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prisoner of the state

By Fred Cohn

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Julie Mathevet as The Assistant, Jarrett Ott as The Prisoner and Eric Owens's The Jailer (background) in Elkhana Pulitzer's production of David Lang's *prisoner of the state* at the New York Philharmonic
Photo by Chris Lee

In *prisoner of the state*, his stirring adaptation of *Fidelio*, David Lang sets up a dialogue with Beethoven, resonating across the centuries. For most of its seventy-five-minute length, the new work, which had its world premiere at the New York Philharmonic on June 6 at David Geffen Hall, hews surprisingly close to *Fidelio*'s scenario, but Lang's setting invites us to look at the story through contemporary eyes. The libretto, by the composer himself, mirrors the familiar plot almost scene-by-scene, although shorn of both the demi-comic Marzelline/Jaquino subplot and the jubilant finale. Lang does not allow for smiles, and he verges off from *Fidelio* at the climax, ending his in a mode of present-day outrage.

When "The Assistant" (Leonore) brandishes her gun, she shoots "The Governor" (Pizarro), but the bullets have no effect and the Governor snatches the weapon away from her. The story stops at this point; from here on in, the characters become mouthpieces, announcing the work's essential argument. We hear an offstage trumpet, announcing the approach of "the inspectors," i.e., Don Fernando's forces, but the governor sings "In a better world/The inspectors would arrive ... How can you think that there is a better world?" In the final chorus, the cast addresses the audience directly: "In here/You see the chains ... If you can see us/We can be free." The words command us to consider the plot's latter-day relevance, and to consider the prisoners in our midst. In this context, "The Prisoner" (Florestan) might well be a Guantánamo detainee; perhaps Mohamedou Salahi, kept in politically motivated solitary confinement for fourteen years.

Despite the overt didacticism, *prisoner of the state* never becomes tendentious, due to Lang's powerful music. His score intersects with Beethoven's only at a few key points: the sunlit orchestration of the prisoners' "O what desire" casts the chorus as a postmodern version of "O Welche Lust"; The Prisoner's lament "Uhhh. So dark" draws on the vein of lyricism that runs through Florestan's aria; The Assistant's "I am his wife!" echoes Leonore's outcry at the same dramatic moment. Elsewhere, Lang offers few of the melodic blandishments of the Beethoven original. His score often proceeds largely in hammer-stroke ostinatos, supremely lucid but harsh, the transparent orchestral textures saving the music from bombast. The whole is remarkably economical, its brief length and stripped-down dramaturgy letting it deliver its polemical charge with stunning impact.

Elkhana Pulitzer's production, with Matt Saunders' sets, placed the principals on a makeshift stage built out from the orchestral platform; the orchestra sat behind them, with the chorus on a balcony at the rear. At moments, Adam Larsen's projections embellished the stage picture. Despite the trickiness and unconventionality of the presentation, the staging was completely straightforward, giving the sense that we weren't watching a director's take on the material, but simply *prisoner of the state* itself.



Alan Oke as The Governor in prisoner of the state
Photo by Chris Lee

The work is due to travel to Rotterdam, London, Barcelona, Bochum and Bruges, but it is hard to imagine subsequent performances bettering the Philharmonic's presentation. The orchestra, under its music director Jaap van Zweden, played as a huge chamber ensemble; the work of the men of the Concert Chorale of New York, under the direction of Donald Nally, was forceful but always mellifluous. Mark Grey's sound design produced none of the distortion you'd associate with amplification; instead, it kept vocal and instrumental forces in unerring balance..

I was surprised to read that Julie Mathevet, who played the Prisoner, lists Zerbinetta and the Queen of the Night among her roles; although in disguise she effectively straightened the tone to seem truly boyish, the somber tints she brought to her singing suggested the seriousness of the character's mission. Baritone Jarrett Ott, a man who is seemingly incapable of an unmusical phrase, made The Prisoner's aria into moment of soulful reflection. Buried in a "dungeon" beneath the stage, with only a hand visible, he was reduced to a projection and a disembodied voice, but he still managed to assert himself as a fully human character. If tenor Alan Oke made less of a vocal effect than his colleagues, snarling his way through the role of The Governor, it may be because the motiveless malignancy of the character evoked Lang's least interesting writing. Lang's Jailer is a less chillier and more cynical character than Beethoven's Rocco, but Eric Owens nonetheless brought humanity, along with his lavish bass-baritone, to every moment. —*Fred Cohn*