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Lang's *prisoner*: Freedom Chained In *Fidelio*'s Prism

By Nancy Malitz

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NEW YORK – The first thing you notice is the fencing – the menacing kind, tall and barbed, that keeps captives in. The room is dark. You can hear water dripping. At the front is an elevated platform, where gray blankets obscure yellow-jacketed sleeping prisoners. The title of the show is [*prisoner of the state*](#). The aspect is bleak. There will be other surprises.

It's not an easy thing to turn a concert hall into an opera theater, much less to sustain a dreamlike musical state in which listeners can meditate upon powerful ideas eroding human dignity. But in dimly lit [David Geffen Hall](#) at Lincoln Center, where the [New York Philharmonic](#) gave the world premiere of [David Lang's](#) contemporary response to [Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*](#) on June 6, a vibrant ensemble effort in a production conceived and directed by [Elkhanah Pulitzer](#) encouraged receptivity to something different. (The project is a co-commission; the rolling world premiere, with projected video, will ultimately make its way to Rotterdam, London, Bochum, and Bruges.)



'prisoner of the state,' Lang's 'Fidelio'-inspired opera, transforms David Geffen Hall. (Photos by Chris Lee)

Lang's *prisoner of the state* often felt like a sacred oratorio as it riddled and repeated short phrases that conceptually dissolved the lines between "freedom" and imprisonment, between us and them. The premiere was part of a larger New York Philharmonic project called "[Music of Conscience](#)," which also included a late May revival of [John Corigliano's Symphony No. 1](#), composed in 1990 in response to the [AIDS crisis](#).

Both concerts reflected an apparent effort to provide direct context for a sophisticated audience that is no longer assumed to be made up entirely of people who have played an instrument or had rigorous music history training, but who nonetheless bring a rich cultural and theatrical experience to bear. Corigliano spoke for more than 10 minutes about his AIDS symphony, making abundant cultural connections without referring even once to technical jargon or technique. And in *prisoner of the state*, the Philharmonic players were garbed in gray and clearly part of the dramatic action, split to the left and right off a narrow onstage alley. Why not? Stage and screen blend such context all the time and are no less relevant. The philosophy of the orchestra's president and CEO [Deborah Borda](#) and first-year music director [Jaap van Zweden](#) couldn't be clearer: We're in a new era.



Julie Mathevet, as an assistant in disguise, grips her imprisoned husband's hand.

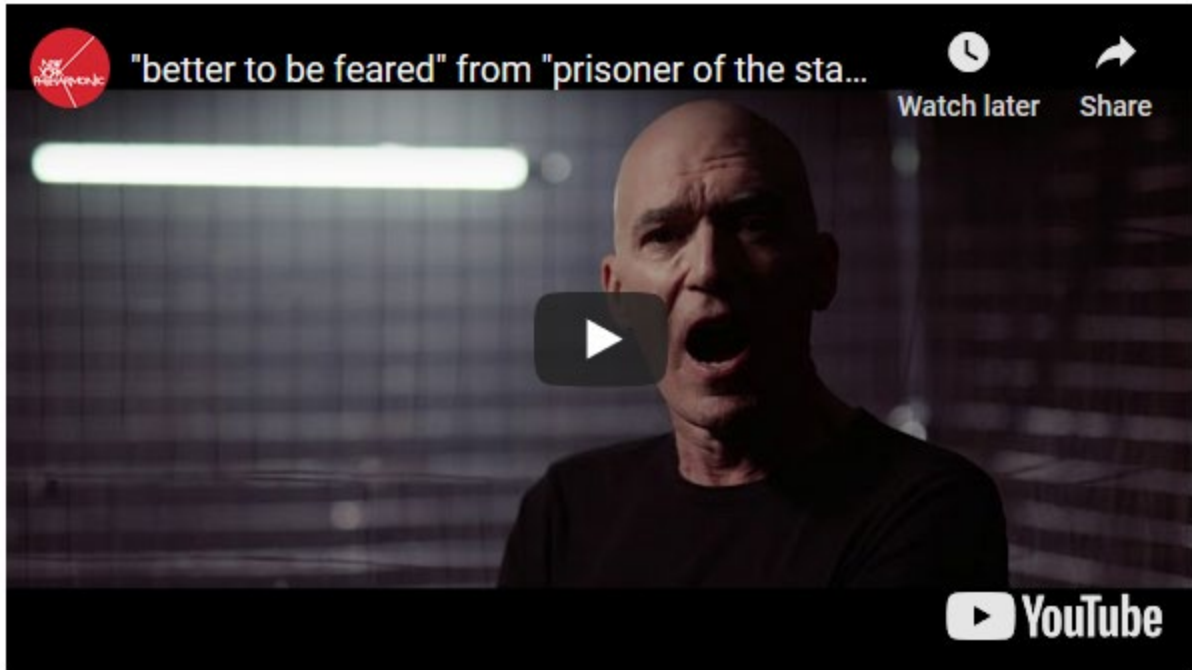
In Beethoven's opera, it is Leonore who rescues her unjustly imprisoned husband from certain death, and the music's extraordinary cry for liberty has the purity of blinding light. Lang's powerful new work – for which he wrote the libretto – responds to that message while pruning the plot twists and 19th-century conventions that tend to get in the way. We are left with a prisoner (baritone [Jarrett Ott](#)), who has been gone so long that he and hundreds like him (men of the [Concert Chorale of New York](#)) are all but buried alive. His desperate wife (soprano [Julie Mathevet](#)) puts on an adolescent's disguise and becomes the assistant of an avuncular jailer (bass-baritone [Eric Owens](#)). Their attempt is interrupted by the governor of the state (tenor [Alan Oke](#)), who festers with furious insistence that the prisoner has not suffered nearly enough, and wants to see him dead.



A jailer (Eric Owens) advises his assistant: Don't work without pay.

When the lights go up, the wife, dressed as a boy, sings of the toll of her husband's absence: "I don't remember his face, I don't remember his name, I don't remember his love, but I remember I was a woman once." Hers is the first of Lang's many minimalist repetitions that ramp up with shifted color and double meaning. Mathevet's plaintively sung grave-digging number "What if he's mine?" becomes "What if he isn't mine?"

Owens, who was riveting as the "Everyman" jailer, explains that gold is "the love you hold tightest in your arms, in your purse, in your bed. When I get enough, I'll be gone." It builds with the timeless gravitas of a chaconne. The orchestra under van Zweden provided a gorgeous threnody, as well as parodistic pomp. The men in prison, who often sang to the rhythm of a beating heart, incanted their confessions and protestations in the dark: "They say I had a knife (But I didn't), They say I had a gun (I did have a gun)."



Oke, dripping with honey as the governor in urgent need of the prisoner's death, stole the show in his slow waltz through Machiavellian rhetoric, to eerie winds and whistling harmonics: "Better to be feared than to be loved." Lang's music doesn't shy from necessary whips and snaps, but they do not seem like mere sound effects. They are part of the psychological texture. The ending leaves room for doubt.



Composer David Lang takes a bow for ‘prisoner of the state.’

In recent years there have been a number of projects created for symphony orchestra venues that went beyond the standard opera-in-concert model. Esa-Pekka Salonen’s [City of Light](#) performances of Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* in London, Los Angeles, and elsewhere come to mind. But Lang’s thoughtful new work, ambitiously prepared for a modern audience, is representative of a New York Philharmonic season that seemed focused on changing the listeners’ experience – whether it involved planting musicians in their midst ([Ashley Fure’s Filament](#)) or dealing with events such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire ([Julia Wolfe’s Fire in my mouth](#)). For next season, the Philharmonic has announced [a double bill](#) of Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* and Bartok’s *Bluebeard’s Castle* that will similarly rethink the concert experience.

Nancy Malitz is the publisher of Chicago on the Aisle. She was the founding music critic at USA Today and a cultural columnist for the Detroit News. She has written about the arts for The New York Times and a variety of other national publications.