

## Mandel Festival: Fabulous ‘Fidelio’ from Welser-Möst, Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus, Soloists (May 16)



By Daniel Hathaway|Cleveland Classical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — This season, the Mandel Festival of Opera and Humanities is featuring three concert performances of Ludwig van Beethoven’s only opera to illustrate the Festival’s theme of Courage. The opening concert at

Severance Music Center on Saturday evening, May 16 also demonstrated the mastery of conductor Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus, whose Beethoven performances are second nature and flawless.

“Leonora,” based on the story of a woman who disguised herself as the prison guard Fidelio to rescue her husband Florestan from death in a Spanish political prison, premiered in Vienna in 1805 and was presented in a revised version in 1806. The composer fussed with the work for the next eight years, presenting the final version, now named “Fidelio,” in 1814.

It would have been intriguing to witness the premieres of those three versions, which trace the gradual evolution in Beethoven’s mind of personal attributes like courage, love, and the triumph of the human spirit into such universal truths as liberty, and freedom.

In the process, arias were swapped in and out, three overtures ended up on the cutting room floor, and spoken dialogue, read by narrator Tony F. Sias, was reduced to a minimum while still moving the story forward.

Beethoven tried out and rejected three substantial “Leonore” overtures before writing a more concise orchestral introduction to the 1814 version of “Fidelio.” That was the first piece the audience heard on Saturday in a spirited reading by the Orchestra featuring horn calls.

As the virtual curtain went up on Act I, tenor Owen McCausland (Jaquino), soprano, and Ashley Emerson (Marzeline) were exchanging good-natured jabs. Emerson’s voice was vibrant as she sang of her desire for the disguised Fidelio, and soprano Sara Jakubiak (Leonora) joined bass Raymond Aceto (Rocco) in a revealing quartet where Aceto brought a big, focused sound when singing that money is a wonderful thing.

Bass-Baritone Tomasz Konieczny (Don Pizarro) was the epitome of an authoritarian as he sang “I will have my revenge on Florestan. He tried to disgrace me.”

Don Pizarro and Rocco say that political dissenters are being killed, but Rocco insists that “taking a man’s life is not part of my duties.” The two sing a commanding duet and Leonore overhears everything in her lovely aria, “I am following my inner voice. I cannot falter.”

Released from the labyrinthine dungeon, the prisoners — the men of The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus directed by Lisa Wong featuring baritones Ronnie Dailey and Francisco Prado — are delighted to be outside.

Leonore is featured in a noble aria accompanied by three horns before she joins Rocco to dig a grave for Florestan.

We finally meet Florestan at the top of Act II — and he’s at his wit’s end. The powerful tenor David Butt Philip hallucinates a vision of Florestan as he sings in a desperately high register, “I see an angel in the golden mist.” But it’s Leonore herself.

Husband and wife reunited sing the ecstatic duet “O namenlose Freude,” just as an offstage trumpet announces that the prisoners have been set free by the power of love and joy.

At this point, where the 1814 librettist called for a scene change from the dungeon to the out-of-doors, Franz Welser-Möst followed the practice of many conductors and inserted *Leonore Overture No. 3*. The Cleveland Orchestra played it spectacularly, with exceptional wind solos, and won a standing ovation from the audience.

Then, the stage and balcony filled with a celebratory crowd welcoming this day of deliverance. Bass-baritone Dashon Burton made the most of his cameo as Don Fernando, announcing that “The forces of tyranny have been banished. Stretch your hands to your brother.”

Welser-Möst set what seemed like a breakneck tempo for the final chorus, but he spurred his forces on even faster as they jubilantly sang,

Wer ein solches Weib errungen,  
Stimm in unsern Jubel ein!  
Nie wird es zu hoch besungen,  
Retterinn des Gatten seyn.

*Whoever has possessed such a partner of his heart,  
Let him join in our jubilee!  
Never can the praise be too loudly sounded  
Of the wife that is the preserver of her husband!*

This concert version of Fidelio will be presented again on Thursday, May 21 at 7:00 pm and Sunday, May 24 at 3:00 pm Tickets are available [online](#).

Photo by Roger Mastroianni

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