PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Overture to Fidelio

Beethoven began to compose Fidelio in 1804, and he completed the score the following year. The first performance was given on November 20, 1805, at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna. Beethoven revised the score in preparation for a revival that opened there on March 29, 1806. For a new production in 1814, he made substantial revisions and wrote the overture performed at these concerts. The overture wasn’t ready in time for the premiere on May 23, 1814, in Vienna’s Kärntnertor Theater, but it was played at the second performance. The overture calls for an orchestra consisting of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately six minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Beethoven’s Overture to Fidelio were given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 14 and 15, 1894, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances of the overture (and the complete opera) were given at Orchestra Hall on May 26, 28, and 31, 1998, with Daniel Barenboim conducting. The Orchestra first performed this overture at the Ravinia Festival on July 16, 1938, with Willem van Hoogstraten conducting, and most recently on July 30, 2008, with Sir Andrew Davis conducting.

Nothing else in Beethoven’s career caused as much effort and heartbreak as the composition of his only opera, which took ten years, inspired four different overtures, and underwent two major revisions and a name change before convincing Beethoven that he was not a man of the theater.

The history of the four overtures to Fidelio—or Leonore, the title Beethoven originally chose and always preferred—is nearly as complicated as that of the opera itself. Their sequence is further confused by the numbers mistakenly given to them after the fact, so that Beethoven’s first effort is now known as Leonore no. 2 and his second as no. 3. (An overture written for a production in Prague that never took place was discovered after Beethoven’s death, mistaken for his earliest effort, and called Leonore no. 1, thereby setting up this entire series of wrong numbers.) The Fidelio overture performed at these concerts is Beethoven’s final word on the subject.

Both of Beethoven’s first efforts—Leonore overtures nos. 2 and 3—are highly impressive works, but each made the mistake of providing too much music for the task at hand, which was, after all, simply to quiet the crowd, raise the curtain, and set the stage for the drama to follow. Instead, both of these two overtures presented a drama all its own.

When, in 1814, when the Kärntnertor Theater wanted to mount a revival of Fidelio, prompted by a “sudden and boundless popularity of Beethoven’s music,” in the words of Alexander Thayer, the composer’s biographer. (Half of the public concerts held for the composer’s benefit in his lifetime were given that year.) In 1814, with Napoleon just defeated, the opera took on fresh meaning, as it has continued to do ever since, as each age reads this work in light of the reports of tyranny and acts of heroism in the current headlines. Beethoven jumped at the chance to revise the score—he warned the management that there would be many changes—and to write yet another overture. As it turned out, he could not finish the overture in time for the opening, and so the overture to Fidelio, as it is known today, was actually premiered at the second performance.
With his final attempt at composing music to open his opera, Beethoven found an ideal solution—the overture to Fidelio is shorter and lighter than either of the two Leonore overtures, and it leads to the opera’s first number, rather than upstaging it (it also is in E major, the dominant of the opera’s first key, while the Leonore overtures are in C major, the opera’s final tonal destination). The Fidelio overture may be less important as stand-alone music, but it is perfect stagecraft. Fidelio was at last a public success, and Beethoven felt momentarily vindicated, although after all he had been through he could not be blamed for complaining that “this whole opera business is the most tiresome affair in the world.”

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

**For the Record**

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Beethoven’s Overture to Fidelio in 1955 with Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA. The Orchestra recorded the complete opera in 1979 with Sir Georg Solti conducting for London. A 1967 performance with Jean Martinon conducting is included on *From the Archives*, vol. 12: A Tribute to Jean Martinon.

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