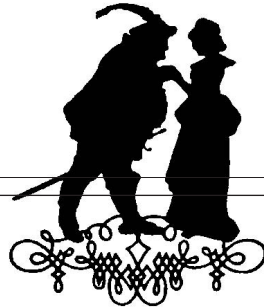


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Two Iconic Works Cross Paths in Chicago: Paër's *Leonora* and Beethoven's *Fidelio*

As a lover of Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, I can't imagine a more interesting time to be alive than in the waning years of the 18th century and the opening few years of the 19th century. This choice might seem an odd one, since Mozart had died in 1791, and the two most popular composers of that century, Domenico Cimarosa (1749-1801) and Giovanni Paisiello (1740-1811), were just finishing up at the time of his death, each with roughly 60 to 80 operas to his credit. Many imagine the gap before the emergence of Rossini, born in 1792, a year after Mozart's death, as a dark hole in operatic history, labeled by Stendhal as an "interregnum," a pause between two periods. But there was much of great operatic interest before 1814, by which time Rossini, having written more than a dozen operas, became the rave.

But I would like to have been around for the many operas leading up to Beethoven's final version of *Fidelio* in 1814. This began with Pierre Gaveaux's 1798 French opera-comique *Léonore, ou L'Amour conjugal*

with a libretto by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly. Recently, in 2017, I had the good fortune to attend a rare production of this early rescue opera when Opera Lafayette, the enterprising company specializing in music of the French Baroque, gave an idiomatic performance in New York of this seminal work. Coming from the French opera-comique milieu and based on a true story from the Reign of Terror, the work indeed spawned a string of works based on this original French libretto about a faithful and heroic wife who risked her life to pluck her beloved husband, unjustly imprisoned, from the claws of tyranny.

First in line following Gaveaux's pioneering work came *Leonora, ossia L'Amor conjogale (Leonora or Conjugal Love)* from a prolific, but lesser-known Italian opera composer of the period, Ferdinando Paër (1771-1839). The opera, an Italian adaptation of Bouilly's French libretto, had its Dresden premiere in 1804, just one year before Beethoven's first version of *Fidelio* (called *Leonore* then) had its premiere in Vienna. Paër's

tuneful Italian opera semiseria then continued to be successful in numerous productions around Europe - at least until 1814, when Beethoven's fourth and final version of his rescue opera, *Fidelio*, finally succeeded and knocked Paër's off the boards. From there it remained in obscurity for almost two centuries. Thus imagine the excitement in October of 2024 when in one town, Chicago, and in just two days, the innovative Chicago Opera Theater would present the North American Premiere of Paër's once-popular *Leonora* while the very next day the venerable Lyric Opera of Chicago aired its production of the iconic rescue opera *Fidelio*. "Oh what a moment," as Beethoven's Leonore exclaims upon her triumph. How could I resist zipping out from Boston to Chicago for the occasion?!



Alex Soare (Giachino); Keely Futterer (Marcellina); Vanessa Becerra (Fede/Leonora); and Joo Won Kang (Rocco) Photo: Michael Brosilow

First up, appropriately, was the straight forward, compelling production of Paër's *Leonora* at Chicago's historic, intimate Studebaker Theatre. Although seemingly an early "rescue opera," it really is more a charming opera semiseria, a serious opera with comic characters and a happy ending. The sparse, stark white set, by Scenic Designer Cameron Anderson, with tiered stairs topped by rows of bright red flowers wonderfully caught the bucolic flavor of the familial first act. But this turned out to be a deceptive façade. In an informative pre-opera discussion, COT General Director Lawrence

Edelson, doubling as Stage Director, pointed to the 2023 award-winning historical film *The Zone of Interest* as a reference for the production's concept. The film depicts the wife of a WWII Auschwitz commandant striving to build a dream life for their family in a house with gardens right next to the camp. It is hard to imagine that just a hair's breadth away from the peaceful, idyllic household were the horrors of the Nazi regime.

So too in the opera, the set in the first act gives only a hint of the grim state prison behind and its brutal governor Pizzarro via just a glimpse of curved barbed wire visible through an open door elevated at the right. On the left in the background stands a large bare tree, with sprigs of green at the end of each branch, a symbol of hope. All else is brightness and light, with little to upset the momentum of the first act's focus on the warm-hearted chief jailor, Rocco, and his extended "family." This group includes his naive daughter, Marcellina, plucking red flowers as she pines for Fedele, disguised wife to the imprisoned Florestano; the young prison aide, Giachino, jealous but hopeful for Marcellina's hand in marriage, repeatedly distracted in his pursuit by knocks on the door; and finally Rocco's adopted "orphan" helper Fedele, alias Leonora, set on rescuing her falsely imprisoned husband if and when she finds him. Ironically, she first enters with freshly purchased chains per Rocco's bidding.

And the first act moves merrily along rather like a singspiel, delightfully so, with various details looking ahead to Beethoven's *Fidelio* (the knock on the door, Leonora entering with chains, and more.) But absent is Beethoven's sublime quartet capping the first scene, which immediately moves his opera to another, almost spiritual, plane. Absent too is the poignant prisoners' chorus toward the end of the act. Indeed, entirely missing in Paër's intimate opera is any chorus whatsoever. But if one puts aside Beethoven and enters into the 18th century, ensemble-rich world of Paër's characters, the rewards are many, especially with musical forces led by acclaimed British conductor Dame Jane Glover, a notably sensitive and expressive conductor for the theater, bringing the theatrical character of Paër's many ensembles to life.

In this cast, with her effervescent charm, perkiness, and glorious voice, coloratura lyric soprano Keely Futterer as Marcellina almost stole the show right from her opening aria as she sung of her love for “Fedele” while picking flowers. No wonder stalwart bass Alex Soare as Giachino couldn’t leave her alone. In Act II, in a duet omitted by Beethoven, she continues to twist the poor boy around her finger, with all the coy allure of Carmen, desperate to have him do her bidding. Thus Paër kept the homey singspiel genre foremost even in the darker prison scene of the second act; he also keeps Marcellina and her boyfriend from being merely “lightweight, charming, not very important,” as Leonard Bernstein labled the two in *Fidelio*, during one of his famous “Young People’s Concerts” in 1970.



Keely Futterer (Marcellina); Alex Soare (Giachino)
Photo: Michael Brosilow

Curiously, in Paër’s opera, Giachino is a bass, whereas the malevolent Don Pizarro is a lighter-voiced tenor, sung with clarion intensity by Matthew Pearce. The reversal in voice types is perhaps a product of the difference between 18th and 19th century casting; in the 18th century, basses were primarily buffo roles,



Matthew Pearce (Don Pizarro); Vanessa Becerra (Fedele/Leonora); and Joo Won Kang (Rocco)
Photo: Michael Brosilow

of which there is a trace in Paër’s Rocco. Conversely, Beethoven’s Pizarro looks ahead to the plethora of darker voices favored in such villainous roles as Verdi’s title character in *Attila*, Boito’s devil in *Mephistopheles*, and Wagner’s Klingsor in *Parsifal*. The kindly Rocco remains a low voice in both operas; in Paër’s *Leonora*, baritone Joo Won Kang brought a jollity to the role, noticeably, for example, in his aria about money being just as important as love in a balanced life.

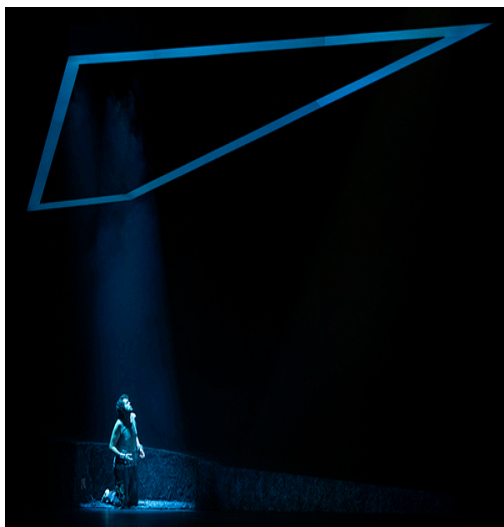
But the truly stellar performance of the night was the radiant young Peruvian-Mexican American soprano Vanessa Becerra as the heroine, Leonora, aka Fedele. Indeed she was especially convincing in this trouser role - a compact, compelling presence as a determined, impassioned Fedele. In her moving first act monologue she sang with secure and glowing tone about how, strengthened by the devotion of true marital love, she could move from sorrow to hope in rescuing

her imprisoned husband. As she sang, sometimes prone, with shades of the rock-like determination of Mozart's Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*, and with the aid of striking crimson lighting around the bare tree in the background by Lighting Designer Josh Epstein, the first act assumed a fleeting serio tone.



Vanessa Becerra (Fedele/Leonora) Photo: Michael Brosilow

Meanwhile, the light tenor role of Paër's Florestano was a perfect fit for esteemed bel canto specialist Edgardo Rocha. His opening Act II monologue, "Ciel! Che profonda oscurità tiranna!" in the dark prison highlighted by a single spotlight, was another poignant



Edgardo Rocha (Florestano) Photo: Michael Brosilow

moment in the opera, especially the mellifluous central section as he reflects longingly on his love for Leonora, with a softly lit image of her in the background. After the brightness of Act I, Act II came as a complete shock, with its pitch-black stage and only a stark triangle of light in the background to break the gloom. This striking shift made Act I seem a mere prelude to the ensuing dramatic events of Act II, beginning with the entrance of Rocco and Leonora with lamp and shovel and their powerful recitative - not melodrama as in Beethoven (spoken dialog against an instrumental background). Later came the moving quartet as Leonora draws her pistol, followed by the off-stage trumpet announcing the arrival of the minister whose inspection will expose the tyranny of Pizarro.



Elza van den Heever (Leonore); Russell Thomas (Florestano)
Photo: Todd Rosenberg

To be sure, the influence of Paër's *Leonora* on Beethoven's *Fidelio* is felt throughout. But the two operas are really worlds apart. For one thing, the two leads in Beethoven's monumental *Fidelio* look ahead to the heroic vocal demands of Wagner, with rich and varied orchestral texture to match. In the Lyric Opera's production, the luminous South African-born lyric-dramatic soprano Elza van den Heever fit the bill well with her statuesque, fervent portrayal of the heroine. As for the orchestra, for example, three obbligato horns in her first-act monologue (as in the contemporary *Eroica Symphony*) helped shift the emphasis as much to the quest of liberty as to that of rescuing a beloved husband. Likewise, Beethoven's

The Prisoners' Chorus of *Fidelio*

Photo: Todd Rosenberg

Florestan is truly a “heroic” Wagnerian tenor, and the stentorian, if at times blustering, Russell Thomas was powerfully expressive in the great opening soliloquy of Act II, warming up in his ecstatic apostrophe to his beloved wife as her vision appears.

Just as the two operas are worlds apart, one Italianate with focus on mellifluous vocals, the other Germanic with stunning orchestral emphasis, so too were the respective productions, one immersed in the familial, the other stretching toward the universal. Rather than the direct simplicity of the COT production, the Lyric Opera’s director, Matthew Ozawa, opted for the monumental with a full-stage rotating set of many layered, barred cells topped with rows and rows of florescent lighting. The contemporarily dressed cast numbered in the hundreds, with silent extras (many children and women) drifting down stairs from the

cells and remaining, sometimes awkwardly, for the famous nine-minute prisoners’ chorus. There was much stage business and occasionally distracting activity throughout from extras, as in the prisoners’ chorus, causing key moments to get lost sometimes. But the final celebratory chorus of brotherhood and freedom, with choral members (now men and women) spread out over every inch of the tiered set, might as well have been the joyous final scene from *Die Meistersinger*.

Bernstein (whose energized performances with the Vienna State Opera in the late 1970’s I still cherish) continued in his eloquent fashion at the above-mentioned Young People’s Concert:

‘Fidelio’ contains some of the most glorious music ever conceived by a mortal, one of the most cherished and revered of all operas, a timeless monument to love, life, and liberty, a celebration of human rights, of freedom to speak out, to dissent.

And who could argue, especially given the Lyric Opera’s majestic performance, both so solid musically under the experienced Conductor and Lyric Music Director Enrique Mazzola and so striking visually, Indeed, the production captured, in Stage Director’s Ozawa’s words, “the power of humanity to defeat tyranny and overcome oppression.”

Yet exiting the theatre, I could not help but think back with a touch of nostalgia to the disarming simplicity of a charming, less flamboyant opera the night before. Paër’s opera certainly had its influence on Beethoven, but it also stands in its own right as a cohesive and endearing ode to married love and, yes, to freedom.