

# Beethoven's 'Leonore' performed for first time since 1806

by Anno Hellenbroich

The opening of this year's 35th Beethoven Festival in Bonn, was the scene of a performance that was nothing short of extraordinary, both musically and historically: For the first time since 1806, the earliest version of Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* (the reworked "Original *Leonore*" of 1805) was performed in concert at the Beethovenhalle. Both the composition and the spoken dialogue of this version are, in the best musicological judgment, authentic. Under the baton of Bonn's General Music Director Marc Soustrot, the Beethovenhalle Orchestra, together with the Kölner Rundfunkchor and soloists, gave a very exciting performance of this very precisely composed work. The dialogues were spoken by members of the Bonn Theater under the direction of its supervisor, Dr. Manfred Beilharz; though, in some cases, the speakers' vocal technique was not adequate for the dialogues, some of which are quite difficult.

This performance was preceded by many years of painstaking research by a scientific associate of the Bonn Beethoven Archive, Dr. Lühning, making it now possible to follow the complicated history of how Beethoven composed his only opera, *Fidelio* (1814). The resurrection of the authentic libretto, including staging instructions, and of those sections which Beethoven repeatedly reworked on his own manuscript, is now complete, and we can look forward to the publication of this new edition of the 1806 *Leonore*.

From the literature published for the festival (with financial support from the City of Bonn) on Beethoven's many revisions of the various "versions" of *Fidelio*, the listener could gain much sharper insights the connection between the dramatic, vocal, and compositional transformation in the kernel-idea of this opera: the indomitable love of freedom, which culminates in Florestan's aria "In des Lebens Frühlingstagen" ("In My Life's Springtime Days"). Among the changes Beethoven made later for the version of *Fidelio* which is best known today, were his complete re-composition of the recitatives of Leonore's and Florestan's aria, of the second part of Florestan's aria ("Und spür ich nicht linde, sanft säuselnde Luft" ("And Do I Not Feel a Gentle Rush of Sweet Air?")), of the melodrama, and of large parts of the finales of both acts. Beethoven also supplied it with an entirely new overture—the fourth one, which is known as the "Fidelio Overture." The Bonn festival performance included the three Leonore

overtures composed before the one today known as the "First Leonore Overture" (1807).

Beethoven repeatedly returned to the central part of the work, especially the Florestan aria, to make additional alterations (18 versions in all). Although many of his papers have been lost, we find a virtually inexhaustible wealth of sketches, revised manuscript scores, altered copies, and piano reductions, which yield fascinating insights into Beethoven's creative work. This was also the subject of an international scientific symposium of Beethoven scholars, held over several day in the chamber music hall of the Beethoven-Haus and chaired by Dr. Lühning and Professor Steinbeck.

The Bonn performance included the beautiful duet "Um in der Ehe froh zu leben" ("To Live Happily in Marriage"), with its solo violin and 'cello accompaniment (perhaps hinting at the Triple Concerto, which was composed around that time), and the trio "Ein Mann ist bald genommen" ("A Man Is Soon Taken"), which Beethoven later dropped from the 1814 version in order to tighten the dramatic progression of ideas. Rocco's aria "Hat man nicht auch Gold beineben" ("If You Don't Have Any Gold on You"), on the other hand, had been struck from the 1806 version, but Beethoven decided to re-insert it.

The performance also brought before the public a contested "error" in Beethoven's composition. There has been a dispute over a seemingly small, but actually quite important philological reading of Beethoven's marking at the dramatic high-point in Act II, the quartet "Er sterbe, doch soll er erst wissen" ("He Must Die, But First He Must Know"), sung by Pizarro, Leonore, Florestan, and Rocco. In the libretto used by Beethoven in the 1806 version, the stage directions read: ". . . Pizarro attempts to stab Florestan, but Leonore rushes forward with a penetrating cry, and protects Florestan with her own body. Leonore sings 'Tödt erst sein Weib' ['First you must kill his wife']." In Beethoven's manuscript score, Leonore's "outcry" is on a high B-natural, even though the woodwinds are simultaneously sounding an E-flat, thereby giving rise to a triad G-B-E-flat—an unacceptable dissonance in those days. Should her note "correctly" be a B-flat, in harmony with the prevailing key of G minor? Dr. Lühning presented a compelling philological argument against this interpretation, and so, at the Bonn performance, Leonore, sung by Pamela Curn, sang a high B-natural, producing a sharp dissonance that must certainly have been Beethoven's intended dramatic effect—as everyone could hear. In 1814, Beethoven once again revised this passage, and had Leonore sing entirely unaccompanied at that point, heightening the drama even more.

Hopefully this performance will be followed by an equally congenial full staging. This is all the more desirable, because certain "new versions," such as the one arbitrarily thrown together by the British conductor John Elliot Gardiner for his 1996 Salzburg performance (now on CD), do not do justice to the work—not to mention the recent, banalized *Regietheater* productions, which distort the work beyond all recognition.