stimm in un-tern Ju-bel

M. ein! Nie, nie, nie wird es zu hoch be-

J. ein! Nie, nie, nie wird es zu hoch be-

D.F. stimm in un-tern Ju-bel ein! Nie, nie, nie wird es zu hoch be-

R. ein! Nie, nie, nie wird es zu hoch be-

M. sun-gen, Ret-te-rin, Ret-te-rin des Gat-ten zu sein,

J. sun-gen, Ret-te-rin, Ret-te-rin des Gat-ten zu sein,

D.F. sun-gen, Ret-te-rin, Ret-te-rin des Gat-ten zu sein,

R. sun-gen, Ret-te-rin, Ret-te-rin des Gat-ten zu sein,

Ex. 4. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Leonore*, Act 3, final chorus.

Fidelio portrays such a society. It shows us a good world that has been corrupted by one evil individual. Once the malignant growth is cut out, the body politic returns to health, leaving the social order intact. It is a comforting vision, especially for a society traumatized by years of war and social upheaval. One can easily understand its appeal to Viennese audiences, and to Beethoven himself, in 1814.

The imperfect society of *Leonore* demands a different remedy. Removing Don Pizarro begins the healing, but regeneration must take place at the level of the system, in the basic structure of human relationships. The fault lies not with one evil minister who exacts revenge on a political enemy, but with the destructive cycle of revenge itself; not with one man's self-interest, but with the mercenary system that allows him to implement his designs. We

glimpse the outlines of a new world as Leonore and Florestan foreswear revenge, or as Rocco hurls the blood money at Pizarro's feet. We hear it in the gently twining melodies of Leonore and Marzelline, and in the final quartet that folds Don Fernando into the circle of the bourgeois family. Fittingly, *Leonore* leaves the characters in the prison cell, ready to begin their ascent to justice and light.

Leonore will probably never regain the stage. Few listeners would trade the compact action of *Fidelio* for the ponderous orchestral introductions and lyrical numbers of *Leonore*, or suffer through two acts of costume farce before glimpsing Florestan. Even the undeniable thrills of Pizarro's bloodthirsty second aria or the marvelous prison chorus seem unlikely to offset the *longueurs* of Beethoven's three-act original. The 1814 characters may present flat stereotypes and the drama may at times devolve into a morality play. Yet, in our ossified opera world, aesthetics trumps ethics. Perhaps this betrays our own distance from the spirit of 1805. ◀

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