

BEETHOVEN'S

FIDELIO



An Opera in Two Acts

Virginia
Opera
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Premiere

Theater an der Wien, Vienna, 20 November 1805 (first version); Theater an der Wien, 29 March 1806 (second version), and Kärntnertheater, 23 May 1814 (final version).

Setting: A Spanish prison not far from Seville.

Cast of Characters

Florestan, a political prisoner	tenor
Leonore, his wife; disguised under the name Fidelio, an assistant to Rocco in the prison	soprano
Rocco, jailer	bass
Marzeline, his daughter	soprano
Jacquino, assistant to Rocco	tenor
Don Pizarro, governor of the state prison	bass-baritone
Don Fernando, minister and Spanish nobleman	bass
Soldiers, prisoners, townspeople	

Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Overture

Of the four overtures Beethoven wrote for the opera, the most suitable one to be heard before the opera is the Fidelio overture. The three Leonoras are splendid in and of themselves but, except for the more modest first one, they tend to anticipate the action and make the raising of the curtain somewhat of an anti-climax. The Fidelio overture begins by suggesting heroic action and romantic love in its introduction. These are used as the main themes of the sonata-allegro structure.

Act 1

No. 1--Duet between Marzelline and Jacquino

The opening scene is set in the courtyard of a state prison, not far from Seville. Marzelline, the daughter of the jailer, Rocco, is busy doing laundry. Jacquino, the porter, attempts to propose to her, but is constantly interrupted by people at the gate. Marzelline deftly avoids his questioning and, when his back is turned, declares her love for Fidelio, her father's young assistant. Jacquino is called away by Rocco. Marzelline wonders what her father thinks of the young Fidelio.

No. 2--Aria by Marzelline

As Marzelline sings of her love for Fidelio, she begins timidly and then gains more confidence. Beethoven reflects this in the music by changing from minor to major and with changes in orchestration.

Rocco, followed by Jacquino, appears and asks if Fidelio has appeared with dispatches for the Governor. Leonore, disguised as the youth Fidelio, arrives, laden with chains and provisions. Rocco praises him and promises a reward, saying that he can see into his heart.

No. 3--Quartet

All four characters react to the above situation in different ways. Such a quartet was not found in the original French libretto; its addition gives deeper insight into the relationships of these characters. Marzelline is delighted; Leonore is apprehensive; Jacquino is jealous; and Rocco is benevolent. Despite their various reactions, Beethoven chose to set the quartet as a canon, a form in which one voice states a melody and each voice imitates it after a time lapse ("Row, row, row your boat" is a canon, for example). Marzelline begins what becomes a sublime ensemble.

No. 4--Aria by Rocco

Rocco promises to speed the betrothal, but warns that something else besides love is essential for happiness--gold. He sings an aria in the *buffo* manner, extolling the virtues of gold. Fidelio is naturally distressed by the talk of marriage but must retain Rocco's good will in order to stay and find her husband, if he is indeed here. Fidelio begs Rocco to be allowed to assist him and move freely among the prisoners. Rocco tells her there is one dungeon she may never penetrate--a prisoner has been incarcerated there for over two years now. On orders of the Governor, the prisoner's rations are now being reduced to starvation level so that he may soon die. He is kept in darkness without straw bedding. Marzelline begs her father not to let Fidelio see this distressing sight. Leonore flares up, however, exclaiming, "Why not? I have strength and courage," two most important attributes.

No. 5--Trio with Marzelline, Leonore, and Rocco

From this point on, the opera leaves the realm of domesticity entirely and takes on a serious, heroic tone. Leonore now believes she may have found her husband and must do whatever is necessary, face any possible danger, to save him. In this trio, she sings of many emotional states of being and ideals:

love, suffering, hope. This powerful ensemble served as the finale in the original three-act version of the opera.

Rocco announces that he will ask the Governor for his consent to the marriage and to the proposal that Fidelio should have access to all the prisoners. Music is heard in the distance.

No. 6--March

To a March, the Governor, Don Pizarro (significantly an aristocrat), enters with his retinue. He opens a letter, which he proceeds to read after dismissing the prison staff. Leonore has contrived to remain. The letter warns Pizarro that the Minister has heard that some prisoners have been unlawfully detained and that he intends to pay a surprise visit the following day. The evil Pizarro reflects that the discovery of Florestan in chains in the subterranean dungeon would ruin him. There is only one solution.

No. 7--Aria with chorus by Pizarro

Pizarro sings an aria displaying his evil intentions, with his inner agitation expressed by Beethoven's orchestra: ominous drum rolls, jabbing accents, blaring brass, and a twisted string that seems to be a perversion of Leonora's "tears".

As in many places throughout his oeuvre, Beethoven uses the shift from minor to major to signal triumph, but here it is a perverse and wicked kind of triumph, one that will not ultimately win out. This vengeance aria is in the tradition of the Queen of the Night's aria "Der Hölle Rache" from *The Magic Flute*.

After the aria, Pizarro commands that a watch be kept and a trumpet be sounded when any escorted carriage is seen approaching from Seville. He then summons Rocco.

No. 8--Duet with Pizarro and Rocco

Pizarro needs Rocco's help to carry out his wicked plans. He begins by promising to make him rich and then praises his courage. Ultimately he tells him he must commit murder, a word given its full emotional impact by a *mezza voce* drop in pitch.

Rocco stammers at first and then points out that murder is not among his duties. Pizarro tells him he himself will commit the murder--Rocco need only dig the grave.

No. 9--Accompanied recitative and aria by Leonore

Writing an aria in E major about marital devotion, Beethoven may have been responding to the inconstant Fiordiligi's aria "Per pietà" from *Così Fan Tutte*, an aria in the same key. Leonore, alone, addresses the retreating Pizarro as a monster. Her anger and fear are reflected in the turbulent swirling low string figure taken over from French horror opera. She is deeply suspicious of his intentions and in a vivid accompanied recitative violent mood changes are conveyed through shifting timbres, unstable harmonies, key changes, obscured meter, and sudden shifts in dynamics. Images such as a fierce tiger, storms at sea, and the appearance of a rainbow are painted in the orchestra. In the first part of her aria, Leonore in a heroic musical effort, calls on hope to guide her. The scoring is unusual, consisting of strings with obbligato parts for three horns and bassoon. This is one of Beethoven's most inspired slow melodies and the vocal and instrumental lines intertwine beautifully. Certain words such as "Liebe" (love) and "erreichen" (to reach up, to attain) are emphasized by long or high notes or by embellishment.

The concluding fast section shows her fixity of purpose. She gears herself up by stating the text (I will follow my inner compulsion) on a monotone in even rhythm, then expanding upward melodically in soaring, triumphant manner, accompanied by the heroic French horns, which probably represent the inner voices propelling her towards the rescue.

Marzelline and Jacquino return. Leonore, anxious to inspect the prisoners, begs Rocco to let them out into the courtyard. He gives his permission, but to her disappointment, only for the prisoners in the upper cells.

No. 10--Act I Finale

Leonore and Jacquino unbar the prisoners' doors and the prisoners slowly emerge into the sunlight. The string accompaniment tells us that they have long been unaccustomed to light and that some of them seem to be stumbling. The prisoners begin singing in a hesitant manner.

The key changes from B-flat to a bright G major. One prisoner steps forward, proclaiming that with God's help they will again find freedom and peace. The rest respond with an outburst of joy.

When they realize the guards the prisoners whisper the opening chorus and then fall silent can overhear them. In the English National Opera guide, Basil Deane writes of this scene: "No moment in opera is more profoundly moving, none has more universal meaning than the emergence of these anonymous prisoners from darkness into light."

Rocco returns from an interview with the Governor and tells Leonore that her two requests have been granted and this very day she may accompany him into the dungeons. She is delighted at first but then sobered by learning that their task is to dig a grave. Rocco would like to spare her the experience but she insists on going with him.

Jacquino and Marzeline arrive with ominous news. The Governor has heard that the prisoners have been let out and he is furious. Pizarro appears and demands to know from Rocco why he disobeyed orders. Rocco is able to placate Pizarro by pointing out that it is the King's name day and also that a death will soon take place. With their hopes of freedom dashed, the prisoners are led back into their cells, bidding farewell to the light of day. Pizarro urges Rocco to hurry and attend to his gruesome task.

Act 2

No. 11--Introduction and Aria with Florestan

The orchestral introduction in F minor, really a miniature tone poem, gives a full sense of the terrible nature of Florestan's imprisonment and contains many horror conventions from French rescue opera. The tonality is extremely unsettled with inconclusive cadences and adventurous harmonies. Unsettling cross-rhythms are heard, along with extreme, sudden changes of dynamics. The drums are tuned to A and E-flat, a diminished fifth or "tritone," an extremely dissonant interval long considered to be "diabolical." Amidst the prevailing gloom can be heard glimpses of light, projected by changes from minor to major mode and by changes from string to woodwind scoring. As the curtain rises, we hear Florestan cry out in recitative, "God! What darkness here!"

His two-part aria seems to be a telepathic response to Leonore's presence in the prison. Both seem to have sensed each other's presence. In the slow part of Florestan's aria, in A-flat major, Florestan sings of his unjust fate, finding consolation from having done his duty. This lovely theme, first heard in the woodwinds, is heard in all three of the Leonore overtures.

For the fast aria, in F major (paralleling the beginning of the scene, which began in F minor), Florestan rises in ecstasy as he sees a vision of his wife leading him to freedom.

But the vision fades and Florestan sinks back down, exhausted, an action portrayed vividly in the music. This F-major conclusion to the scene was added only in the final 1814 version of the opera. With its suggestion of hope and victory, it is a much more satisfying conclusion than the original one in F minor.

No. 12--Melodrama and Duet with Leonore and Rocco

Rocco and Leonore enter the dungeon where Florestan is held prisoner. Leonore attempts to make out the prisoner's features, but to no avail. The grave digging is done to melodrama, the declamation of text to an orchestral background, usually done in alternation. This was a type of text delivery used in

French horror opera from the 1790s, reserved for the spookiest, darkest parts of the opera, or for the most evil characters. Here, the orchestra background provides, among other features, vivid “shudders.” The ensuing duet continues the grim sense of atmosphere by being performed in a hushed manner throughout.

During the duet Leonore is distracted by her thoughts of Florestan and keeps trying to discern if the prisoner is indeed her husband. Rocco calls her attention back to her duties. Florestan awakens and is recognized by Leonore. Despite her strong emotions, she must continue to play her part. Florestan learns that Pizarro has imprisoned him, whose crimes he exposed. He asks for a drink and Leonore gives him some wine.

No. 13--Trio with Leonore, Florestan, and Rocco

The duet between Leonore and Rocco turns into a trio as Florestan’s voice is added. Florestan warmly expresses his gratitude and the others respond.

Leonore persuades Rocco, who is reluctant, to allow her to give the starving prisoner a piece of bread from her pocket. Leonore is almost overwhelmed by the situation, with Rocco reflecting that the prisoner will soon be dead.

No. 14--Quartet with Leonore, Rocco, Florestan, and Pizarro

As Pizarro enters and draws a dagger, the trio becomes a quartet. Beethoven provides a turbulent orchestral accompaniment as Pizarro gloats over his victim. Characteristically for Pizarro, he reveals himself in a chromatic vocal line.

In reference to his Act 1 vengeance aria, the music moves to a triumphant D major as Pizarro moves to kill Florestan. He is prevented from doing so, however, by Leonore, who now discloses her own identity, proclaiming, “First kill his wife!” as he draws a pistol.

Pizarro makes another attempt to kill Florestan but is suddenly halted by a trumpet call from the tower.

There is a moment of stunned silence while everyone registers the significance of the trumpet call, followed by an orchestral phrase of calm transcendence: from here on, the path to freedom and resolution is inevitable. The trumpet sounds again. Jacquino announces the arrival of the minister. Pizarro rushes out, followed by others, and Leonore and Florestan are left alone. Before he left, Rocco has let the couple know they may count on him.

No. 15--Duet with Leonore and Florestan

This is the first time in the course of the opera that the married couple has been together. They express their joy in music of ecstatic happiness, singing “O namenlose Freude” (O unnameable joy). The key is the bright G major of the prisoners’ chorus from the Finale of Act 1.

No. 16--Finale

The setting is the parade ground of the castle. His officers surround the Minister, Don Fernando, with Pizarro present. Jacquino and Marzeline lead in the prisoners to the triumphant key of C major. The crowd expresses its overwhelming joy. Don Fernando proclaims the King’s dedication to justice for all. Rocco produces Leonore and Florestan, the latter still in chains. Rocco explains the situation to Don Fernando and the crowd demands that Pizarro be punished. The guards remove him. Don Fernando invites Leonore to remove her husband’s fetters as Beethoven quotes from an earlier work of his, the “Cantata on the Death of Joseph II,” in which the emperor Joseph II is praised for having overcome Fanaticism, a monster from Hell who spread darkness over the earth.

Then the chorus sings a line from Schiller's Ode to Joy, not the last time Beethoven would use that as a source for a musical setting: "Let him who has won a fair wife join in our rejoicing." To quote again from Basil Deane: "Death is swallowed up in victory; captivity is led captive; the light shines in the darkness; love conquers all. 'Music,' declared Beethoven, 'is a higher revelation than all your wisdom and philosophy.' As the curtain comes down on *Fidelio*, who will be the first to contradict him?"

Historical Background

Fidelio is known as Beethoven's only opera, as the opera with four overtures, and as the most famous and lasting example of the genre known as French rescue opera. Even though the work is to a German libretto, its literary sources are specifically French and indeed Beethoven's music itself contains many French elements. Beethoven was born in the small town of Bonn on the Rhine River in 1770. The cataclysmic events of the French Revolution of 1789, elements of which had been an increasingly important part of European society for many decades, had a profound effect on the young Beethoven. No one believed more strongly in the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity than Beethoven, who made them an essential part of his art. *Fidelio* is a prime example, as is the text of the finale of the Ninth Symphony, from Schiller's "Ode to Joy," which declares that "Alle Menschen werden Brüder" (All men shall become brothers).

After Beethoven settled permanently in Vienna in 1792 he regularly heard French rescue opera in the theater. This was a form of French *opéra comique*, which, although certainly not of a comic nature, kept the format of *opéra comique* in employing spoken dialogue (considered more democratic than sung recitative) and using simple tunes for lower class characters and more complex arias (e.g., with a wider range and more coloratura) for aristocratic or heroic characters. Representative composers of French rescue or horror opera in the 1790s were Jean-François Le Sueur, Nicolas Dalayrac, and, most importantly for Beethoven, who admired him greatly, Luigi Cherubini. Cherubini, an Italian, was one of the many foreigners who dominated French opera at various points throughout its history (remember Lully and Meyerbeer, for example). Cherubini's music is not heard that often these days but it is difficult to understand fully Beethoven's aesthetic and musical style without knowing the music of Cherubini.

Opera in France was always an extraordinarily sensitive reflection of socio-cultural focuses and attitudes. Thus, *opéra comique* in the 1790s reflected the upheavals of the Revolutionary era and in particular those of the "Reign of Terror." Mme. Cherubini was in fact to state that "In the morning the guillotine was kept busy, and in the evening one could not get a seat in the theater." The evening's "entertainment" directly mirrored the beheadings, rallies, and state funerals carried on in large public squares (the Place de la Revolution, now known as the Place de la Concorde) and such daily events were likewise considered as "outdoor theater." French rescue opera was meant to raise feelings of terror or horror on the part of the audience. Features included unjust imprisonment of altruistic political heroes (represented by the tenor) and wicked aristocrats who abuse their power (baritones and bass-baritones). Such aristocrats abused their power not only politically but also sexually, often menacing a young heroine (soprano) by kidnapping her and keeping her imprisoned underneath a trapdoor in his rotting castle until she agreed to his dastardly desires.

The heroic tenor, whose crime was to speak out imprudently against tyranny, was incarcerated in a subterranean dungeon. The rescue theme came from the fact that either the soprano or the tenor was rescued by the other (conjugal devotion was a major theme, one in which Beethoven fiercely believed--another of his ideals he was unable to put into actual practice). To make the rescue meaningful and exciting, it had to be a daring, last-minute one. Many of these operas featured rescues despite natural disasters such as floods, fires, shipwrecks, volcanoes, earthquakes, and avalanches. Rescue is thus based on great personal danger done through an act of supreme courage motivated by true love and fidelity. Such disasters are also connected to the element of spectacle so intimately a part of French opera and also to the "exotic" element, the idea of setting a political allegory in a distant land (and also in a distant past) to diffuse any elements of current danger.

As in other opera genres, much is made of polar opposites: good and evil, darkness and light (time of day is very important) are projected by musical dichotomies such as major vs. minor modes, diatonicism vs. chromaticism, high vs. low registers, and so forth. One of the musical-scenic conventions of the French rescue opera--inherited from earlier French opera--was the "storm scene," a storm in the heavens with dark psychological implications. Significantly, it is Beethoven who puts the operatic storm

into the symphony--most specifically his Symphony No. 6 ("Pastoral")--where he strengthens it through the power of the symphonic orchestra. Subsequently, numerous nineteenth-century operas (Weber's *Der Freischütz*, Bellini's *Il Pirata*, Wagner's *Flying Dutchman*, Verdi's *Rigoletto* and *Otello*, to name only a very few) featured increasingly vivid storm scenes, inspired by Beethoven's 6th Symphony, which took its own cue from French rescue opera. Keeping in mind the aim of French rescue opera to instill horror in the listener, specific musical features Beethoven heard in them that may be heard in *Fidelio* and in his innovative symphonies include extremes of dynamics (from terrorizing silence to the loudest blasts of sounds heard thus far in music); sudden violent changes in dynamics (from very loud to almost nothing, for example); accented dissonant chords (especially the supreme dissonance of the era, the diminished-seventh chord); a greater level of dissonance projected through chromaticism (use of all twelve tones of the scale); imaginative orchestration, especially the use of winds and percussion (Beethoven finally put the operatic instruments the piccolo, the trombone, and the contrabassoon into the symphony in the finale of his Symphony No. 5); prominent choral parts, which represented the common folk, or the sense of fraternity (Beethoven adds a chorus to the finale of his Symphony No. 9); and special musical effects such as the use of silence, string *tremolandi*, and deep, turbulent swirling string scale passages.

In 1798 the opera *Léonore, ou L'amour conjugal* (Leonore, or Conjugal Love) appeared in Paris, written by the composer Pierre Gaveau. The libretto was by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly, who had also written the libretto for Cherubini's rescue opera *Les deux journées*, given in Vienna as *Der Wasserträger* (The Water-Carrier), a work much admired by Beethoven. Bouilly's story of Leonore was according to him based on events that had actually happened to his family during the Reign of Terror. For the libretto he typically transferred the action to an earlier period and to an exotic place (a prison near Seville, Spain).

This was the libretto that became the basis for Beethoven's *Fidelio*, the story of a loving, faithful (fides) wife who rescues her husband from political imprisonment by dressing as a young male and taking a job at the prison where she believes (but does not know for sure) he is incarcerated. In addition to the original French setting, there had been two adaptations in Italian prior to Beethoven, both by non-native Italian composers, Ferdinand Paër's *Eleonora, ossia l'amore conjugale* and Mayr's *L'amore conjugale*, the latter set in Poland. Paër's work was written for Vienna in 1804 and may thus be considered an immediate inspiration for Beethoven. In Paër we find the basis for Leonore's Act 1 scene and aria, "Abscheulicher!", for Florestan's scene in prison, and for the trumpet call. Paër, however, has no Prisoners' Chorus or Beethoven's ending with its fraternal rejoicing. As has been suggested by other writers, Paër's work is a love story, while Beethoven's *Fidelio* is a political event.

Beethoven's work was given with a German libretto by Joseph Sonnleithner and premiered as three-act opera given with the Leonore Overture No. 2. The work was never given under the title Leonore (as we tend to think of the first version today), being billed as *Fidelio* in 1805, 1806, and in 1814. It was not a success, given only three performances, principally because Napoleon's troops had just occupied Vienna and times were not propitious for opera attendance, especially of a new work. Also, there was a general criticism that Beethoven's work was more symphonic than stage-worthy, an observation still held by some today.

Drastic revisions were made: the format was changed to two acts, much music rewritten, and arias were cut. A new version introduced by Leonore Overture No. 3 was given on 29 March 1806 but still only achieved two performances. Beethoven claimed the orchestra had murdered his music. For the next several years Beethoven considered how to salvage his opera and also continued to seek suitable operatic subjects, but everything fell short. He was uncompromisingly idealistic in his choice of subjects. Loyalty, fidelity, hope, courage, victory over fate--nothing less than these high goals would do. He considered Mozart a great composer but was mystified and angry that he had squandered his talents on *Così Fan Tutte*, which, with its exploration of the fickleness of women, Beethoven considered utterly unworthy of both Mozart and of the stage.

In 1814 a number of people, including three singers who were interested in performing the opera, approached Beethoven and asked for a revival of *Fidelio* and once again drastic emendations were

undertaken. There was an extensive revision of the text by Georg Friedrich Treitschke, a Viennese poet and stage director. Nearly every musical number underwent changes; by this time pieces such as the Act 1 quartet (“Mir ist so wunderbar”) and Florestan’s grand scene opening Act 2 had been redone numerous times, as was Beethoven’s compositional wont. Eventually the premiere of this version--the one we are used to hearing today--was given on 23 May 1814 with the *Fidelio* overture, much more modest than the three Leonore overtures, which were often felt to dwarf the subsequent action with their length and intensity.

From Bouilly and Gaveau Beethoven inherited a French opéra comique; adding certain elements from the German version of comic opera with spoken dialogue (known as the Singspiel) such as the “homey” or folk element (the opera opens with Marzelline ironing after all!), Beethoven transformed the piece into a heroic opera of grand proportions with a heroic soprano and tenor and overwhelming choral and symphonic elements. The principal means by which the soprano and tenor are displayed as heroic is through their overwhelmingly difficult music. Listen, for example, to Leonore’s Act 1 aria “Komm, Hoffnung” (Come, hope--typical use here of a noun representing an abstract ideal) in which she must perform nearly superhuman feats of breath control and range, representing the fact that she must overcome difficult obstacles to reach her goal. In the concluding fast section “Ich folg’ dem innern Triebe” (I follow my inner compulsion) the French horns come to her aid as she girds her loins in Joan of Arc manner (are the horns voices only she hears?) to complete her task. And although she is singing to herself, we know that she knows that on some level she is communicating with her beloved Florestan, whom she has not seen for two years. This telepathic connection is borne out when Florestan is heard at the beginning of the second act. Significantly, he is introduced symphonically, with what is a kind of tone poem in the French operatic tradition, taking us through all of Florestan’s past agony and suffering and suggesting some of the hope offered him.

Beethoven’s *Fidelio* is full of some of the most sublime music known to man and is often considered, along with certain of Beethoven’s symphonies, to transcend the realm of music into the philosophical and political. The opera has been given--as have other works by Beethoven espousing liberty, such as the Ninth Symphony--as a symbol of hope for the prevalence of mankind’s ideals, as in 1955, when it was the work chosen to open the Vienna Staatsoper when it was rebuilt after being bombed in World War II. No work could have meant more to the Viennese or to the world.

A Note from the Stage Director; Lillian Groag

I wanted to do a FIDELIO that didn't echo the pervasive Third World Country prison productions, or the Nazi concentration Camp versions. Worthy as they are, they have been done to death and they usually don't quite follow the libretto, which tells the story of ONE individual gone amok (Pizarro) and NOT his government, which intervenes just in time and gets rid of the criminal.

So: I decided to center the production, instead, on another kind of oppression and that is a subtler one, which comprises the end of Art. The Prisoners are artists who are imprisoned. Their political crime is that they are intelligent beings that create art. I feel the Dumbing Down of America is a clear and present danger. The fact that our children leave college without knowing who Keats, Michelangelo, and Mozart were, let alone the location of Iraq on the map, is a clear sign that we are entering a new Dark Age, where plant-killing music and button-pushing are the only solace to extremely troubled souls. I believe that children kill children in schools, not only because of the inexcusable proliferation of stunningly violent entertainment accessible to all (and the weapons that go with it), but because their souls and hearts (as well as those of their parents) are imprisoned in a hopeless darkness into which not the feeblest ray of art and literature has/can penetrate. I DO believe the solution is education and the understanding of art as a manner of expression of the self in a world that seems to be closing in, in chaos of noise and brutality from which only poetry, music, painting and literature will save us. And the young, new artists that will result from a restitution of all art into our everyday life.



A Short History of Opera

The word *opera* is the plural form of the Latin word *opus*, which translates quite literally as *work*. The use of the plural form alludes to the plurality of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word *opera* as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued throughout the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as an “insignificant” part of the action as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries. Traditional view holds that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence in the 1570s by an informal academy known as the *Camerata* which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini’s drama, *Dafne*, by composer, Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of *recitative* sections (*secco* and *accompagnato*) which revealed the plot of the drama; followed by *da capo arias* which provided the soloist an opportunity to develop the emotions of the character. The function of the *chorus* in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new “form” was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished throughout the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Leoncavallo developed the art form through clearly defined periods that produced *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, *bel canto*, and *verismo*. The Austrian Mozart also wrote operas in Italian and championed the *singspiel* (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*. Bizet (*Carmen*), Offenbach (*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*), Gounod (*Faust*), and Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*) led the adaptation by the French which ranged from the *opera comique* to the grand full-scale *tragedie lyrique*. German composers von Weber (*Der Freischütz*), Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), and Wagner (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) developed diverse forms such as *singspiel* to through-composed spectacles unified through the use of the *leitmotif*. The English *ballad opera*, Spanish *zarzuela* and Viennese *operetta* helped to establish opera as a form of entertainment which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20th century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country’s folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
Soprano	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
Mezzo-Soprano	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Cosi fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
Tenor	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Cosi fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
Baritone	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)

<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Cosi fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)
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Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.



Discussion Questions

1. Beethoven is known as a composer who worked painstakingly on his compositions, always making extensive revisions. What example of this do we have at the beginning of his opera, *Fidelio*?
2. Beethoven firmly believed in high-minded, idealistic subject matter. How do the characters of *Fidelio* bear out Beethoven's beliefs?
3. *Fidelio* is a type of opera called a "rescue opera." What is a rescue opera and how does Beethoven make it so?
4. Beethoven grew up in a time of revolution, war, and great change and challenges. How is this reflected in his music?
5. The quartet in Act 1 is an example of a musical expression of character only possible in opera. What are the four different emotions expressed by the four characters singing the quartet?