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## Retelling Fidelio: David Lang's Prisoner of the State

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The ending of David Lang's *prisoner of the state* (L–R): The Governor, Alan Oke; Prisoner of the State, Jarrett Ott; The Assistant, Julie Mathevet; and The Jailer, Eric Owens. Photo Credit: Chris Lee.

Productions aiming to “bring up to date” dramatic works from the past, whether simply through staging and costuming or more invasively through modernizing language or adjusting plots, are a dime a dozen these days. Indeed, it’s often more difficult to find an opera or theater production employing a majority of original or historical elements than a modern “re-imagining.” Within the opera world, however, updating is usually limited to the visual, leaving the textual and musical well-enough alone. Composer

David Lang's "modern retelling" of Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, which boasts completely new music, along with a much-altered libretto and modern staging, was thus something of a novelty, even within the updating proclivities of opera culture.

The retelling, [\*Prisoner of the State\*](#), was given its world premiere in June by the New York Philharmonic (NYPhil) under the baton of the orchestra's new artistic director, Jaap van Zweden. Commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, Rotterdam's de Doelen, London's Barbican, Barcelona's L'Auditori, the Bochum Symphony Orchestra, and Bruges's Concertgebouw, *Prisoner of the State's* debut was the last offering in the symphony's three-week thematic finale of the season, "Music of Conscience," which explored composers' responses to social conflict. Running from May 22 to June 8, 2019, the NYPhil presented past works written in opposition to political oppression, such as Shostakovich's Chamber Symphony and Beethoven's Symphony No. 3; composer John Corigliano's Symphony No. 1—his "personal response to the AIDS crisis"; and a concert of contemporary music of conscience for smaller forces, including the world premiere of Gabriella Smith's *Divisible*. "Music of Conscience" also curated several educational public discussions and exhibitions.

In many ways, *Fidelio* was a natural choice for a series like this, both due to the sociopolitical messages *Fidelio* itself bears, and for the performance tradition of the work over the past two hundred years. The libretto for *Fidelio*, written by Frenchman Jean-Nicolas Bouilly in the 1790s is suffused with Enlightenment and revolutionary political thought. The plot tells the story of the unjust imprisonment of a man who "dared to speak the truth," and his wife, Leonore, who dares to rescue him. Disguised in male attire in order to work as the jailer's assistant at her husband's prison, Leonore adopts the name and persona of "Fidelio." Tyrannical authority is ultimately checked, and Leonore and her husband are reunited and liberated. The premiere of Beethoven's 1814 version of the work has long been interpreted as celebrating the defeat of Napoleon's armies, breaking the emperor's military rule in Europe. *Fidelio* has been a sign of protest against oppressive regimes ever since: it was performed in protest against Nazi occupation and the DDR (Deutsche Demokratische Republik). Last year, New York City's Heartbeat Opera received accolades for its adaptation of *Fidelio* in a chamber opera arrangement telling of the wrongful incarceration of a black activist. The production included video and audio recordings of Beethoven's prisoners' chorus "O welche Lust" sung by inmates in Midwestern correctional facilities, in so doing bringing current social issues into the space of the theater in an immediate way.



Despite the timeless revolutionary appeal of *Fidelio*'s plot, writing a modern retelling brings along a unique kind of musical baggage, along with particular opportunities. When one meets a fellow enthusiast of Western Classical music, one can usually rightly assume that she or he holds similar affection for the "greats" of the canon: Beethoven's Ninth, Mozart's late piano concerti, Brahms' symphonies, Bach's Passions, etc. . . . Such an assumption cannot be made about Beethoven's only opera. There are "*Fidelio* people," and there are not. Furthermore, one can be a "Beethoven person" without being a "*Fidelio* person." For those not impressed with Beethoven's opera, *Fidelio* is an awkward attempt at mixing German *Singspiel* (light opera with spoken dialogue) with *opera seria*. There is not enough action. There is too much kitsch in the romantic side plots. For "*Fidelio* people," the work deftly blends the sublime with the mundane. It deals with meatier issues than the love stories of most nineteenth-century Italian opera plots, elevating opera to the philosophical. A new opera in dialogue with Beethoven's *Fidelio* would need to capture something of what the *Fidelio*-lovers cherish while addressing its criticisms.

David Lang was clearly game for the deep critical engagement required for an updated version of *Fidelio*, having flirted with the concept for the past forty years. Lang states in the program notes, "there is none of Beethoven's music in my piece, but *Prisoner of the State* is built of the skeleton of *Fidelio*. I began with the various versions of Beethoven's libretti, filtering out the things I felt were dramatically confusing or off the topic, searching for moments that I thought were odd or interesting."<sup>[1]</sup> To this extent, then, one might think it more accurate to call *Prisoner of the State* a "modern retelling" of Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's libretto, *Léonore, ou L'amour conjugal* (c. 1794) than a version of Beethoven's opera. Much of *Prisoner of the State* consists of direct quotations or paraphrases from the *Fidelio* libretti, though there is also new material generated from quotations and ideas from political philosophy, including works by Machiavelli, Rousseau, Hannah Arendt, and Jeremy Bentham. But the results of Lang's process of filtration clearly correspond to classic criticisms pertaining directly to Beethoven's *Fidelio* and show Lang to be in close dialogue with the opera's reception history. Most of the comic elements have been removed through shearing away the "cheerful secondary characters" and subplots. Leonore, in disguise and known as the handsome youth, "*Fidelio*," is in Lang's version no longer the love interest of the jailkeeper's daughter, Marzelline. The *deus ex machina* and *lieto fine* finale have been replaced with a slightly-surreal, darker, postmodern ending.

I found Lang's cleverest response to criticism of *Fidelio* to be his handling of "the Gold Aria." Perhaps the most-detested aria of *Fidelio*, "Hat man nicht auch Gold beineben" ("Unless you have some gold as well"), is sung in the original by Rocco the jailer to Fidelio as a bit of bourgeois and fatherly advice to his future son-in-law. Disdained since *Fidelio*'s premiere for its pedestrian subject matter, lackluster musical treatment, and *opera buffa* character, the "Gold Aria" would have seemed to many a natural element to purge in a modern retelling. Beethoven scholar Nicholas Mathew describes this aria's reception history in the following humorous summary:

. . . the Gold Aria has struck generations of critics as similar to money at least in one respect: generic and substitutable, it has few distinctive qualities of its own . . . Neither gloriously eluding the logic of circulation altogether . . . nor reminding us of a long history of pleurably sociable exchange, the Gold Aria has ended up curiously inert, jangling away meaninglessly like an obsolete currency.<sup>[2]</sup>

Given that this aria is connected most clearly in the original to the romantic subplot of *Fidelio* and the jailer's daughter, a feature of the plot entirely removed in *Prisoner of the State*, there would seem no narrative reason to keep it. But Lang retains most of the text of the aria for The Jailer, sung by bass-baritone Eric Owens, and ingeniously uses it for what seemed to me to be a sobering reflection on the effects of degenerate capitalism on politics and justice. "Don't do a good deed unless you are seen doing it . . . Don't do any deed at all, unless you will be paid," The Jailer advises The Assistant (Leonore) immediately preceding the aria. As is typical in Lang's treatment of the libretto, the text becomes simpler and darker in the retelling. While Beethoven's Rocco seems benign enough in ending his Gold Aria with blessings for the future couple (a blessing which includes future fiscal prosperity), Lang's Gold Aria shows the obsessive longing and churning of the mind of an agent of the State who idolizes money. "In this world / Your true love / Your real love, / The love you hold the tightest in your arms, / Is gold." The Gold Aria has been transformed into a chilling portrait of corruption. And though perhaps I imagined it, I thought I heard the arpeggiated figures in Beethoven's original accompaniment subtly quoted in the orchestra of Lang's aria.

Many of Lang's arias (such as the Gold Aria) correspond to numbers in *Fidelio*, but the opera also contains some new additions. My favorite of these was the opening number, "I was a woman." The Assistant, who like Leonore in *Fidelio*, has adopted a male persona in order to work within her husband's prison, mourns the loss of her female identity. In *Fidelio*, Leonore's disguise is necessary for the plot (a woman could hardly work as a jailer's assistant in the eighteenth century) and provides the context for Marzelline's comedic crush-by-mistaken-identity. In "I was a woman," the loss of The Assistant's womanhood is examined psychologically: Lang's Leonore is no longer a woman, not necessarily because she has adopted male attire, but because her womanhood has been taken away from her with the removal of her husband by the State. Soprano Julie Mathevet (The Assistant) declaimed the text within the lilting, blues-inflected melody, to a sparse and searching accompaniment. "When they took my love away / I died the way a woman dies / I don't remember his face. . . ." The aria not only suggested an interesting psychological interpretation of the *Fidelio* conceit, but simultaneously provided a social reflection on the impact of incarceration upon the lives surrounding the convicted—their families and partners. After this aria, I found myself wondering if the literal disguising of The Assistant as a boy was necessary in Lang's version of *Fidelio*. It could be interesting in future productions to try a staging of *Prisoner of the State* in which The Assistant's loss of gender identity is completely interiorized—expressed in text and song—rather than in costume.

The musical minimalism of Lang's score fits the aesthetic of the streamlined libretto, its modernist simplicity, and its verbal repetitions. Like in his *Little Match Girl Passion*, ostinati, slow, iterative

unfurlings of intervals, and musical play around small collections of pitches undergird the musical language. Above and within this, Lang subtly experiments with a variety of styles, sometimes suggesting the gravitational gestures of dance (such as in the suave Machiavellian number sung by The Governor, “better to be feared”) and often suggesting a jazz melodic idiom. In an innovation to Beethoven’s use of the chorus in *Fidelio*, Lang’s choir of prisoners becomes a chorus in the classical dramatic sense, offering emotional repetitions or responses to utterances of the cast members. For this listener, the most beautiful number of the opera was the prisoner’s chorus, “O what desire,” which was one of the few musical numbers making obvious affective and musical allusion to Beethoven’s chorus for the analogous text, “O welche Lust.” Here, for one of the only moments in the opera, the blanket emotional cloud of despair, rage, and cynicism opened briefly to dwell in hope.



In sympathy with Lang’s libretto and score, the visual elements of the production were, according to director Elkhannah Pulitzer, treated as an installation rather than a traditional theater set. The stage was completely barred in with chain-link fencing encircling its upper levels with barbed wire on top; an elevated platform at the back of stage served to house (or imprison) the chorus of inmates above which surveillance-type footage was periodically projected. The impact of the installation within David Geffen Hall was visceral, and the shoebox shape of the packed theater itself contributed to a sense of being penned in. The visual and dramatic impact of the onstage orchestra, however, was much less effective. While the publicity materials for *Prisoner of the State* touted the onstage presence of the orchestra as a critical element of the opera, I found the NYPhil’s presence disappointingly underdeveloped. On the one hand, a quick glance at the orchestra attire seemed to suggest some sort of role or narrative significance within the drama: dress was all black and generally more informal than a typical symphony concert—many donned black beanies and turtlenecks. Maybe they were prison guards? Prisoners? Whatever they were meant to be, any kind of significant effect was broken by the glare of shiny dress heels at the floor of the forest of music stands. There was no action for the staged orchestra, nor did the libretto or cast ever overtly address them. (The one exception to this is near the end of the opera, when The Governor—according to the directions in the libretto—orders one of the trumpet players from the orchestra to leave the stage and “give a signal if anyone approaches.” Unfortunately, however, due to the trumpet player’s position in the orchestra, I neither registered that The Governor was pointing or ordering one of the musicians, nor did I see the trumpet player move offstage. I assumed the order was directed to one of the prison guards.)

In the press release for *Prisoner of the State*, director Elkhanah Pulitzer outlines the thinking behind the onstage orchestra:

The emphasis in the design is on the psychological space of prisons and imprisonment, the graphic quality of iconic spaces related to prisons, and the surveillance that pervades our current culture. The Orchestra being onstage is critical to the work itself. The Orchestra is present and ambiguously cast: they're observers of the story unfolding and simultaneously participants inside of the prison, vacillating between performance as punitive requirement and performance as a creative act of defiance.

Yet the orchestra never *acted* as observers—they simply gave the vibe of performers playing a gig. And as for their participation in “performance as a creative act of defiance,” the gregarious onstage conducting of van Zweden, in formal attire, in a theater at Lincoln Center was a perpetual reminder that this was the elite NYPhil playing an ordinary evening job in the subscription concert series.

There is, of course, a wealth of potential in exploring the symphony orchestra as a regimented hierarchy of power relations and a long tradition of analyzing it as a mirror for the political state. Take some historical political associations with the orchestra: In seventeenth-century France, the orchestra and its time keeper, the *batteur de mesure* (who beat time with a rolled-up score) was used as a metaphor for the absolute rule of the monarch:

Everything hinges on the sovereign of the orchestra, a prince whose power is so absolute that by raising and lowering his scepter in the form of a roll of paper he holds in his hand, he regulates every movement of this fickle populace.[\[3\]](#)

Political and military metaphors of the orchestra have continued down to this day. But concerns of power relations within the orchestra go behind mere metaphor. The conductor and the symphony orchestra are real sites of power which, as in any societal or political configurations, may be exploited or abused. A description of the conductor Arturo Toscanini in Norman Lebrecht's book *The Maestro Myth: Great Conductors in Pursuit of Power* paints the musician as a musical tyrant:

He ruled unchallenged and unrestrained, “forgiven conduct that would have been tolerated in no other artist” and exerting a stranglehold on musical appreciation across the civilized world. Artistically and intellectually, he remains a massive paradox. He was the Great Dictator in an art and a society that shed blood, sweat and tears in its mortal effort to rid the world of great dictators.[\[4\]](#)

Considering the unusually-symphonic score of *Fidelio* which has long been noted for its essential and psychological role in the drama, along with the historical traditions of linking the orchestra with power and politics, Lang and Pulitzer's intent in capturing and tapping into these meanings for *Prisoner of the State* was a smart and exciting endeavor. I think that with a coupling of some choice allusions made in the libretto with a more concerted effort to involve the orchestra in the narrative of the opera, the latent potential in the meanings and history of the orchestra for power and politics could have been incredibly effective. This wasn't quite there in this first production of *Prisoner of the State*.

For those familiar with *Fidelio*, the most shocking innovation of *Prisoner of the State* is its ending. In Beethoven's *Fidelio*, the timely return of Don Fernando as *deus ex machina* just as Leonore reveals her true identity and protects her husband suggests a liberation by philosopher king. A *tutti* chorus praising the merits of a good wife and the power of love ends *Fidelio* assertively on a high note. *Prisoner of the*

*State* concludes with a question mark. Unlike in the original, The Assistant (Leonore) actually shoots The Governor (Pizarro), but as the directions in the libretto read, “it has no discernable effect.” An explanation is given in The Governor’s following aria in which he questions the impact of individual actions: “What is one man?” The death or overthrow of one man is meaningless. Suddenly introducing the idea of democracy, he states that, “Until we hear [your neighbors] crying out: / ‘Save this man’ / Until we hear them crying out: ‘Freedom’ / Until we hear them / . . . No one man is ever safe or free.” Although following this, the trumpeter appears and plays his signal, it is not clear whether The Inspectors will arrive in time to free The Prisoner and The Assistant. As the reunited couple sing, “Yes I am saved,” “You are saved,” The Governor sneers, “In a better world / The inspectors could arrive / At just the right moment / . . . How can you think that there is a better world?” The opera closes in what has now become a typical convention in social activist theater—turning the responsibility of “the ending” onto the audience. Rather than a celebration of virtue as in *Fidelio*, the concluding *tutti* chorus of *Prisoner of the State* addresses the audience, imploring them “We need your light / You need to see us / Sometimes— / We need to know you see us / Sometimes— / If you can see us / We can be free.”

As a modern retelling of *Fidelio* in the current political and social climate, it would be impossible to end *Prisoner of the State* with the kind of exuberance that Beethoven’s offers in his opera, and it makes good sense for Lang to suggest a political context more along the lines of current democratic ideals. Yet saving mention of popular activism until the very end felt somewhat unmotivated (here, a discernible role for the onstage orchestra could have contributed), and the emotional effect of the question-mark-type ending felt fatalistic, as if expecting a bleak and inevitable answer, rather than opening up a realm of possibilities. Listening to clips of the performance posted by the New York Philharmonic, the music of the ending scene, “waiting for the inspectors”—decontextualized and optimally balanced—was more pluripotent than I remembered from the performance on June 6. In the recording, each layer of the complex finale is clearly audible but balanced toward The Assistant; the brightness of the brass and rhythmic vitality of the score struck me in listening as suggesting optimistic possibility that vied with competing motives. In performance, perhaps the more optimistic musical materials were swamped by the competing layers, giving a more pessimistic audible impression than the score may allow for (in general, The Assistant, sung compellingly by Julie Mathevet, was almost always slightly covered by the orchestra). But my suspicion is that for most audience members, the emotional and cognitive confusion caused by the lightning-fast side-steps in the last scene—from The Assistant’s action, to apparent failure, to potential of salvation by The Inspectors, to ambiguity of outcome, to popular activism—all being taken together in comparison with Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, simply did not allow sufficient psychological time to process and become receptive to the work’s final musical question mark.

*Prisoner of the State* is a smart, probing commentary on *Fidelio* that rewards the listener with the novelty of a new work, together with an interpretation of a past one. For me, it is the deep underlying dialogue between the political, social, musical, and emotional aspirations of two composers and two historical moments that makes this work so interesting and that will continue to attract performers and interpreters in the coming years. In distilling *Fidelio* into a “compressed and vital, essential form,” in the words of Elkhana Pulitzer, Lang creates an utterly new work, thereby casting light on the inner workings of Beethoven’s opera as well as casting drastic changes of perspective that differentiate nineteenth-century from twenty-first-century sensibilities. A listener seeking the firm hope, tender affections, and Enlightenment sublime of *Fidelio* will have a hard time finding them in *Prisoner of the State*. For in Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, these sentiments are part and parcel of valorized domesticity, faith in the goodness of true Law, and confidence of an idealized conjugal love between true government and the state. That *Prisoner of the State* has removed these elements is telling, I think, of current political

attitudes and sentiments. Law *might* be good; the State *might* be good; the unseen *could* be seen . . .  
but all of these are contingent; darkness is just as certain as light.