

The Appeal of *Leonore**

DVD Ludwig van Beethoven – *Leonore*

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In no other work except the *Ninth Symphony* did Beethoven better express his love of freedom and his faith in brotherhood. It was not until the centenary of its creation that the score of this original version of *Fidelio* was published, which allowed Richard Strauss to conduct the work. Bern presented it in 2012. In November 2017, René Jacobs performed it in Baden-Baden, then at the Philharmonie de Paris ([The Pleasure of discovery](#) ; [Nothing beats the original](#)), and it was finally recorded.

While *Fidelio* is a Viennese specialty, the work has long been acclimatized across the Atlantic. The present achievement would attest to this if need be. This evening, most of the singers come from Canada. They are all familiar with Opera Lafayette and its conductor. In 2017, the same performers gave us the *Léonore* of Pierre Gaveaux, which preceded that of Beethoven by seven years ([Fi de Fidelio](#)). A somewhat obsolete cousin, since the two find their common origin in Bouilly's lacrimal rescue opera. It is true that we owe to Opera Lafayette and **Ryan Brown** the rediscovery of many French *opéras-comiques*.

Although part of the Mozart-Gluck-French *opéra-comique* lineage, this first version is truly modern. The work is unbalanced (the 3rd act is as long as the first two), its style is hybrid, divided between the Mozartian heritage and the emergence of the Beethovenian drama. But here, there is no break between the spirit of the *singspiel* and the pathetic. The transition feels natural. The first appearance of Pizarro, which most frequently marks the change, is not as contrasted as usual. Here, the character has the vulgar brutality of a junior officer. His mustache and his lock (deliberate?), the angry hysteria of his first aria ("*Die Rache*") refer to the caricature of Charlie Chaplin's *The Dictator*, we will come back to that.

The single decor is limited to a few wooden structures. The accessories are reduced to the minimum, the costumes – somewhat simple – are enough to characterize each one, the lighting is sketchy and only the final scene takes on some visual relief. Simple but effective are the stage production as well as the actor direction. The interest is elsewhere. The team, because it is indeed a team, familiar with ensemble playing, is closely-knit, complicit, without any major weakness.

The reading is lively, literal, with no added intention. The solid experience of the French repertoire of *opéras-comiques* provided by Opéra Lafayette, its artists and its conductor, is the pledge of scrupulous fidelity to the work, stylistically, vocally and instrumentally. The lean orchestra, with just the right numbers, plays on period instruments. Many of its musicians, such as oboist Marc Schachman, are accomplished soloists. Ryan Brown, always attentive to each and everyone, lives the tragedy. He imbues his orchestra with vigor, transparency and balance with his flexible and tense direction. All of this lives, breathes and moves us.

Nathalie Paulin's Leonore convinces from her first intervention. Let's set aside her advantageous physique, which affects the plausibility of the attraction she exerts on Marzelline. The voice is full throughout the range, round, of an admirable line, not only the sung voice, but also the spoken voice, well-sounding in its low register. She plays her life and is totally invested in her character. The intensity, the confidence and the poetry are poignant. And, not to spoil anything, her German is clearly superior to that of most of her partners. **Pascale Beaudin**, Marzelline, is an exquisite maid. The voice is agile, spicy and the few small lags at the beginning are quickly forgotten. Her original freshness and her acting are also convincing.

Florestan is entrusted to **Jean-Michel Richer**, a clear and expressive voice, but altered by an unstable emission, with a constant vibrato, unless these effects are intended to translate the weakness of the character. His German does not help, either. A beautiful Jaquino is sung by **Keven Geddes**, a young voice, rich in colors, Mozartian without sentimentality. **Stephen Hegedus**, who is usually appreciated in the baroque repertoire, plays a powerful Rocco, unambiguous, but perfectly credible. Mozartian, obviously, during the first two acts, he finds the required colors when Pizarro sets out to accomplish his crime. A high-quality performance. Pizarro is puzzling (his furious *Die Rache* could be sung by Osmin): a vulgar villain, devoid of any nobility. The voice is easily projected during the trio "Euch werde Lohn", but one wonders about the composition of the character. The contrast is glaring with Don Fernando (**Alexandre Sylvestre**), of aristocratic authority, imbued with justice and kindness. His two interventions are so many moments of joy.

The ensembles, from the smallest duet to the quartets and finals, are perfectly tuned and reflect familiarity and mutual listening. The balance favors the voices, and despite their qualities, it's a shame, because the orchestra alone (the Overture, quite naturally, and the introduction of the third act), or in support, deserves all our admiration. For example, in Leonore's recit and aria "Ach bricht noch nicht" from Act II, the playing of the winds is ideal and enhances the line and agility of the singing, fully participating in the dramatic progression.

The chorus never demerits, it is balanced, precise, responsive, nuanced. Obviously, sixteen choristers cannot compete with the numbers of the choruses of the biggest stages. But we must be closer to the sonic truth expected by Beethoven than to these marvelous machines. "O welche Lust" leaves us a bit unsatisfied, musically and dramatically too. The expected light is not there. But the guards who accompany Pizarro, and the choirs of the grand finale of Act III reconcile us fully with these excellent singers, including the two prisoners.

The spontaneous applause, since the recording was made in a public performance, invades the sound track somewhat, but – in these times when our stages are closed – this reminds us how much lyric theater is a matter of sharing and communion.

To conclude, a welcome *Leonore* (especially since it is the only video available, it seems), served by a committed team, in the interpretation closest to what it should have been in 1805. The work – very different in its organization, in its writing – deserves to be better known, making it possible to measure the composer's development over ten years. The main criticism voiced at its creation concerned its length. Listening to it belies this observation, and allows us to discover

some arias and ensembles of the best Beethoven, of which the 1814 version was deprived. To be retained.

(*) In the original: “La pelle de Leonore” a pun on “*l’appel*” (the appeal) and “*la pelle*” (the shovel), explained in a footnote as follows: “Before aiming her gun at Pizarro, Leonore disarms him with a blow from a shovel, a welcome gesture in the dramatic context.”