

Beethoven's *Leonore*, with Crucial Cuts in *Fidelio* Restored

By [George Loomis](#), *Musical America*

March 9, 2020



Washington, D.C.-based Opera Lafayette's highly welcome production of Beethoven's *Leonore*, seen on March 4 at Hunter College's Kaye Playhouse, gave Beethoven enthusiasts much food for thought. Even the title raised an issue. Known as *Fidelio*, the opera attained its definitive form in 1814, following versions from 1805 and 1806 (all initially performed in Vienna). Beethoven favored the title *Leonore*, but it was rejected—for fear of confusion with Ferdinando Paer's Italian opera *Leonora* (1804)—in favor of *Fidelio*.

On the rare occasions when one of the earlier versions is offered, the convention is to revert to the title *Leonore*, although that is still unsatisfactory since it doesn't distinguish between the 1805 and 1806 versions. In any case, given the current Beethoven anniversary year, such occasions are no longer rare. A new recording of the 1805 version conducted by René Jacobs was released last fall. The Pittsburgh Symphony recently gave *Leonore* in the 1806 version, and Vienna's Theater an der Wien (where *Fidelio* was first performed) follows suit with that version later this month. For

its new production in February, the Vienna Staatsoper chose the 1805 version. All that already, and it's still early in the year.

In notes to his recording, conductor Jacobs, never one to shirk controversy, flatly declares the 1805 version to be the best of the three. In the current issue of *Opera* magazine, Pittsburgh Music Director Manfred Honeck sides with 1806 (at least vis-à-vis its predecessor). Opera Lafayette chose 1805, thereby enabling one to test Jacobs's pronouncement.

To fill a void in the 1805 score, Opera Lafayette performed a newly composed approximation of Florestan's aria "In des Lebens Frühlingstagen" constructed by conductor and musicologist Will Crutchfield based on Beethoven's sketches, including a near complete draft of vocal and instrumental melody. Included in the valuable program book is a score of the new aria and commentary by Crutchfield that goes into considerable detail.

Beethoven's *Fidelio* revisions, which range from the sweeping to the minuscule, constitute an exception to the rule that operatic revisions are usually made not for artistic reasons but for practical ones, such as cast changes. Yet Beethoven was also driven by practicalities, because

the 1805 version was thought to be too long; hence, the 1806 changes largely involved cuts. Not surprisingly, the 1805 version includes much music not included in the 1814, which was a pleasure to hear, including two entire numbers. Importantly, Opera Lafayette's performance proved that concerns over length were unfounded. It lasted no more than three hours, including an intermission.

Another point in favor of 1805 (as well as 1806), which Opera Lafayette brought out, is that, unlike the final version, dramatic tension is sustained into the finale, because Leonore's rescue of Florestan initially appears to be unsuccessful. Left alone in the dungeon, the two, while joyfully reunited, face death in a magnificent accompanied recitative (deleted in 1814) preceding their duet "O namenlose Freude." Only Don Fernando's subsequent intervention assures their safety.

The new aria fills a void resulting from cannibalization of manuscript material when the 1806 version was fashioned; heretofore, modern 1805 performances of necessity have used the aria's 1806 version. All three versions are cast in the standard slow-fast format. The slow section of the new aria is likely to sound familiar because it makes use of music also heard in the final version.

Crutchfield's task nevertheless required rewriting the slow section, but his main achievement was to restore the first half, in F major, of the original version's fast section, which was known to have flute obbligato. This music, during which Florestan recalls happier days with Leonore, was totally deleted in 1806, leaving just the second half of the fast section, in F minor (expanded to incorporate text from the deleted first half).





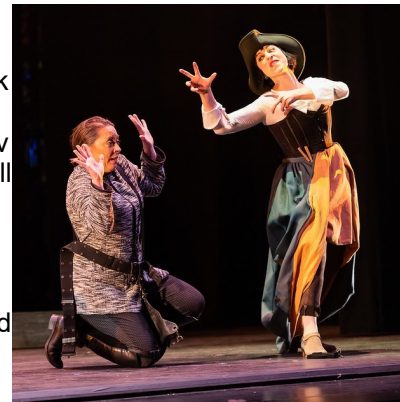
Opera Lafayette's production of *Leonore* at the Kaye Playhouse

We will probably never know exactly what Beethoven composed, but the new aria fits securely and appealingly into its surroundings. In particular, the crucial portion with flute gives the aria a lift that the uniformly somber 1806 version lacks. Fascinatingly, Crutchfield notes Beethoven's musical and dramatic indebtedness to Tamino's *Bildnisarie* in *Die Zauberflöte* for this part of the aria; indeed, stage directions call for Florestan to draw a portrait of Leonore from his breast.

Given the totally new, ecstatic fast section of the 1814 version, in which Florestan experiences a vision of Leonore as an angel, it is logical to infer that Beethoven had regrets about his 1806 abridgment. Crutchfield's aria redresses the matter and deserves to be adopted for future performances of the 1805 version.

If the production, directed by Oriol Tomas, had a familiar look, it is because the sets and costumes, designed by Laurence Mongeau, served in 2017 for Opera Lafayette's performances of Gaveaux's *Léonore*. The sets especially, consisting largely of wires and wooden beams, had the look of economy, but they did the trick. And so did Tomas's direction, even if he didn't resist such flourishes as having Marzeline cradle in her arms an apparent baby as she envisions becoming Fidelio's wife.

Fidelio is a tough piece to cast in this day age, but the singing was never less than competent. Nathalie Paulin's attractive soprano was employed with some restraint early on, but she took greater risks, to good effect, when the drama heated up. Jean-Michel Richer was a sympathetic, expressive Florestan. Tomislav Lavoie and Dominique Côté, each in firm, lean voice, filled the bill handsomely as Rocco and Pizarro, while Pascale Beaudin and Keven Geddes made an attractive couple as Marzeline and Jaquino.



Ryan Brown paced the music surely and drew fine, accomplished playing from his period instrument orchestra. If one left feeling unconvinced by Jacobs's claim that 1805 is the best version of *Fidelio*, you can't blame that on Opera Lafayette. Rather, the feeling was one of gratitude for an engrossing and stimulating evening.

Top photo: Nathalie Paulin in the title role; bottom, Paulin with Pascale Beaudin as Marzeline

Photos by Louis Forget

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