

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born 16 December 1770 in Bonn; died 26 March 1827 in Vienna

Overture to *Fidelio*, Opus 72c (1814)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, 25 May 1814; Kärntnertor Theater; Ludwig van Beethoven, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 1 November 1900, Carnegie Music Hall; Victor Herbert, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 6 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani and strings

The decade (1804-1814) that Beethoven devoted to his only opera, *Fidelio*, was an unprecedented amount of time to spend perfecting such a work during the early 19th century. Given the same ten years, Rossini dispensed 31 (!) operas between 1810 and 1820, and Donizetti cranked out 35 (!!) specimens of the genre from 1827 to 1837. Even Mozart launched seven operas during his decade in Vienna. For Beethoven, however, *Fidelio* was more than just a mere theatrical diversion — it was his philosophy set to music. This story of the triumph of justice over tyranny and love over inhumanity was a document of his faith. To present such grandiose beliefs in a work that would not fully serve them was unthinkable, and so Beethoven hammered and rewrote and changed until he was satisfied.

The most visible remnants of Beethoven's extensive revisions are the quartet of overtures he composed for *Fidelio*. The first version of the opera, written between January 1804 and early autumn 1805, was initially titled *Leonore* after the heroine, who courageously rescues her husband from his wrongful incarceration. For that production, Beethoven wrote the Overture in C major now known as the *Leonore No. 1*, utilizing themes from the opera. The composer's friend and early biographer Anton Schindler recorded that Beethoven rejected this first attempt after hearing it privately performed at Prince Lichnowsky's palace before the premiere. (Another theory, supported by recent detailed examination of the paper on which the sketches for the piece were made, holds that this work was written in 1806-1807 for a projected performance of the opera in Prague that never took place, thus making *Leonore No. 1* the third of the *Fidelio* overtures.) Beethoven then composed a second C major overture, *Leonore No. 2*, and that piece was used at the first performance, on November 20, 1805. (The management of Vienna's Theater-an-der-Wien, site of the premiere, insisted on changing the opera's name from *Leonore* to *Fidelio* to avoid confusion with Ferdinand Paër's *Leonore*.) The opera foundered. Not only was the audience, largely populated by French officers of Napoleon's army, which had invaded Vienna exactly one week earlier, unsympathetic, but there were also problems with *Fidelio*'s dramatic structure. Beethoven was encouraged by his aristocratic supporters to rework the opera and present it again. That second version, for which the magnificent *Leonore Overture No. 3* was written, was presented in Vienna on March 29, 1806, but met with only slightly more acclaim than its forerunner.

In 1814, some members of the Court Theater approached Beethoven, by then Europe's most famous composer, about reviving *Fidelio*. The idealistic subject of the opera had never been far from his thoughts, and he agreed to the project. The libretto was revised yet again, and Beethoven rewrote all the numbers in the opera and changed their order to enhance the work's dramatic impact. The new *Fidelio Overture*, the fourth he composed for his opera, was among the revisions.

The *Fidelio Overture*, whose themes do not derive from the opera, opens with an introduction comprising two contrasting strains of music: a rousing fanfare for the full orchestra and a darkly colored harmonic passage in slow tempo without a definable theme. The work's compact sonata form begins with the fast tempo and the announcement by the solo horn of the main theme, based on the fanfare motive from the introduction. The fleet second theme is presented quietly by the strings following an energetic climax. The tiny central section, based on the fanfare motive, is less a true development than a transition to the recapitulation of the themes. A rousing coda, separated from the body of the Overture by a return of the slow harmonies of the introduction, brings this noble work to a stirring close.