

Opera column

DEFYING TYRANNY

In the 250th anniversary year of Beethoven's birth, Melbourne Opera is tackling his only opera, *Fidelio*. Conductor **Anthony Negus** discusses the work's power and the influence of one of its greatest interpreters.

I was first introduced to *Fidelio* when I bought a recording of the opera conducted by Toscanini when I was aged about 15 or 16. I then went to an opera workshop in London when I was a student at the Royal College of Music and that's where we did bits of some of the great operas including the quartet and trio from *Fidelio*. We did the first five numbers. After that I saw it at Covent Garden several times in a production which Klemperer had done himself in 1961. I actually heard him conduct it in a revival in 1969 which was simply amazing.

There had been a mystique about Klemperer's performances of Beethoven and his *Fidelio* at Covent Garden created an incredible stir in the 1960s and that definitely rubbed off on me. I was already a huge admirer of his, and I remember him doing the Beethoven symphonies. He was getting on then and was essentially sitting in a chair, but there were these moments when he rose up,

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this giant of a man, and you knew he had this mastery of every bit of the music.

I was most struck by Klemperer's ability to allow the time and space for the opera's rhythm and harmony. I was too young to hear it when he first did it at Covent Garden and by the time, he did the revival, he was losing his grip a bit and some things had got slower and so on but in the greatest Klemperer performances there was a sense of transcendence. You really felt as though you were being guided inside the music. You could always feel this guiding hand that led the music through the transitions in the most compelling way. I knew when I heard him conduct it that it would take me absolutely years to really understand the music, to be as clear and as present in the moment. It's like these

wonderful experiences you have in life – you cannot hang onto them, they're there, and you can't keep things the same way and you have to undergo your own development.

It was just a case then of really meeting the opera and realising the depth of composing experience Beethoven brought to it. I do think that that quartet which is the third number in the opera is just one of the most extraordinarily wonderful ensembles. Mozart's trio in *Così fan tutte* is absolutely divine but there's something about the quartet in *Fidelio*, with all four characters singing the same music but expressing somewhat different viewpoints, that is astonishing. The sense of atmosphere in the opera is just wonderful as well, as when Rocco gives Leonore permission to give Florestan a piece of bread.

As it's an opera with dialogue, you can't just treat it as a series of numbers. There has got to be a dramatic line which runs through the music into the dialogue and from it into the music. That is vital. For Melbourne Opera, we're doing quite a bit of the dialogue and I must say I'm in favour of that. I conducted a *Fidelio* in the past which retained hardly any of dialogue and I found this was just not right. To make the piece work you've got to have it because it's only then that you'll be able to really build the drama and emotional effect of the piece.

I think this idea that Beethoven didn't know how to write for the voice is false. He doesn't write for the voice in the way that Mozart did – Mozart tailored his parts for the voices that he knew. That said, it is difficult and can place an incredible stress on the performer. In the final scene, the tenor is right on the passaggio, singing fortissimo, and that is extremely hard, so it's incredibly thrilling if your Florestan has a good command of the range of the aria.



Anthony Negus

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It's the same with the demands placed on Leonore. But I think you can't really say that there are problems with the writing for Rocco or Marzelline or Jaquino.

This opera and its exploration of freedom is relevant to all times and places where there is oppression. The first appearance of the prisoners can be absolutely devastating, and I feel that for many of us, one has to use a great deal of imagination when approaching the piece in order to understand the plight of the characters, especially in the case of Florestan who has been totally unjustly imprisoned. Beethoven's message of defiance against tyranny and hope even in the darkest situations is simply amazing.

Melbourne Opera's *Fidelio* is at the Athenaeum Theatre, February 5 – 13