

The Trusts Community Foundation Opera in Concert



BEETHOVEN'S **FIDELIO**



7.30PM, SATURDAY 8 MAY 2021  
AUCKLAND TOWN HALL



# FIDELIO

Seville, Spain  
Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century

## Characters:

**Rocco** – The head gaoler where Florestan is being imprisoned; the narrator of the story.

**Florestan** – A nobleman being held as a political prisoner.

**Leonore** – Florestan’s wife, disguised as the prison guard **Fidelio**

**Jaquino** – Rocco’s assistant.  
In love with Marzelline.

**Marzelline** – Rocco’s daughter.  
In love with Fidelio.

**Don Pizarro** – Governor presiding over the gaol where Florestan is being held. Responsible for Florestan’s wrongful incarceration.

**Don Fernando** – The Prime Minister and friend of Florestan. Unaware of Florestan’s incarceration; believes that Florestan died during political riots two years prior to the start of the opera.

## BEFORE THE ACTION

In the midst of political upheaval in Seville, Florestan has endeavoured to expose the corruption of his political rival, Don Pizarro.

In retaliation, Pizarro illegally imprisons Florestan, and spreads rumours of his death.

Florestan’s wife, Leonore, however, believes that her husband still lives. She hatches a plan to find him. She disguises herself as a boy – the eponymous Fidelio – and gains employment as a prison guard.

## ACT ONE

We open with Marzelline being romantically pursued by Jaquino. He wants her to commit to marrying him, but she refuses, for she is now in love with “Fidelio”. Fidelio has recently arrived in the employment of her father – Rocco the gaoler – and everyone is unaware that Fidelio is actually Leonore, Florestan’s wife (here referred to as Fidelio for consistency). Fidelio – not wanting to break the illusion – doesn’t outwardly protest when Rocco approves the marriage. Instead, she listens patiently while Rocco insists that having enough money is the key to a happy life.

Fidelio counters: money is one thing, but she would prefer to know that she has Rocco’s trust – something that she suggests Rocco could prove by allowing her to help in the lower dungeons, where Fidelio thinks Florestan may be imprisoned. Rocco refuses: he is under the strictest of orders from Pizarro – the governor of the gaol – to allow nobody else down there, but Fidelio insists that she has enough courage and strength. Rocco relents and says he will ask Pizarro’s permission for Fidelio to assist him.

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Pizarro arrives. He receives a letter informing him that the Prime Minister Fernando has a plan to inspect the prison, based upon rumours that political prisoners are being illegally held there. Pizarro knows that it will ruin him if Fernando discovers Florestan in particular, given that he had informed him of Florestan's death two years ago. He resolves to seize the moment and have his final revenge.

Pizarro attempts to bribe Rocco into killing Florestan, who refuses. They instead come to a compromise: Rocco will dig the prisoner's grave, so that it will be ready for Pizarro to kill Florestan himself. Fidelio overhears the plot, and, although initially terrified, resolves that she will not give up her goal to find Florestan.

In an effort to look for Florestan among their ranks, Fidelio – aided by Marzeline – convinces Rocco to let the prisoners come outside, to their overwhelming relief and joy.

Rocco returns to tell Fidelio that Pizarro has given his permission for Fidelio to join him in the dungeon. As they leave, Jaquino and Marzeline tell them that Pizarro knows that they let the prisoners out of the dungeons. When Pizarro enters in a fury, Rocco explains that they were letting them out to have some sunlight in honour of the King's Name Day, and that Pizarro's anger is best saved for the man he is about to kill. Pizarro orders the prisoners to be locked up again, and for Rocco and Fidelio to get to work digging Florestan's grave.

## ACT TWO

We now meet Florestan, alone and ailing in his cell. He sings of his belief that, no matter how bitter the punishment, he has done the right thing in speaking the truth, and then has a vision of his wife Leonore coming to save him. He falls asleep. Rocco and Fidelio arrive to dig the grave.

Florestan awakes, and upon hearing his voice, Fidelio recognises the prisoner to be her husband. Once the grave has been dug, Rocco sounds the alarm to alert Pizarro that all is ready. He tells Fidelio to leave, but she hides instead. Pizarro reveals his identity to Florestan, and just as he is about to kill him, Fidelio/Leonore throws herself between Pizarro's dagger and her husband, threatening Pizarro with a pistol and revealing her true identity. Pizarro resolves to kill them both but is interrupted by a trumpet announcing the arrival of Fernando. Pizarro is led upstairs to him while Florestan and Leonore rejoice in their reunion.

Fernando frees those who have been wrongly imprisoned, much to the elation of the gathered crowd. Upon learning of Pizarro's plot to murder Florestan, he orders his arrest. Rocco tells Fernando of how Leonore saved her husband, and Fernando allows her to release him from his chains. The crowd sings the praises of Leonore's unmatched love and courage.

# “I SHALL SEIZE FATE BY THE THROAT. IT WILL NEVER BEND ME COMPLETELY TO ITS WILL.”

–Beethoven

To give Fate its due, it gave the task its best. The adversities that Beethoven faced are dizzying to list: familial acrimony, alcoholism, occasional poverty, endless problems with his health, not to mention the acute cruelty that he, of all people, would go almost entirely deaf over the course of his lifetime. And yet, he continued to drive himself onward through a combination of sheer grit and an unrelenting dedication to his art, carving triumph out of unimaginable hardship.

It is unsurprising then, that the protagonist of his only opera is much the same. It also seems somehow fitting that *Fidelio* was the work, in his entire output, that the composer found most tormentingly difficult to get right: it went through two librettists, four overtures and three different premieres before it arrived in the form performed today.

*Fidelio*'s life began in 1803 when Beethoven was commissioned to write an opera to a libretto by Schikaneder (author of the libretto for Mozart's *The Magic Flute*). He abandoned the project after only a month, unable to hide his contempt for the poor quality of Schikaneder's libretto. We should be grateful, incidentally – he instead turned his attention to the 'Eroica' Symphony.

However, his work was not in vain – some

of the music would find a new home in his next attempt at opera, *Fidelio*. A so-called “rescue opera”, *Fidelio* tells the story of a woman who disguises herself as a male prison guard in order to free her wrongly incarcerated husband. In it, Beethoven found the material that could both carry his staunchly-held enlightenment ideals of liberty and justice, as well as his unparalleled musical imagination.

He completed the opera in 1805 and embarked on a typically harrowing rehearsal process, only for the censors to then decide that they wouldn't allow a work with such an overtly political plot to be performed. The work's librettist, Joseph Sonnleithner, eventually negotiated the necessary permissions, only for the hard-won premiere to then be viewed as an uncontested failure by both audiences and critics.

Beethoven was stubborn, certainly, but he wasn't a fool: he knew as well as anybody that *Fidelio* had not yet found its mark. He then, unusually, turned to a small circle of his friends for advice. Even more surprisingly, he actually listened.

They met and went through the entire score bar by bar. Despite screaming out “not a note will I cut!” in response to any and all

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suggestions, he clearly took some of their ideas to heart, eventually reducing the work from three acts to two and composing an entirely new overture. The premiere that followed, although not exactly a hit, was far more favourably received than before, and there were plans for repeat performances. However, after the piece's second outing, Beethoven had a violent argument with the director of the theatre about money, demanded his score back and walked out. The opera quite literally disappeared into a drawer.

Cut to 1814. In the wake of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, the Viennese theatres were on the lookout for an artistic vehicle to carry their jubilation at the demise of the man who had sent French troops to occupy their city. What could be better than a work by the city's most revered composer, a work all about the oppressed having victory over their oppressor?

At this point it becomes apparent that Beethoven wasn't entirely happy with the second version of *Fidelio* either, even with all the revisions. So he reworked it for a third time, bringing on board playwright/librettist Georg Friedrich Treitschke to edit the libretto, writing yet another new overture (by now the work's fourth), and finally giving us the version of *Fidelio* most commonly performed today.

And is it now absolutely perfect?

In a word: no.

It is inescapably true that the piece is dramaturgically flawed, among other things. And yet, from the moment the overture starts, we are transported to a musical experience that borders on a spiritual one. He stops time in the quartet in Act I as each

of the characters face the ramifications of love's caprices. He captures the essence of wonderment as the prisoners move out of the dungeons into the light. Florestan's cry to God at the opening of the second act is soul-crushing, the very embodiment of desperation.

In Beethoven's hands, music is not a mere tool for illustrating words or carrying drama. It is the medium that exposes the inarticulate drives that govern us, bearing witness to the infinite, indestructible world of the human spirit.