

FIDELIO

Composed by Ludwig van Beethoven

Act I

Jaquino finds himself alone with Marcellina in the prison courtyard. Taking keen advantage of the opportunity, he tells her how happy he would be to marry her; she seems less eager than he is. He is interrupted by someone knocking at the door; while he's out of the way, Marcelline tells us how she has fallen in love with Fidelio, a young man who has come to the house recently. Rocco, the jailer, comes back from work; at the same time young Fidelio staggers in under a heavy load of chains, which he has had repaired by the smith. Both Rocco and Marcelline speak of the reward the youth will be given, meaning Marcelline's hand; but Fidelio, strangely, is almost as appalled as the eavesdropping Jaquino.

Rocco is a good but unimaginative fellow; he tells Fidelio to find money, not love - if you have to depend on the food of love, you'll go hungry. But Fidelio defends romantic love, and instead of marriage, demands Rocco's trust. Even though Rocco has strict orders to allow no-one near the prisoners - particularly one very dangerous prisoner who is kept apart - he decides to let Fidelio help him in the dungeons.

A march sounds, and the gate is opened for Pizarro and his guards to enter. Pizarro has news of an inspection by the Minister; he is terrified that the Minister will find out that Florestan, believed long dead, is one of his prisoners. But, he says, "there is a way! one bold act can rid me of fear!" Remembering his past humiliation, he determines to savour his revenge. Rocco has not yet realised what Pizarro plans. When he does, he is outraged; but when Pizarro takes responsibility for the killing blow, Rocco squares it with his conscience. The prisoner is close to starvation, hardly alive; killing him would be a mercy.

Fidelio has overheard the end of this conversation. Throwing aside her disguise and her caution, she reveals herself to the audience as Leonora, bursts forth in condemnation of Pizarro's animal fury, and summons up all her hope and love to save her husband Florestan. Armed with hope, she asks to join Rocco on his visit to the dungeons; he agrees to ask Pizarro for her help. As Rocco and Leonora go, the prisoners come out; they have been allowed to take their exercise. But their joy in the fresh air is muted by their caution; there are ears and eyes everywhere, and there is a vivid sense of fear.

Now Rocco, coming back with Fidelio, tells his assistant that Pizarro will let him take an apprentice. And Fidelio's first task will be to dig Florestan's grave. But before Rocco can descend to the dungeons, Marcelline warns him that Pizarro is angry; sure enough, Pizarro storms on, furious that the prisoners have been allowed out in the sun. Rocco sends them back into the prison; "night already falls", and as the atmosphere grows darker Fidelio and Jaquino lock the doors.

Act II

Florestan is sitting alone in his dungeon. It is dark. He dared to speak the truth, and has been punished for it. Yet even in this darkness he feels a single ray of hope; he seems to see his wife Leonore, like an angel. The dream exhausts him, and he falls exhausted on the floor. Rocco and Leonore come in with their tools and a lamp, and start to dig the grave. Leonora can't even be sure, in the darkness, if the prisoner is really her husband. But whoever he is, she vows to save him. It's only when he speaks to Rocco that she recognises his voice. It's against Pizarro's orders even to give Florestan a drink of water, but Rocco bends the rules to give him a

little wine from his flask. Emotions are running high, though Florestan has only half-recognised his wife, and Rocco does not understand what is happening.

It is time. Rocco brings in Pizarro, again exulting in his revenge; he rips off his disguise so that the prisoner will recognise his enemy before he dies. But as he lifts the dagger, Leonore bravely throws herself in front of Florestan, revealing herself as his wife. When Pizarro threatens to kill both of them, she draws a pistol - a pistol she never has time to use. The very moment she brandishes the gun, a trumpet sounds from the tower to announce the Minister's arrival. Pizarro is beaten, and Florestan is saved.

Pizarro and Rocco rush out, leaving Leonore and Florestan in each others' arms. The prisoners have been set free, and hail Don Fernando, the Minister. They have been saved on the very borders of the grave. Rocco presents Florestan and Leonore to the Minister; Pizarro is led away to his punishment. And at last, it is Leonore who takes the fetters from her husband, as the chorus praise them.