

# Indecision Time

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Of the many genres in which Beethoven worked, opera seems to have given him the greatest difficulties. It is not that he lacked the capacity for musical drama – as most of his purely instrumental works attest – but rather that his sense of drama as something continuous, intense and unstoppable didn't quite fit with the elaborate plots, closed forms and spoken dialogue considered the norm of German-language operatic expression at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although *Fidelio*, in its final form, would go on to secure its place in the standard repertoire, it remains a work fascinating more for its uncontainable spirit than its willingness to play by the rules.

Some of its structural imbalance can be attributed to the opera's complex genesis: it began as the three-act *Leonore*, and the first act, with its minor characters and romantic subplots, can seem insubstantial when set against the highly-focussed narrative of struggle-and-redemption that defines Act Two. The new production of *Fidelio* at the Deutsche Oper – directed by David Hermann and conducted by Sir Donald Runnicles – decided to tackle the problems of form and balance by blasting through the opera as quickly as possible. The spoken dialogue was reduced to only a few lines – and omitted entirely between some numbers – and the music was pushed forward at a frantic pace. The result was a production that felt uneasy less for the implied violence of the libretto (or the real violence of the staging) than for a hurried pace that left little room for reflection.



Beethoven: *Fidelio*. Donald Runnicles, conductor. David Hermann, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, november 2022. ©

Hermann, *Fidelio*  
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**Berlin, viernes,  
25 de noviembre  
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Oper Berlin.

Beethoven: *Fidelio*.

David Hermann, director. Ingela Brimberg (Leonore), Robert Watson (Florestan), Jordan Shanahan (Don Pizarro), Albert Pesendorfer (Rocco), Sua Jo (Marzelline), Gideon Poppe (Jaquino), and Thomas Lehman (Don Fernando). Choir and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Sir Donald Runnicles, conductor



Mr Hermann's staging was set in a space that suggested a prison in outline, even if the prisoners, all wearing oversized papier-mâché face masks, pushed it into the realm of the unreal. It nonetheless evoked a mood of gloom and despair: the curtain rose on Marzelline and Jaquino scrubbing down a dead body (which was later pushed into the large, seemingly bottomless pit at the centre of the stage), and even the nominally friendly encounters between Fidelio and Rocco contained a barely suppressed violence that one felt could erupt at any moment. It was a promising starting point: even if the

characters never quite settled into plausibility – Pizarro was little more than a cartoon villain and the staging couldn't seem to decide if Rocco should be sinister or benevolent – the opening scenes established a convincing unease.

That mood continued into the first part of the second act, set in the large cavernous space at the bottom of the pit. Then, in the finale, Mr Hermann attempted a sudden left turn that destroyed the credibility of the staging in a single stroke. There were, admittedly, a few intriguing ideas: the notion that Florestan, half-starved and imprisoned in total darkness, might have turned somewhat feral was a reasonable alternative to the usual narrative of noble suffering; and the fact that he might be more angry than grateful towards Don Fernando – who could, after all, have been a bit more active in finding out what happened to his 'friend' – had a certain logic. But in its final quarter-hour, the staging couldn't decide if it wanted to pivot to a happy ending or pursue its own dark mood (a direction that the music simply would not support). Rather than choosing a direction, the staging ended up breaking from the strain of its own indecision.

The lack of firm tone and clear direction was compounded by the arrival of the choir as a group of moderately well-dressed spectators held back from the main action by a cordon; they clearly belonged to a different narrative universe than the rest of the staging, and while they were obviously there to make some kind of conceptual point, no one involved in the production seemed to know what to do with them. Their actions in the final chorus – breaking through the cordon in an attempt to apprehend the characters, doing a kind of slow-motion jazz-handy dance, then freezing entirely, giving the characters a chance to escape their clutches – weren't merely incoherent, they were silly ... and they had the effect of devaluing everything that had come before.



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One must assume that the sudden rupture of the conclusion was intentional. Mr Hermann has, in the past, knowingly 'ruined' the tone of his own stagings in the service of some larger argument (his Dresden *Ariadne*, in which the climactic duet was destroyed by the arrival on stage of a group of bourgeois dinner guests taking selfies with the singers, offered an instructive comparison, although that at least had some basis in the opera's frame narrative). Here, however, it did not seem as though Mr Hermann was wilfully subverting the staging, so much as fumbling it. Not only did it render the final scene deeply unsatisfactory, but it forced one, in the final moments, to reconsider the quality of the staging as a whole: had the uncertainty of tone in the first act been intentional, or was it simply careless handling of the scenario.

The difficulties of the staging were compounded by an oddly perfunctory approach to the music. Although Sir Donald Runnicles found a good balance between the alternately relaxed and driven passages of the overture, he had a tendency to press many of the first act scenes forward at uncomfortably brisk speeds. Rocco's 'Gold' aria needed more space to establish its paternal feeling, 'Komm, Hoffnung' sped by with only a passing glance at its

emotional complexity, and the first act finale offered little chance for the male choir to savour their moment of freedom; only the first act quartet was given the luxury of building naturally to its peak. The driven pace was perhaps better-suited to the dramatic focus of the second act – the quartet, especially, found a good middle ground between vocal ensemble and forward momentum – but one was too often left with the sense of a breathless dash through the score.



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As Leonore, Ingela Brimberg gave the evening its dominant voice. If the pace of ‘Komm, Hoffnung’ didn’t allow her quite enough space for the cultivation of nuance, she was nonetheless able to summon convincing emotional turmoil. But she was at her best in the ensembles, in which she was invariably the commanding presence: she established a subtle preeminence in the first act trio with her strident voice cutting against the relative complacency of Rocco and Marzelline, but was most compelling as the driving force behind the dramatic second act quartet. In terms of stage charisma, Ms Brimberg’s only equal was the Rocco of Albert Pesendorfer, who managed to remain likeable despite the staging’s vaguely sinister vision of the character. Although forced to rush

through the ‘Gold’ aria, his rapid-fire dialogue with Fidelio in the first act finale and the gloomy tension of the grave-digging scene possessed some of the evening’s rare moments of character drama.

Despite a physically compelling performance, Robert Watson spent much of Florestan’s monologue struggling against the weight of the orchestra; while there were a handful of nicely phrased moments, the scene never quite took flight. Jordan Shanahan, a late replacement for Markus Brück, approached the role of Pizarro with plenty of energy and villainous flourishes, but his voice seemed an odd match for the role and the character never emerged as a genuine threat. However Thomas Lehman used his brief appearance to sketch the outline of an intriguingly ambiguous Fernando; Gideon Poppe, while suffering the fate of all Jaquinos – effectively written out of the plot midway through the first act – nonetheless made a notable contribution to the first act quartet; and Sua Jo, after freeing herself from Jaquino’s pawing in the opening duet, delivered Marzelline’s lone aria with pleasingly understated grace. In the few moments when the singers, orchestra and staging came together, one was reminded of *Fidelio*’s potential for greatness; but on this evening such instances were too brief (and too spread-out) to offset the prevailing unevenness.