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Ludwig van Beethoven: *Leonore*. Harmonia Mundi 902414, 2019 [review]

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Audio Review

Ludwig van Beethoven: *Leonore* [i.e., *Fidelio*, in its first version, 1805]. Harmonia Mundi 902414, 2020.

Performers: Marlis Petersen (Leonore), Robin Johannsen (Marzelline), Maximilian Schmitt (Florestan), Johannes Chum (Jaquino), Tareq Nazmi (Don Fernando), Johannes Weisser (Don Pizarro), Dimitry Ivashchenko (Rocco), Zürich Sing-Akademie and Freiburg Baroque Orchestra, conducted by René Jacobs

In February I hailed a staged production (in Washington, DC and Manhattan) of the rarely seen first version (1805) of Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*.[1] The marvelous troupe was Opera Lafayette, under its founder and conductor Ryan Brown. Here we have a new recording of that first version, under the able leadership of conductor—and former countertenor—René Jacobs. The experience of getting to know Beethoven's first thoughts about *Fidelio* has caused me to see the work afresh and in a new light.

The version of *Fidelio* that normally gets performed is the third (1814). As just mentioned, the work was originally staged a full nine years earlier. For a revival a year later (1806), Beethoven trimmed it drastically, thereby creating a second independent version that was, however, no more successful at the time than the original production had been. The second version's main advantage, which got maintained in the final version, is that it combined acts 1 and 2 into a single act.

Eight years after that, Beethoven removed several further numbers (but restored and revised Rocco's quite effective aria), rewrote many things that stayed, and added entirely new material—most notably to Leonore's big aria (act 1) and to Florestan's (near the beginning of what was now called act 2). For this 1814 version he also created a totally new overture, which is sometimes performed on its own (as his *Fidelio* Overture).

The present review is published here online for the first time, by kind permission of *American Record Guide*, where the initial version first appeared [Eds.].

1. Ralph P. Locke, "Opera Review: Beethoven's 'Leonore': Upcoming Performances in New York City," *The Arts Fuse*, February 27, 2020 https://artsfuse.org/196704/opera-review-beethovens-leonore-upcoming-performances-in-new-york-city/. A revised version appeared in print as "Washington DC's Opera Lafayette: Beethoven's First Version of *Fidelio*," *American Record Guide* 83, no. 4 (July–August 2020): 9–10.

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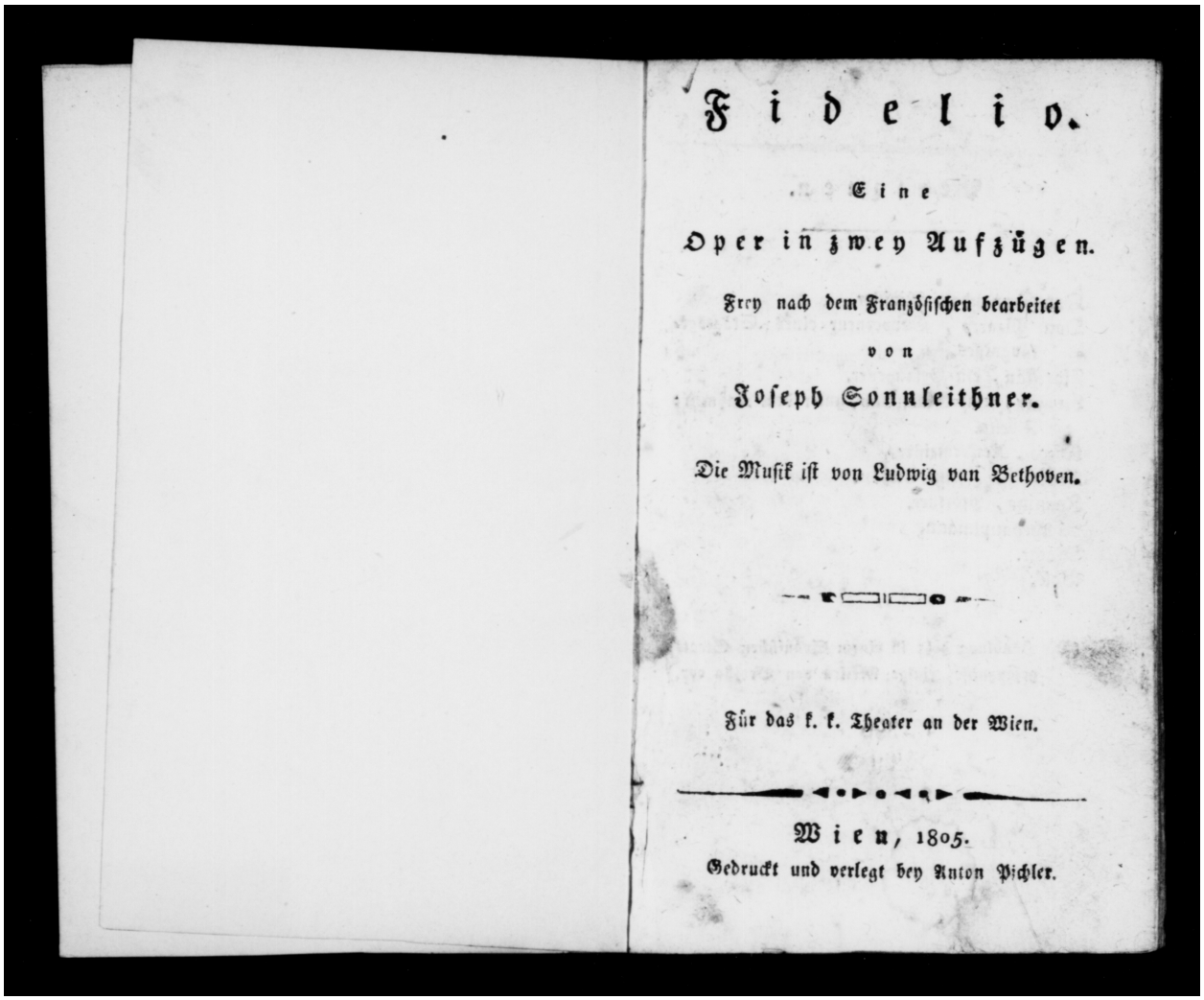

Fidelio.

Eine

Oper in zwey Aufzügen.

Frey nach dem Französischen bearbeitet

von

Joseph Sonnleithner.

Die Musik ist von Ludwig van Bethoven.

Für das k. k. Theater an der Wien.

Wien, 1805.

Gedruckt und verlegt bey Anton Pichler.

Title page of the 1805 published libretto of the first version of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, today generally called *Leonore* to prevent confusion with the third and final version of *Fidelio*, 1814 (Albert Schatz Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC—https://www.loc.gov/resource/musschatz.14630.0/?sp=3)

The 1805 and 1806 versions of *Fidelio* are always now called *Leonore* to distinguish them from the 1814 version. There are three versions of the overture associated with the pre-1814 stagings, the most famous being the so-called *Leonore* Overture No. 3. Sometimes performances of *Fidelio* interpolate it into the last act, before the final scene. Mahler is said to have come up with that supposed improvement, which I find annoying and anti-dramatic.

Numerous scholars and musicians have expressed a preference for the opera's first (1805) version. *American Record Guide*, a long-lived and highly regarded bimonthly magazine whose past issues are available on JSTOR, has reviewed four recordings of "1805," notably ones under conductors Herbert Blomstedt (a re-release is reviewed in the September/October 1996 issue and John Eliot Gardiner (reviewed in March/April 1998). Further recordings can be purchased online (often as used copies). There is also a recording of "1806" (i.e., 1805 but tightened and with some musical numbers moved around), under Marc Soustrot (May/June 1999).

I have read, in those reviews and elsewhere, mixed recommendations about the Blomstedt and Gardiner recordings of "1805," although both surely have many merits. (Gardiner reportedly incorporates passages from the later versions.) Now comes René Jacobs, with a recording of "1805" that, like Gardiner's, uses period instruments. In addition, Jacobs has made his own conflation of the strongest passages of the spoken dialogue from various early versions of the libretto, including the original French text by Bouilly (for an opera with music by Gaveaux) that served as the primary basis for the libretto that Sonnleitner wrote in German for Beethoven. Those French exchanges are here translated into German so as to harmonize with what has been kept from Sonnleitner's text.

Jacobs mentions that he has lightly modernized some of the spoken wordings for greater clarity. I trembled at reading this last remark, but I found I was able to follow the plot more clearly here than ever before, without needing to look at the printed synopsis. Still, it is a little odd to be hearing a spoken text that has been even slightly updated in a recording that is otherwise so deeply rooted in the doctrines of Historically Informed Performance. Indeed, Mike Ashman notes (in a review in Gramophone) that Jacobs made yet other "slight" changes, incorporating (in different ways than Gardiner, and more modestly) details from the 1806 and 1814 versions. Still, this recording, on the whole, makes a persuasive case for "1805."

From a musical point of view, the 1805 version is satisfying and unified. After listening to the new recording, I'm not sure that I don't prefer it to the 1814 *Fidelio* that operagoers know and love—or should I say "know and respect"? (*Fidelio* is one of the less cuddly operas in the repertory.)

There is the special pleasure of getting to know several substantial later-rejected chunks: a trio for Marzelline, Jacquino and Rocco; a duet for Marzelline and Leonore (with solo violin and cello); an additional energetic passage for the evil Pizarro; and a highly dramatic exchange for Leonore and Florestan before their ecstatic duet celebrating their having found each other again: "O namenlose Freude!"

Even the many portions of the score that are recognizably more or less the same in "1805" and in "1814" have significant internal differences that will be evident to listeners who know "1814" well. One encounters dozens of measures (often very interesting ones) that Beethoven would later either rewrite or remove (likely in the hope of maintaining dramatic momentum). For example, we can now explore two different but equally valid solutions to how the orchestra should open the grave-digging duet for Leonore and the jailer Rocco in act 3 (i.e., act 2 in "1814"). I kept being surprised at how strong the new-to-me (i.e., later-removed) music was, and then had to remind myself that the first version—though it of course preceded the final one—is not "early Beethoven" but the work of a mature composer who had completed the "Eroica" Symphony two years before.

The recording was made at an unstaged (it seems) performance at the 2400-seat Philharmonie de Paris in November 2017. The recording is generally clear, though the low strings often lack punch and richness. Occasionally the voices seem a bit closely miked, preventing figurations and harmonies in the orchestra from making much impact: for example, toward the end of the lovers' rapturous "O namenlose Freude!" But the many prominent passages for solo instruments or specific sections of the orchestra come through well: we hear lovely and varied colors from the woodwinds and highly dramatic entries from

the brass and timpani (the latter played with hard sticks). The three horn players make joyful whoops, nicely in tune with each other, in the up-tempo conclusion to Leonore's big aria.

Tempos are generally more forward-moving than in certain famous *Fidelio* recordings from the past (e.g., Klemperer's, with Christa Ludwig and Jon Vickers; or Bernstein's with Gundula Janowitz and René Kollo) though perhaps often similar to those chosen by, say, Lorin Maazel or Charles Mackerras.

Not surprisingly, given the period instruments and Jacobs's long career in early music, the singers that he has chosen sound youngish: light-toned and firm. It is quite amazing how well everything works considering that (if the stated information is accurate) we are hearing an undoctored single performance, without any patches from rehearsals or after-sessions. The German text (sung and spoken) is handled exceptionally well, including by the three singers who are not native German-speakers: the Marzelline, from the US; the Fernando, from Kuwait; and the Rocco, from Russia.

I remember seeing and hearing soprano Marlis Petersen (who is German-born, despite the Scandinavian family name) as a marvelous Susanna in an HD transmission of the Metropolitan Opera's *Marriage of Figaro* (2014). She has also sung the title role in *Lulu* at the Met and has recorded some Bach cantatas. Given her success in Bach and Mozart, it is perhaps not surprising how well she handles Leonora's coloratura passagework; she also rises to the very different challenge of the character's more passionate phrases. Maximilian Schmitt is reliable and generally steady as the starving, highly principled prisoner Florestan. Robin Johannsen is a glorious, bouncily naïve Marzelline. Her Jaquino, Johannes Chum, is more than adequate vocally, though a bit lacking in character. The three low-male roles are handled capably, but connoisseurs may find themselves longing for certain heftier bass-baritones and basses of the past who recorded one or more of those roles (e.g., Gottlob Frick, Franz Crass, Kurt Böhme, Walter Berry, Karl Ridderbusch, or Martti Talvela).

The recording has sold me on the 1805 *Leonore*. Maybe this is the version that opera houses should be staging from now on. Or at least they could do so from time to time, thus helping us hear Beethoven's sole but ever-amazing opera in a new way. I recommend Jacobs's recording highly to scholars, singers, libraries, and opera lovers generally—side by side with the best recordings of the 1814 *Fidelio* (such as those conducted by Karl Böhm and by Kurt Masur).

The hardcover book that comes with the CDs contains numerous illustrations (but no bios), an interview with Jacobs, a synopsis (too short—not even mentioning the politically potent Prisoners' Chorus), and the libretto. Everything is in French, German, and generally good English. Alas, there is no essay to explain who reconstructed the 1805 version heard here nor what guesses and adjustments were made and why. The act 2 "melodrama" scene (i.e., a scene in which characters speak over orchestral music) is given here in the 1814 version, even though one brief passage in it refers to the major-mode conclusion of Florestan's aria, a passage that Beethoven did not create until that 1814 version. Even if the scene does not totally match what was done in 1805, it is certainly effective in this performance. But this one scene also allows more direct comparison with other recordings, and I admit I slightly prefer the creepy tension conveyed by Gwyneth Jones and Franz Crass for Böhm. So it goes with an opera that has been recorded many times, and often marvelously.

As for the 1805 version, the staged production I mentioned at the outset was filmed during its two subsequent performances in Manhattan (at New York University's Kaye Playhouse). Opera Lafayette has released it as a DVD, making it a companion to their DVD of the French opera whose libretto, as mentioned earlier, was the basis for *Fidelio*'s German one: Pierre Gaveaux's Léonore, ou l'Amour conjugal (1798).

Many of us continue to need heartening contact with the lively arts of past centuries. The chance to experience forgotten operas, or forgotten versions of well-known ones, remains a reliable (and relatively inexpensive) pleasure in our postmodern age, and one that we can enjoy in the privacy and the safety of our homes. (I wrote and, two years later, revised this during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.)

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