Beethoven's 'Fidelio' at C=256: more of the mass than the opera

by Kathy S. Wolfe

Ludwig van Beethoven's sole opera, *Fidelio,* "has more of the mass than the opera to it," the great conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler wrote, for it proclaims that there is a divine spark in man, a "sacred . . . religion of humanity." This spark makes man forever free, lifting him above the beasts, and above the power of any chains on Earth.

The Schiller Institute's Jan. 21 concert-presentation of *Fidelio* at New York City's Alice Tully Hall, sung by the Lubo Opera Company and conducted by Anthony Morss with Philip Levin's 18th-Century Ensemble orchestra, powerfully demonstrated this simple truth.

Fidelio, composed 1802-15, is exceptional among 19th-century operas for its assertion of cultural optimism: the idea that God has constructed the universe according to moral law, and that man can *know* this law, and thereby control his destiny. Law No. 1 is that God is good; therefore, the universe is good, and good men can defeat evil—if they are courageous. As Beethoven put it, in his "Heiligenstadt Testament" written at the onset of his deafness, "I shall speak, out of my silence. . . . Mankind, help yourself, for you are able!"

The Schiller Institute made history by reinstating Beethoven's pitch of C=256 (A=430) for the first time this century, as proposed by former presidential candidate Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. Since Beethoven used this pitch precisely because he considered it God's law for music, there can be no true *Fidelio* without it.

Morss and ensemble went further, however, than the letter of the law. In this day of soap opera, with moral law out of fashion, the opera houses reduce *Fidelio* to a Wagnerian outpouring of homogenized sound, another tragic saga of the cruelty of life, a musical "Rambo."

Instead, the Schiller Institute concert brought the beauty of the human voices together with the uniquely human tones of Levin's 18th-century instruments, to a stunning result: musical transparency. The distinct musical voices, the differentiated, human ideas, with which Beethoven constructed his mass, could actually be heard, for the first time since the death of Brahms. This, combined with the sight of such diverse musicians, assembled with a purpose, to such highly developed end, was an overwhelming testament to the divine power of the human spirit.

Patriots in East Germany today, fighting for the dignity of the individual human mind against terrifying odds, trace their movement and their moral strength directly back to that of Furtwängler, an ardent anti-Nazi. The Schiller Institute program quoted the great conductor's 1948 statement on *Fidelio*:

"Now that political events in Germany have restored to the concepts of human dignity and liberty their original significance, this opera . . . gives us comfort and courage. . . . That which moves us is not a material effect, nor the fact of imprisonment: Any film could create the same effect. No, it is the music, it is Beethoven himself. It is this 'nostalgia of liberty' he feels . . . which brings us to tears. His *Fidelio* has more of the mass than the opera to it: The sentiments come from the sphere of the sacred, and preach a religion of humanity which we never found so beautiful or necessary as we do today."

The nominal plot of the opera is important enough; it proves that Beethoven was no Sunday moralizer. He openly defied the crowned heads of Europe, by relating the story of the French republican Lafayette, hero of the American Revolution, freed from prison by his wife Adrienne. Beethoven's heroine, Leonore, disguises herself as the boy Fidelio, to take a job in the prison where her husband, Florestan, is held. Beethoven immortalized the evil British Prime Minister William Pitt, who demanded Lafayette's chaining, in the character of the prison governor Pizarro.

Thus, at the outset Beethoven raised the fundamental question of all human moral law: What sort of love is it, which risks life itself, selflessly, for the beloved? The biblical term or label used for this sort of love is *agapē,* as described by St. Paul in Corinthians I:13. Beethoven, however, was not out to label soup cans. He constructed *Fidelio* as a whole, as the answer to this question. He proves, with a geometer's rigor, that the human mind has been so constructed by God, that, with courage, it will grow toward *agapē,* toward the Divine.

That is, liberty for what? For the dignity of man.

This proof is what this reviewer heard, after decades of *Fidelios*, recorded and live, for the first time here.

Instruments close to human voice

Beethoven proceeds by forcing us to witness the development of the human mind itself. He shows the emotions of the child, then of the simple adult, then of the heroic adult, and finally of the pure lover of God. Each of these distinct emotion-states is associated with a *distinct type* of human voice—for example, a light soprano versus a heavier dramatic soprano—and also with a distinct quality of voice in the orchestral instruments—for example, a flute versus a clarinet, or the winds versus the strings or the brass.

From the opening bars of the overture, with nary a singer, it was the differentiation *between* the types of instruments in the original-instrument orchestra, which hit one like lightning. The instruments, simply, sounded like human voices. Morss, who has evidently learned a great deal from Furtwängler's recordings of *Fidelio,* is not Furtwängler, but he had something Furtwängler didn't have: the right instruments.

It was far, far more than just the fact that the lower pitch made each separate instrumental voice more full—which it did. This was like the scene in "The Wizard of Oz," when Dorothy's house falls into Munchkin land, and the film, previously black and white in the drab Kansas segment, shifts suddenly into Living Color. Your modern orchestra is black and white, and you don't realize it, until you hear color!

This reviewer never realized before, that Beethoven has constructed the entire opera, overture first, around this. The overture counterposes four bars of full orchestra, to a series of different wind solos: first horns, then clarinets, then bassoons, then oboes. With Levin's ensemble, each of the four had a totally different color, for the first time. Then, these were counterposed against the warmer *tutti* of the strings.

Many of the orchestral players had never before had the opportunity to play much Beethoven, since "original" instruments have generally been restricted up to now to the Baroque repertoire. Their enjoyment was visible on their faces. True, they made some bloops and squeaks; but the blame should be placed on the idiots who designed the modern instruments, which admit inferior technique and make instruction on the real thing—and performances—so rare.

Beethoven's real voicing only hit home, however, after the opening soprano-tenor duet after the overture. The human voices, too, were meant to be differently colored—to work with the differentiated instruments.

Development into humanity

Beethoven begins with the mind of the child, the duet revealing the emotions of Marzelline, the jailkeeper's teenage daughter—a light soprano—and her adolescent boyfriend, the turnkey Jaquino—a light tenor. In the midst of tragedy, the audience is made to laugh at Marzelline's notion of love, for she has fallen for a woman, Leonore, disguised as Fidelio. As a kitten might run between food dishes, she transfers her affections, located mainly below the belt, from Jaquino to Fidelio.

Well, this is not love. As LaRouche has pointed out, true classical drama is never pathetic, but always slightly ironic.

The shocker at the Schiller Institute concert, however, was that with the right instruments at the right pitch, one could hear how Beethoven had coordinated certain comic woodwind passages, with the "childish" voices of Marzelline and Jaquino.

Next comes the jailer, father Rocco, who is more grown up, but who does love his money and his comfort: a deeper voice, a bass. Blind to the reality that his faithful servant, Fidelio, is a woman, he plans to marry Fidelio to his daughter. That isn't love, either.

Then comes the disguised heroine, Fidelio, a darker, dramatic soprano, in agony ("O namenlose Pein!"). Yet another, distinct, emotion-state. Their first quartet, the much-hackneyed "Mir ist so wunderbar," was a revelation. Four totally distinct human voices, supported by totally distinct orchestral voices! After the comedy of the woodwinds in the teenage duet, the quartet's opening viola passage was an unexpectedly warm, intense contrast. Jodi Laski-Mihova sang a rich Fidelio, and Maryann Polesinelli's Marzelline soared over the ensemble.

In sum, we were merely getting what was ordered, after a 100-year wait. Some of what occurred even surprised Morss—but that's the joy of scientific experiment. I was especially struck by the richer contrast of the horns and the soprano in Mrs. Laski-Mihova's beautiful Leonore aria in E major, the same key as the overture. The soprano instinctively tried to take a broader tempo, but Morss went on, too fast. By the time Beethoven reached his pinnacle in Act I, the Prisoners' Chorus, enough space had been created for an even broader tempo; again, Morss was too quick.

Act II was even better—but, as Pizarro says, my time is up, so two final notes. With these instruments and with good voices at this pitch, the dungeon quartet in which Leonore reveals herself, shows the density of contrapuntal singularities of Beethoven's late string quartets. By this point, the audience had realized that Leonore's level of selfless love for Florestan, associated with her instrumentation, is a far higher emotion-state than any on stage.

Beethoven, however, is not done. At the momemnt when the minister hands her the key to unlock Florestan's shackles, Leonore turns, not to anyone on Earth, but to Heaven. "O God!" she sings, "what an instant," and the orchestra beneath makes an instantaneous, radical shift, from A to F, such that a great light seems to break through the sky above the scene. The transformation is indeed instantaneous, the same sort of transformation which occurs in the mass, during the taking of the sacrament. This is the quality of love embodied in the death and resurrection of Christ, as Furtwängler indicated.