**As Gripping as “The Count of Monte-Cristo”**

*From Felsenstein to Flimm: Beethoven’s Opera “Fidelio” in Film, TV and in DVD by Anja-Rosa Thöming*

A filming of Ludwig van Beethoven’s “Fidelio” should take place in the Chateau d’If, the small fortress island in front of Marseille with the hundred-year-old state prison. The despair of the prisoners that in the novel of Alexandre Dumas senior “The Count of Monte-Cristo” is recounted so vividly, is captured in a highly concentrated musical moment. Beethoven’s only opera, written thirty years before Dumas’ novel, tells the story of the political prisoner Don Florestan, a man who “is barely alive” after years in the dark and who feels he is about to meet God. Both works deal with existential abandonment in prison and with a spectacular liberation against a backdrop of fight for human rights against tyranny.

The agony of the prisoner is musically illustrated in an introduction in f minor with the timpani playing a triton interval, the woodwinds sounding fearfully over the resigned longings of the violins. This scene has been taken by opera directors as the focus of their interpretation. In a controversial production at the Hamburg State Opera, the director Peter Palitzsch showed Florestan as crucified. Certainly a pointed reading, however what better picture could show that Florestan surrenders to the will of God (“He has decreed the measure of my sufferings”) and awaits “the kingdom of Heaven”.

Surprisingly there is only one true opera film of “Fidelio”, the the fascinating, even if abridged, attempt by the Austrian and later East Berlin director Walter Felsenstein (1956, Arthaus). As setting he used a castle with an overgrown park, that in thelight of Spring promises freedom; despite restauration the black and white quality of the film is only moderate. In the prison scene, the camera follows Leonore and Rocco, past instruments of torture, deeper and deeper still to the underground dungeons, till it shown the exhausted Florestan. Reality and dream blur, Opera and Film unite at this juncture.

A curiosity is the 1968 studio version of “Fidelio” from the Hamburg Opera (Arthaus) as its Intendant, Rolf Liebermann, promoted the spread of operas on television. The color film cannot hide the fact that outstanding singers such as Anja Silja, Lucia Popp, Richard Cassily lose their vocal power and immediacy by acting on playback.

More exciting is the performance also for the television of the “Fidelio” of the Deutsche Oper of Berlin in 1963 directed by Rudolf Sellner (black and white, Arthaus). Rarely has one seen and heard the chorus of the prisoners as perfectly played and sung. The staging is freed from any ballast, such sobriety creates intensity. In this it differs fundamentally from the “classic” Vienna production directed by Otto Schenck (Deutsche Grammophon 1978). Furthermore, the Berlin “Fidelio” lives by the outstanding performances of the singers first among them the Leonore of Christa Ludwig. The mezzo-soprano throws herself in the feared soprano role as if her life depended on it. She combines musical and singing expressiveness with unpretentious and truthful acting even in the spoken dialogues.

One should know, however, that director Sellner had been a member of NSDAP[[1]](#footnote-1) since 1933. The “Heil”-chorus before the king’s envoy makes one shudder. The affirmative end of the work with jubilation may be a reason for the deconstruction or deconstruction stand of more recent directorial approaches. In the Zurich “Fidelio” of 2004 (Arthaus, directed by Jurgen Flimm) lots of rifles, pistols, daggers and knives are bandied about but the vengeful Pizarro in a black leather skirt hardly poses any danger. A remarkably flawed production. Nikolaus Harnoncourt brings out from the pulpit the existential dimension of the music but on the stage, out of fear of pathos, all emotions stay flat. Even the first-class Jonas Kaufmann as Florestan lacks the visionary strength in his dungeon: “I see an angel in rosy array/Standing by my side to comfort me”, he sings without a change of color.

More coherent seems the staging of Adolf Dresen for the Royal Opera House of London (1991, Arthaus) in the realistic and poetic set by Margit Bardy. The apotheosis of the liberation at the end takes place on the concrete ground where dozens of women clad in black submit petitions to the Minister.

Opera Lafayette, located in New York (sic), has just released a production on DVD that will give the "Fidelio" reception a thrill. Together with young singers, a period orchestra with natural horns and transverse flutes as well as a small chorus, conductor Ryan Brown realized Beethoven's "Leonore" from 1805, a work that surprises with Mozart's verve and at the same time grounds Beethoven's call for freedom in a contemporary way. In addition to suggestive lighting, director Oriol Tomas relies on true-to-text personal relationships. Neither deconstructivist tendencies nor larger-than-life role models for singers distract - at opera houses between Vienna and Hamburg "Fidelio" was always the stage of vocal efforts. Here the playing is superbly musical and the acting is light hearted, for example by Pascale Beaudin (Marzelline) or the electrifying young singer Jean-Michel Richer as Florestan.

1. NSDP is the acronym for the Nazi party (note by the translator) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)