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"Spanish Trace" in the Plot, Libretto, and Stage Performances of Beethoven's Opera *Fidelio*

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Abstract. The article considers the various connections between Ludwig van Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* and specific elements pertaining to Spanish culture. According to the libretto, the events take place in a state prison near Seville. Beethoven's librettists (Joseph Sonnleithner, Stephan von Breuning and Georg Friedrich Treitschke) closely followed the original source, Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's play *Léonore, ou L'amour conjugal*, which had originally been set to music by Pierre Gaveaux (Paris, 1798). If Bouilly's play is designated as a "historical fact" (*fait historique*), then on the title page of Gaveaux' opera there appeared a further clarification: "a fact from Spanish history" (*fait historique Espagnol*). It is traditionally believed that the choice of Spain as the setting for both the French original and the German adaptations of the libretto was based on censorship considerations. Indeed, Bouilly had good reasons not to advertise any connection between the plot of *Léonore* and the events of the Jacobin Terror of 1793. However, the "Spanish trace" is still present in Bouilly's play and in the libretto of *Fidelio*.

Translated by Thomas A. Beavitt

The plot of Bouilly's *Léonore* might contain references to the medieval legend of the 10th century Count Fernán González, who, according to the epic poem composed three centuries later, was freed from captivity by his bride, the Infanta Sancha. Several books on this topic published in Spain during the 18th century were accompanied by illustrations reminiscent of the mise-en-scènes from the prison scene in *Fidelio*. The "Spanish trace" is visible both in the names and in the characters of the opera's heroes, especially Léonore, Pizarro and Florestan (in some 19th-century adaptations of *Fidelio*, Florestan was given either a Spanish aristocratic surname or the name Ferdinando). The staging and costumes for Beethoven's opera also contained features that clearly indicated the era of the late 16th–early 17th century, i.e., the time of the reigns of Philip II and Philip III. Although *Fidelio* was not staged in Spain until 1893, this opera became a repertoire piece in Spanish-speaking countries in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Keywords: Beethoven, *Fidelio*, Bouilly, *Léonore, ou L'amour conjugal*, Spain, Opera House, medieval legend, Count Fernán González

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Музыкальный театр: вопросы истории

Научная статья

«Испанский след» в сюжете, либретто и постановках оперы Бетховена «Фиделио»

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Abstract. В статье рассматриваются разнообразные связи оперы Людвига ван Бетховена «Фиделио» с испанскими реалиями. Согласно либретто, события происходят в государственной тюрьме недалеко от Севильи. Либреттисты Бетховена (Йозеф Зонлейтнер, Стефан фон Брёйнинг и Георг Фридрих Трейчке) следовали первоисточнику — пьесе Жана-Николя Буйи «Леонора, или Супружеская любовь», положенной на музыку Пьером Гаво (Париж, 1798). Если пьеса Буйи обозначена как «исторический факт» (*fait historique*), то на титульном листе оперы Гаво появилось уточнение: «факт из испанской истории» (*fait historique Espagnol*). Традиционно считается, что выбор Испании как места действия и во французском оригинале, и в немецких переработках либретто был обусловлен цензурными соображениями. У Буйи имелись причины не афишировать связь сюжета «Леоноры» с событиями времен якобинского террора 1793 года. Однако испанский след в пьесе Буйи и в либретто «Фиделио» все-таки присутствует. Сюжет «Леоноры» Буйи мог содержать отсылки к средневековой легенде о графе Фернане Гонсалесе (X век), которого освободила из заточения невеста, инфанта Санча. Книги на эту тему неоднократно издавались в Испании в XVIII веке

и сопровождались иллюстрациями, напоминающими мизансцены из тюремного акта «Фиделио». Испанский след виден и в именах, и в характерах оперных героев, особенно Леоноры, Пицарро и Флорестана (в некоторых переработках «Фиделио» XIX века Флорестану давали либо испанскую аристократическую фамилию, либо имя Фердинандо). В постановочных решениях и костюмах к опере Бетховена содержались черты, ясно указывавшие на эпоху конца XVI — начала XVII века, время правления королей Филиппа II и Филиппа III. Хотя в самой Испании «Фиделио» поставили только в 1893 году, в XX и XXI веке эта опера стала репертуарной в испаноязычных странах.

Ключевые слова: Бетховен, «Фиделио», Буйи, «Леонора, или Супружеская любовь», Испания, оперный театр, средневековая легенда, граф Фернан Гонсалес

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Introduction

The premiere of Ludwig van Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* (originally titled *Leonore, oder Der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe*) was scheduled to take place at the Theatre an der Wien in Vienna on October 15, 1805. However, on September 30, the censors banned the performance, seeing political sedition in the libretto. Librettist Joseph von Sonnleithner (1766–1835) sent a letter to the censorship department on October 2, in which he pointed out, among other things, that "the action of the opera takes place in 16th-century Spain, and therefore has no connection with modern times."[1] On 5th October, the production of *Fidelio* was permitted on the condition that some of the more extreme scenes be reworked, which required the text to be resubmitted to the censorship. The delay had the most negative impact on the fate of Beethoven's creation: the premiere took place on 20th November, a week after Vienna's surrender to the Grande Armée, and the opera experienced a crushing failure.

In the original edition of Sonnleithner's libretto there is no precise indication of the time of action.[2] Here the librettist exactly followed the original source, i.e., the play by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly (1763–1842), published in Paris in 1798 and subsequently set to music by the composer and tenor singer Pierre Gaveaux (1761–1825). The action takes place in Spain, in the fairly distant past, but without mentioning a specific date.

While these details are not usually given any particular prominence, their study allows us to place *Léonore* / *Fidelio* in an unusual historical and cultural context, revealing additional semantic nuances of this outstanding work.

Beethoven could never bring himself to take on a subject that was intrinsically alien to him. He abandoned the opera *Vestas Feuer*, which he had already begun in 1803, due to his dissatisfaction with the quality of Emanuel Schikaneder's poetry, and categorically refused to deal with fairy-tale or fantastic plots, which were gaining popularity at the beginning of the 19th century. In the case of *Leonore*, however, the internal resonance was so strong that the composer reworked the opera twice in an attempt to achieve its success on the stage. On the third attempt it succeeded — the 1814 version established a firm position in the German — and subsequently world — opera repertoire.

How did the text of Bouilly's play come into Beethoven's hands? In 1803, the management of the Vienna Imperial Theatres decided to update the repertoire by staging several modern French operas, which were not only popular with the opera-going public but also rated highly by Beethoven himself. In a letter dated 4 January 1804 to the influential

[1] Fishman, N. L. (with Kirillina, L. V.). (Eds.). (2011). *Beethoven. Letters*. (In 4 Vols., vol. 1: 1787–1811, 2nd ed.). Muzyka, p. 265.

[2] Beethoven, L., & Sonnleithner, J. (1805). *Fidelio. Eine Oper in Zwei Aufzügen*. Gedruckt und verlegt bey Anton Pichler, p. 2. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2010661239/

critic Johann Friedrich Rochlitz, he wrote of the "intelligent and witty French opera," whose brilliance had eclipsed the "empire" of Emanuel Schikaneder, the previous proprietor of the Theater an der Wien.[3]

It turns out to be difficult to establish whether the score of Gaveaux' *Léonore* was among the new works ordered from Paris. However, it is most likely that a large number of librettos were purchased for review, from which the management selected plays suitable for staging on the court stage and ordered the musical material. Although Gaveaux' *Léonore* was apparently not among the favourites, Sonnleithner considered the libretto suitable for Beethoven — and it met with the composer's approval. Sonnleithner made a free translation of Bouilly's text (in places, in fact, a free reworking of it), and at the end of 1803 Beethoven began work on the opera.

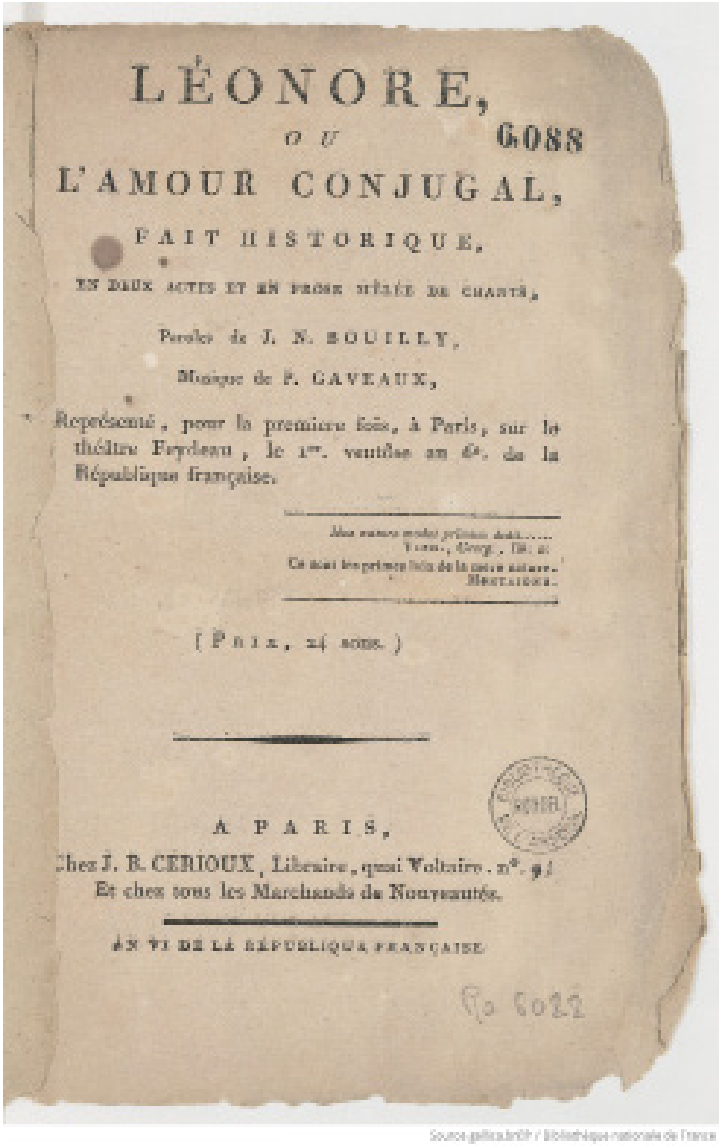
LÉONORE,
OU
L'AMOUR CONJUGAL,
FAIT HISTORIQUE,
EN DEUX ACTES ET EN PROSE MÊLÉE DE CHANTS,
Paroles de J. N. BOUILLY,
Musique de P. GAVEAUX,
Représenté, pour la première fois, à Paris, sur le théâtre Feydeau, le 1er. ventôse an 6e. de la République française.
(Prix, 24 sous.)
A PARIS,
Chez J. B. CERIOUX, Libraire, quai Voltaire, n°. 9.
Et chez tous les Marchands de Nouveautés.
AN VI DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE.

Illustration 1. Title page of the first edition of the libretto by J. N. Bouilly *Léonore, ou L'Amour conjugal* (1798). Retrieved from the Bibliothèque nationale de France – Gallica

"A Historical Fact Set to Music"

On the title page of the original editionof Bouilly's play, the title *Léonore, ou L'Amour conjugal* is accompanied by the additional explanation: *Fait historique en 2 actes* ("A historical fact set to music, in two acts," *Illustration 1*).[4]

In the edition of the score of Gaveaux' opera, which was published in the same year (1798), an important addition appeared: *Fait historique Espagnol* ("Fact from Spanish history,"[5] *Illustration 2*).

[3] *Beethoven. Letters* (Vol. 1), p. 219.

[4] Bouilly, J. N. (1798). *Léonore, ou L'Amour conjugal. Fait historique: en deux actes et en prose mêlée de chants*. J. B. Cerioux.

[5] Gaveaux, P. (1798). *Léonore, ou L'Amour conjugal: fait historique Espagnol en deux actes paroles de J. N. Bouilly. Musique de P. Gaveaux*. J. B. Cerioux.

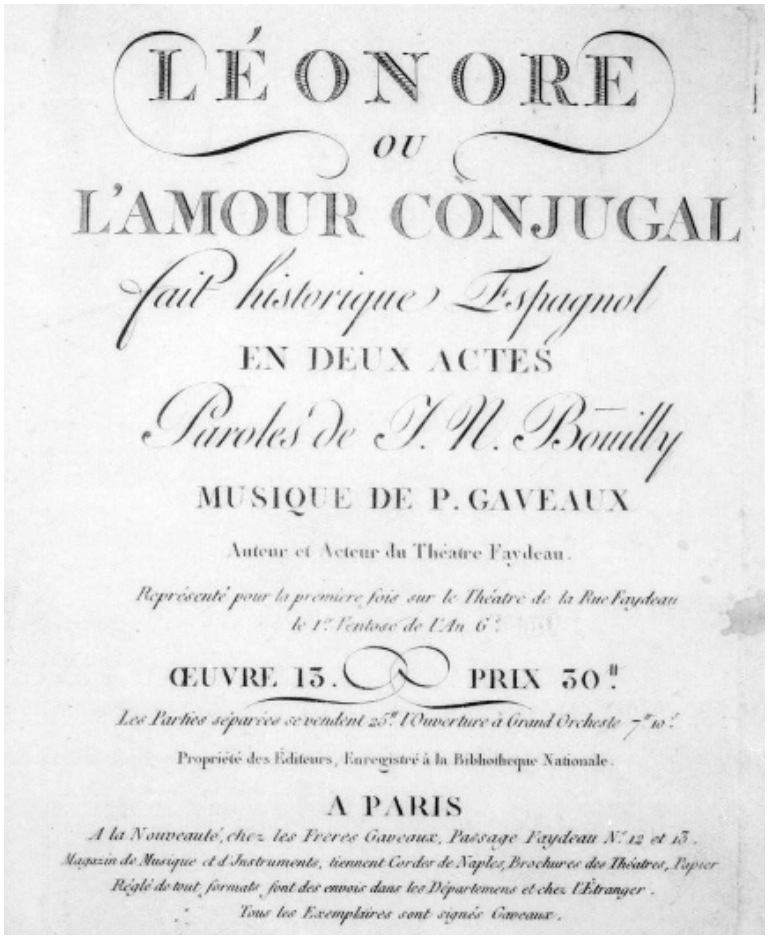
LÉONORE
OU
L'AMOUR CONJUGAL
fait historique Espagnol
EN DEUX ACTES
Paroles de J. N. Bouilly
MUSIQUE DE P. GAVEAUX
Auteur et Acteur du Théatre Faydeau.
Représenté pour la première fois sur le Théatre de la Rue Faydeau
le 1.er Ventose de l'An 6.e
ŒUVRE 13. PRIX 30 ll
Les Parties séparées se vendent 25 ll l'Ouverture à Grand Orchestre 7 ll 10 s
Propriété des Editeurs, Enregistré à la Bibliotheque Nationale.
A PARIS
A la Nouveauté, chez les Freres Gaveaux, Passage Faydeau N.o 12 et 13.
Magazin de Musique et d'Instruments, tiennent Cordes de Naples, Brochures des Théatres, Papier
Réglé de tout, formats, font des envois dans les Départemens et chez l'Etranger.
Tous les Exemplaires sont signés Gaveaux.

Illustration 2. Title page of the first edition of the score of the opera by P. Gaveaux to Bouilly's libretto *Léonore, ou L'Amour conjugal* (1798). Retrieved from the Bibliothèque nationale de France – Gallica

Traditionally, the reference to Spanish history is considered to be Bouilly's concession to censorship demands (as in the case of *Fidelio*). However, in relation to Bouilly's play this is not entirely true, although his French contemporaries, some of whom were personally known to him, are depicted under the guise of Spaniards in *Léonore*.

Although Bouilly's memoirs, published in 1836–37, say nothing at all about the plot of *Léonore*, the informed reader can guess the real events on which the plot was based — the story of the Merciers, who almost succumbed to the Jacobin terror.[6]

In November 1792, Bouilly, a supporter of the Republic, was appointed judge of the criminal tribunal in the city of Tours. In 1793, his office received a denunciation of Jean-Nicolas Mercier, who owned land near Tours. The informer, a certain Louis-Simon Heron, while loudly proclaiming his commitment to the revolution, is likely to instead have been guided by more selfish and base motives. As Mrs. Elizabeth Mercier, the wife of the arrested defendant, told Bouilly, Heron had previously borrowed a large sum of money from her husband and wanted to avoid repaying the debt. In addition, Heron had made advances to Elisabeth, a young and beautiful lady, but was rebuffed. Bouilly managed to help the Merciers by escorting them to a secret hideout outside the city and exposing Heron's malice to the Parisian authorities. Following the end of the Jacobin Terror in 1794, the Mercier family returned to Paris; before too long, Bouilly, who had become friends with the couple, had married Elizabeth's relative, Eugénie Revel. While Bouilly recounted this riveting tale without extraneous details, these were restored by David Gulliver [1, p. 160–161].

[6] Bouilly, J. N. (1836). *Mes Récapitulations* (Vol. 2: 1791–1812). Louis Janet, p. 64–68.

Although Elisabeth Mercier did not dress as a man or join the state prison to save her husband, it seems she must have figured in Bouilly's prototype for the character of *Léonore*. It is not difficult to understand why Bouilly chose to set the action in Spain and greatly alter the recognisable circumstances: the participants in the events were part of his close circle of friends and would not have wanted to become the talk of the town.

However, the reference to the historical nature of the plot is found not only on the title page of Bouilly's *Léonore*. This playwright was generally distinguished by his erudition and love for historical characters, which was repeatedly reflected in the titles of his plays of the 1790s. In this case, as a rule, the discussion was about contemporaries or about figures from the relatively recent past especially the previous century:

- *Jean-Jacques Rousseau à ses derniers moments,* trait historique en un acte et en prose*,* 1790;
- *René Descartes,* trait historique en 2 actes et en prose, 1796;
- *La Mort de Turenne,* pièce historique et militaire à grand spectacle, en 3 actes, mêlée de pantomimes, combats et évolutions*,* co-authorship with Jean-Guillaume-Antoine Cuvelier de Tri, 1797[7];
- *Le Tombeau de Turenne, ou l'Armée du Rhin à Saspach, fait historique en un acte, mêlé de vaudevilles, pantomimes, danses et évolutions militaires,* co-authors Bouilly — Jean-Guillaume-Antoine Cuvelier de Trie and Hector Chaussier, 1799;
- *L'Abbé de L'Épée*, comédie historique en 5 actes et en prose*,* 1799.[8]

At the same time, there are no indications of historical authenticity in the designations of other librettos and plays by Bouilly in which real people are portrayed — for example, *Pierre le Grand, comédie en 4 actes et en prose*. This libretto was set to music by André-Ernest-Modest Grétry in 1790; the composer even tried to create a Russian flavour by using the melody of *Kamarinskaya* in the overture. The libretto of the opera *Valentine de Milan*, written by Bouilly in 1807 for the composer Etienne Méhul, which is not however designated as "historical," tells the story of another faithful and selfless wife who sought to punish the murderers of her beloved husband (the opera was staged only in 1822).

Why did Bouilly insist on labelling the plot of *Léonore* as "historical"? Did the playwright simply want to throw meticulous readers off the scent,

[7] Henri de La Tour d'Auvergne, Viscount de Turenne (1611–1675) was a French military leader who was killed by a cannonball while on reconnaissance.

[8] Abbé Charles Michel de l'Epée (1712–1789), known as the father of deaf education, was widely recognised after his death as a "benefactor of humanity."

leaving them to independently search for facts in the history of Spain that did not actually exist there? Or was this trail not false at all?

The Legend of Countess González

Oddly enough, behind the acutely modern plot of Bouilly's *Léonore* one can discern a medieval basis, which, although already the stuff of legend, can also be considered as historical.

In the 10th century, Castile was ruled by Count Fernán González (c. 910–970), an outstanding politician and military leader, who is immortalised in folk epics and various literary traditions of subsequent centuries. Count González rebelled three times against the kings of León, whose vassal he was (Ramiro II, Ordoño III and Sancho I). While the rebellious count was caught and imprisoned three times in succession, the conflict ended in each case with the reconciliation of the parties.

This episode is connected with the legend of Doña Sancha, the first wife of Count González, who according to the legend helped him escape from prison. In the 13th-century *Poem of Fernán González*, the Infanta Doña Sancha of Navarre is not yet the count's wife, but a girl in love who arbitrarily rescues him from prison and elopes with him on the condition that he marries her and is faithful to her forever. In order to become familiar with the legend of Doña Sancha, a French playwright of the late 18th century did not at all need to read the archaic text of a very long poem. The play *La más hidalga hermosura* was written in the 17th century by Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla but repeatedly published in the 18th century due to its great popularity. It glorifies the brave act of Infanta Sancha, who saved her lover from captivity.

In addition to poetry, various prose stories about Count González and Doña Sancha were published in Spain in the 18th century. In particular, we may mention a small work by Hilario Santos Alonso: *Historia verdadera del conde Fernan-Gonzalez y su esposa la condesa doña Sancha: sacada fielmente de los autores mas clasicos de la historia de España* (Madrid, 1767 and subsequent reprints,[9] *Illustration 3*).

Almost exactly the same title was given to a book published in 1772 by another author, publisher and writer, the Catalan Manuel Joseph Martín.[10] In 1780, Martín published a collection of similar stories in two volumes, whose plots seemingly alternated at random. Thus, in the second volume,

[9] *The True and Wonderful History of Count Fernán González and His Wife, Countess Doña Sancha; Faithfully Extracted from the Works on Spanish History of the Most Exemplary Authors in the History of Spain*. Santos Alonso, H. (1774). *Historia verdadera del conde Fernan-Gonzalez y su esposa la condesa doña Sancha* ... Por Carlos Sapera, y Pio. Retrieved from the *Biblioteca Digital de Castilla y León* https://bibliotecadigital.jcyl.es/es/consulta/registro.do?id=14218

[10] Martín, M. J. (1772). *Historia verdadera del conde Fernán-González, y su esposa la condesa doña Sancha: sacada fielmente de los autores* ... M. Martín. Retrieved from the *Biblioteca Digital de Castilla y León* https://bibliotecadigital.jcyl.es/es/consulta/registro.do?id=5292

consisting of twenty parts, the story of the feat of Doña Sancha was placed between the *History of Judas Maccabee* and the *History of the great lawgiver Moses*.[11]

The engravings on the title pages of both "histories," by Santos Alonso and Martín, depict the appearance of Doña Sancha in the dungeon in which Count González languishes chained with heavy chains to a stone. This painting evokes direct associations with *Léonore / Fidelio*.

Consequently, the legend of Doña Sancha's selfless act was well known enough that Bouilly could have had this plot in mind when he classified his play *Léonore* as a historical work.


HISTORIA VERDADERA.
DEL CONDE
FERNAN-GONZALEZ,
Y SU ESPOSA LA CONDESA
DOÑA SANCHA.
SACADA FIELMENTE DE LOS AUTORES MAS clasicos de la Historia de España, como el Arzobispo Don Rodrigo, el Padre Mariana, Ylescas, Berganza, y la Historia Gotica, con otros muchos Historiadores.
SU AUTOR DON HILARIO SANTOS ALONSO.
Con licencia. BARCELONA: Por CARLOS SAPERA, y Pla Calle den Bot. Año 1774.

Illustration 3. Title page of *The True History of Count Fernán González by I. Santos Alonso* in the 1774 edition.
Available at: Google Books
(accessed 30.10.2024)

Names and Characters

Since the action has been moved to Spain, the characters must have appropriate names. While Bouilly is not entirely consistent in his onomastics, some names are clearly significant.

The most obvious choice of name for the main villain is "Pizar" in the French text — or "Pizzarro" in the German. There is undoubtedly a clear reference here to the surname of a real historical figure, Francisco Pizarro y González (1478?–1541), a Spanish conquistador, conqueror of the Inca Empire and founder of the capital of Peru, Lima, where he was killed as a result of a conspiracy by his confidants.

Francisco Pizarro is often perceived as the personification of cruelty and tyranny, although he was probably not particularly egregious in this regard compared with other conquistadors and rulers of his time (including Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico). In Spain, an apologetic interpretation of Pizarro's activities prevailed due to his conquests having brought the Spanish crown vast overseas territories and untold riches. The colourful personality of Francisco Pizarro attracted the attention of writers and playwrights. Thus, in 1626–1631

[11] Martín, M. J. (1780). *Colección de Varias Historias, asi Sagradas, como Profanas, de los Mas Celebres Heroes del Mundo … Tomo Segundo*. M. Martín.

Tirso de Molina created the *Trilogía de los Pizarros*, dedicated to three brothers — Francisco (first part: *A single goal solves everything*), Gonzalo, and Hernando. Bouilly, with his erudition and interest in history, clearly did not choose the name for his character by chance, and perhaps was guided by images of Pizarro, including imaginary ones, created after the death of the vice-governor of Peru.

For Austrians of the early 19th century, Spain was a rather distant country, but not entirely exotic. In Beethoven's Vienna, there are clear traces of interaction with Spanish culture: the Spanish and Austrian branches of the Habsburg dynasty, which had separated in the 16th century, continued to regularly enter into marriage alliances. Until the time of Emperor Joseph II (who ascended the throne in 1765, but only ruled solely from 1780 to 1790), the Austrian court was strongly influenced by Spanish etiquette. Spanish names were also present on the map of Vienna. Next to the Hofburg palace complex, the building of the riding school of the Spanish Riding School still stands. And in the suburb of Alsergund, up until 1902, there stood the so-called "House of the Black Spaniard(s)" (*Schwarzspanierhaus*) in which Beethoven spent the last two years of his life and died on 26th March 1827. The house was part of the complex of buildings of the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat, which was founded by Catalans and operated from 1633 to 1780.

In some classical-era musical works set in Spain, composers made various attempts to convey a national flavour. Christoph Willibald Gluck's ballet *Don Juan, ou Le festin de pierre* (1761) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786) use a genuine melody of the fandango, a dance that came to Vienna directly from Spain. Vicente Martín y Soler's comic opera *Una cosa rara* written to a libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte based on a play by Luis Vélez de Guevara enjoyed incredible success. The action takes place in Spain – one of the characters is Queen Isabella. First staged in 1786 at the Burgtheater, *Una cosa rara* broke records for the number of performances and was performed in various European countries. Martín y Soler did not overuse folklore borrowings but tried to convey national colour using Spanish genres (for example, the seguidilla) and by introducing the mandolin into the orchestra.

While there are no obvious Spanish borrowings in *Fidelio*, in the overture to his incidental music for Johann Wolfgang Goethe's tragedy *Egmont*, Beethoven characterised Spain's tyrannical power over the Netherlands with a harsh and menacing sarabande, a triple-metre dance form of Spanish origin. The music for *Egmont* was written in 1810 — that is, after the first two versions of *Fidelio* were created, but before the third appeared (1814). And when comparing the *Egmont* overture with the introduction to the second act of the opera, where the orchestra depicts the darkness and horror of the dungeon in which Florestan languishes,

one can discover something in common, and not only in the "tombstone" key of *F minor*. A hint of the ominous tread of the sarabande can be discerned in the introduction to the scene in the dungeon, which is also in triple time.

The names of the main characters in Bouilly's libretto and Beethoven's opera, Léonore and Florestan, are not as clearly associated with Spain as the name Pizarro, but some lines can be traced here too.

In Spanish, the heroine's name would be rendered as "Leonor" — history records a number of princesses and queens who bore this name and were renowned for their virtue. In particular, we may mention Eleanor (Leonor) of Castile, the first wife of the 13th-century English King Edward I Plantagenet. Among other things, she is known for her remarkable courage and selflessness, even to the point of having accompanied her husband on the Crusades. While there is no reason to suppose that her image could have influenced Bouilly (still less, Beethoven), the very name of Léonore corresponds to a Spanish heroine of the noblest origins.

Florestan is also clearly as belonging to the noble class. This is clearly alluded to in the text of the libretto, when the minister, Don Fernando, who has arrived to investigate, addresses Florestan with the words "my friend." Therefore, they must have known each other in the past and communicated on equal terms, for which reason Florestan cannot be a commoner.

The name "Florestan" is not Spanish but taken from a French comic opera. While the surname Flores is quite common in Spanish-speaking countries, it does not belong to the especially aristocratic ones. Nevertheless, in 18th century French operas, the name Florestan was typically given to characters of fairly high social status. In Grétry's opera *La caravane du Caire* (1783), Florestan is a French officer — that is, a nobleman. In another extremely popular opera by Grétry, *Richard Coeur de Lion* (1784), Florestan is the name given to the governor of the prison castle at Linz — a position similar to that occupied by Pizarro in *Léonore* / *Fidelio*. Since Beethoven was familiar with these operas from childhood, especially *Richard Coeur de Lion*, the name Florestan would have been perceived by him as noble.

However, in the 19th century, *Fidelio's* Florestan was sometimes called something else. In 1826, the score and piano score of *Fidelio* were published in Paris by the publishing house A. Farrenc (without Beethoven's knowledge). The opera was supposed to be staged at the Odeon Theatre, but it never actually took place. The text of the opera was printed in French and Italian, and the names of all the characters were changed. The main character became Ellinor, Marcellina became Margherita, Florestan became Ferdinand, Jacquino became Fritz, Pizarro was renamed Dolcarre, and only Rocco remained with a recognisable name (Rocque).[12] The practically disappearance of the "Spanish trace" in this version at the onomastic level could be connected, according to Mark Everist,

[12] Beethoven, L. van ([1826]). *Fidélio. Drame lyrique en deux actes, paroles francaises et italiennes. Partition de piano*. Chez A. Farrenc.

with the problem of copyright on the original libretto, which undoubtedly belonged to Bouilly, who was alive, active and could make thus claims for the unauthorised use of his work [2, p. 275].

François Henry Joseph Castil-Blaze, an influential music critic, composer and music historian, was eagerly awaiting the production of Beethoven's opera at the Odeon, but never saw it. In 1846 he published his own adaptation of his beloved work, calling this version *Léonore, grand opéra en 4 actes*.[13] Castil-Blaze' version was staged at the Royal Theatre of Brussels on 1 December 1847. In addition to extensive reworkings using music from other works by Beethoven, this version is also notable for the renaming of the hero: here, he acquires the pompous name of "Florestan D'Elvas, Spanish Señor." The minister, previously known simply as Don Fernando, took on the name Alvarez, while the gatekeeper Jacquino became "Soldier Diego." The recognisable names retained were Léonore, Marcellina (Marcelina), Rocco (Roc) and Pizarro (Pizar). Castil-Blaze also specified the time of action: "Spain, around 1600." Thus in Castil-Blaze' version, the Spanish cultural features were reinforced — at least in the text, if not in the stage design.

By the middle of the 19th century, Beethoven's opera had won a worthy place in the repertoire of Western European theatres — and not only in German-speaking countries. In 1851, *Fidelio* was staged in London by an Italian troupe and in the Italian language. For this performance, Manfredo Maggioni made a free — albeit equirhythmic — translation of the libretto. Almost all the names followed the original, with the exception of Florestan, who was designated as "Ferdinando Florestan, prisoner of the state prison".[14] Apparently, here the name "Florestan" has become a surname. Moreover, Florestan turned out to be almost the exact namesake of the minister, who is named, as before, *Don Fernando*.

Why Florestan was called Ferdinando in the Italian translation is unknown, but perhaps the choice was not entirely random hinted at a reference to Count Fernán González.

The same description of the characters is given in the first translation of the libretto of *Fidelio* into Russian, which was carried out by the poet Apollon Grigoriev at the request of the book publisher Fyodor Stellovsky in 1862. Grigoriev translated from the Italian version, since the publication of the libretto was timed to coincide with the tour in St. Petersburg of an Italian troupe that was performing *Fidelio* in that language. The list of characters includes: "Ferdinando

[13] Castil-Blaze, H. J. (1847, 1er décembre). *Léonore, grand opéra en 4 actes, d'après J. N. Bouilly, paroles de Castil-Blaze, musique de Louis van Beethoven.* Bruxelles, Théâtre Royal.

[14] Maggioni, M. (1851). *Fidelio: An Opera in Two Acts, the Music by Beethoven; the Libretto, with New Recitatives, Arranged by Manfredo Maggioni; as Represented at the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden*. T. Brettell, p. 11.

Florestan, a Spanish nobleman, who has been imprisoned in the Seville state prison for several years."[15] It is significant that in this performance the part of Beethoven's Leonore was sung by the French prima donna Caroline Barbeau, whose invitation was insisted on by Giuseppe Verdi, who saw in her the ideal performer of his own Léonore — the heroine of the opera *La forza del destino*, which was written for the St. Petersburg stage and staged on November 10, 1862 at the Bolshoi Kamenny Theatre. The action of *La forza del destino* also takes place in Spain — the source of the libretto was the drama by Angel de Saavedra. Although the performance of two operas with a Spanish setting and namesake heroines on the same stage almost one after the other is just a coincidence, the context in any case turned out to be the same.

Place and Time of Action

When staging an opera on a modern plot disguised as a "historical fact," a question inevitably arises about the specific realities — the place and time of the action.

Even if Bouilly was well acquainted with the legend of Count González and Doña Sancha, the medieval era was obviously incompatible with the key turn in the development of the plot: as we know, at the decisive moment, Léonore, protecting Florestan from Pizarro's dagger, snatches a pistol and points it at the enemy. In the Middle Ages, pistols did not exist; they first appeared only in the 15th century to become the personal weapon of the highest nobility in the 16th century. This detail emphasises the aristocratic origins of the main characters. The unknown and poor young man Fidelio not only could not wield a pistol but moreover did not know how to. Therefore, the sudden appearance of a pistol, even if it didn't fire, must have stunned both Pizarro and Rocco. Of course, for people of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, pistols no longer seemed like rare and expensive weapons, but at the same time not every noble lady knew how to hold a pistol in her hands.

Consequently, the opera's action can be dated to the 16th or 17th century, giving *Léonore* / *Fidelio* the features of a historical costume drama in a rather colourful setting. Let us recall once again that Sonnleithner indicated in his appeal to the Viennese censorship authorities that the action takes place in the 16th century. Judging by the costumes depicted in the 1814 edition of the libretto of *Fidelio*, the designers of the play were guided by Spanish fashions of the late 16th and early 17th centuries – that is, the costumes of the era of King Philip II (1527–1598) and his heir, King Philip III (1578–1621) (*Illustrations 4, 5, 6*).

[15] Grigoriev, Ap. (Transl.). (1862). *Fidelio. Opera v dvukh deystviyakh. Muzyka Betkhovena* [*Fidelio. Opera in Two Acts. Music by Beethoven*]. F. Stellovsky Printing House, p. 2.

A surprisingly precise and at the same time mysterious indication of the time of action is contained in the Russian translation of the libretto of *Fidelio*, which was published in 1891 in Moscow by Pyotr Ivanovich Jurgenson both as a separate booklet and in a pianoforte edition. The translator in a separate edition of the libretto is listed as "P. Kirs"; however, no writer with such a surname and personal initial "P" could be found. This may be a pseudonym or a hoax, since Jurgenson's real surname on his father's side is Kirs.

According to this edition, the action of *Fidelio* takes place in 1630.[16] The King of Spain at that time was Philip IV (1605–1665); however, the de facto ruler of the country was the Count-Duke of Olivares, whose power was ended in 1643 (Olivares died in 1645). Appeals to the "good" and "just" king are contained in the opera's libretto, both in the first act (Rocco justifies allowing the prisoners to stroll in the prison yard by celebrating the king's name day) and in the second (the minister is authorised to conduct the investigation on behalf of the monarch). However, in the text published by Jurgenson, the finale of the second act for some reason must take place against the backdrop of a statue of the Castilian king Pedro I the Just, or the Lawgiver (*El Justiciero*): "In the middle of the stage is a statue of Don Pedro (the Lawgiver), the 14th-century King of Castile. The background of the set represents a view of a small Spanish town in around 1630."[17]

Illustration 4. Portrait of King Philip II by Titian. Naples, Capodimonte Museum. Retrieved October 30, 2024, from Wikipedia

Illustration 5. Portrait of King Philip III by Juan Pantoja de la Cruz. Madrid, Prado. Retrieved October 30, 2024, from Wikipedia

[16] Sonnleithner, I. (1891). *Fidelio. Opera L. Betkhovena v 2 d.* [*Fidelio. Opera by L. Beethoven in 2 Acts*] (P. Kirs, Transl.). P. Jurgenson Publishing House, p. 6.
[17] Ibid., p. 56.

Without going into the intricacies of Spanish history, this detail could be easily overlooked, but it carries symbolic weight. Pedro I actually ruled in the 14th century; however, his original nickname was "the Cruel" (*El Cruel*). He ruthlessly exterminated his personal enemies and rivals, decisively suppressed rebellions, and was eventually killed by his half-brother Enrique. Pedro received the flattering nickname "the Just" not because of the great love of his subjects, then, but rather because of the fear inspired by his formidable personality.

Illustration 6. Scene from the second act of Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*. Engraving from the 1814 edition of the libretto

It remains unclear why, when staging *Fidelio*, if the year of action is stated to be 1630, the stage should be adorned with a statute of this monarch, who was not at all distinguished for his mercy. The only reasonable explanation is to follow a foreign source that reflected the realities of a particular performance. After all, Jurgenson's piano score was not made according to Beethoven's score, but according to the edition of François-Auguste Gevaert, who replaced the spoken dialogues in *Fidelio* with recitatives, as was customary for a grand opera of the 19th century. Gevaert's version of *Fidelio* was staged in Brussels in 1889 (the premiere is confirmed to have taken place on March 11, but no information about the scenography could be found).

In addition to the general indication of the opera's location, Bouilly's libretto contains a specific geographical reference: a state prison a few miles from Seville. The same remark is present in all versions of Beethoven's opera.

Was this localisation purely conventional, following the example of Beaumarchais' comedies about a Seville barber named Figaro, or did such a prison really exist? And why is it important to clarify that the prison is a state prison?

The musicologist and cultural scholar Esteban Buch explains this detail in detail in his essay on the historical context of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Based on definitions from dictionaries of the first half of the 19th century

(the *Dictionary of the French Academy* and the *Dictionary of the Brothers Grimm*), one can draw an unambiguous conclusion: state prisons contain prisoners who have committed crimes against the state and its interests. That is, prisoners of such a prison become prisoners for political rather than criminal reasons; moreover, the conditions of detention here are much harsher than in a regular prison, where the prisoner's relatives can ease his suffering with money or donations of food and other items. State prisons existed not only in Spain, but also in France and other countries. However, as Buch notes, such prisons continued to operate in Spain until the end of the 18th century; therefore, Bouilly may have had one of them in mind: either the Alcázar de Segovia castle, located near Madrid, or the Castle of San Jorge, the infamous Inquisition prison located in Seville and operating until 1785 [3].

There is no information about the scenery in which Gaveaux' *Léonore* was staged in Paris in 1798, but some information about the scenery and costumes in the first productions of Beethoven's Fidelio has survived that show obvious references to Spain, which are more likely to be of the late 16th century than later.

As for the decoration of the dungeon in which Florestan languishes, Beethoven's contemporaries had before their eyes an amazing local "attraction" that was used to entertain and at the same time horrify visitors to Vienna. A similar excursion is described in the memoirs of Vasily Mikhailovich Ivanov, quartermaster of Empress Elizabeth Alekseyevna, who accompanied her during her trip to the Vienna Congress in 1814–1815. On October 8, 1814, taking advantage of his free time, Ivanov and two companions went to inspect the Franzensburg castle, located near the imperial country residence of Laxenburg:

> We (i.e. Prince A. M. Golitsyn, N. M. Longinov and I[18]) arrived at this castle, which is surrounded by a lake, on a ferry. The huge Gothic gates were locked: I knocked on them with the ring, upon which they were immediately opened by the sentry. The venerable commandant of the castle showed us all the sights of this place: a small church, the rooms of the former Emperors, towers, long galleries, lift-up sofas that rise from the first floor to the second, knights' rooms and a clandestine chamber, which recalled the terrible times of the Inquisition. Then the Commandant showed us the tower through which defendants were lowered into a deep dungeon. Curious to see this terrible place, we entered the gloomy gaol: heavy chains were bolted to the walls, and instead of chairs and beds there were bare stones. Huge vaults, barely illuminated by the rays of the sun, lead to underground caverns. Looking attentively at this abode of horror, I saw under one vault a prisoner sitting in a white shroud; his hands and feet were burdened with fetters, a red cross was embroidered on his left shoulder, a white hood was on his head; a pale,

[18] Nikolai Mikhailovich Longinov (1780–1853) was Elizaveta Alekseevna's secretary from 1812. Prince Alexander Mikhailovich Golitsyn was part of the imperial couple's retinue at the Congress of Vienna. .

> exhausted face, wild looks and overgrown beard gave him a desperate look; I approached him – suddenly the prisoner rose from the stone and, rattling his chains, stretched out his hands to me, as if begging for compassion. An involuntary tremor came over me. On closer inspection, I was surprised to see a skilfully crafted wax statue operating through a hidden mechanism. The piercing dampness and foul air induced us to quickly leave this prison.[19]

This castle (*Illustration 7*) was never a prison and had no connection with the Inquisition. Generally speaking, it was built in 1798–1801 as an "amusement" by order of Emperor Franz II (after 1804 — Franz I). Franz decided to recreate something Gothic-medieval near Laxenburg that would be at the same time luxurious, majestic and terrifying. Hence the theatrical embodiment of the "trial of the Inquisition" over a Knight Templar (the prisoner's outfit clearly indicates his belonging to this order). The underground prison, which made such a strong impression on eyewitnesses, was created on the model of real medieval dungeons, also called "cisterns", since there was a well inside [4, p. 47–48]. The word "cistern"

Illustration 7. Franzensburg Castle.
Painting by Eduard Gurka, c. 1838.
Retrieved October 30, 2024, from Wikipedia

[19] Ivanov, V. M. (1833). *Notes Kept during the Journey of Empress Elizabeth Alekseevna through Germany in 1813–1815*. (Part 2). I. Glazunov Printing House, p. 12–13.

is constantly present in the libretto of *Fidelio*, and we can only guess whether Beethoven himself saw the impressive installation in Franzensburg or heard about it from his acquaintances (the castle, as can be seen from Ivanov's memoirs, was not closed to visits by outsiders). It is reasonable to assume that the producers of *Fidelio*, who designed the performances at the Theater an der Wien in 1805 and at the Kärntnertortheater in 1814, visited Franzensburg Castle and saw the automaton representing the prisoner.

Fidelio in Spain and in Spanish-Speaking Countries

It would seem only to be expected that a work with such a plot should have achieved success in Spain. But the fate of *Fidelio* in this country turned out to be even more difficult than in Russia, where Beethoven's opera was staged as early as 1818 (although during the 19th century it was never included in the regular repertoire).

During Beethoven's lifetime, the political and cultural situation in Spain did not leave any opportunity for the performance of a work as problematic in content and challenging for singers and orchestra as *Fidelio*. By entering into an alliance with Napoleon, Spain doomed itself to several years of French rule (from 1808 to 1813, Joseph Bonaparte was the King of Spain) and to a long period of wars and armed uprisings. Even after the Battle of Vitoria, a city in the Basque Country, when the French were defeated and Joseph Bonaparte left Spain, the struggle for power continued; under such conditions, the Spaniards had no time for new musical theatre, especially in German, which for a long time was perceived by Spaniards with great difficulty.

Various aspects of the reception of Beethoven's work on the Iberian Peninsula are explored in the collective monograph, published in 2021 in Madrid and edited by Teresa Cascudo García. The monograph opens with a section by Michael Christoforidis and Peter Tregear that reconstructs the political context of the 1820s in connection with the Viennese productions of Beethoven's works, including *Fidelio* (1822, Kärntnertortheater). As the authors note, the resumption of the opera chronologically coincided with the Congress of Verona, at which the countries participating in the Holy Alliance (Russia, Austria and Prussia) decided to support the French military intervention in Spain with the aim of suppressing the revolution there. In this situation, the Spanish setting of *Fidelio* acquired additional significance, since the sympathies of the German liberals were on the side of the Spanish constitutionalists [5, p. 26–27].

The history of the reception of *Fidelio* in Spain is the subject of an independent study by Francisco Manuel López Gómez [6]. Beethoven's work was virtually unknown in this country until the mid-19th century. Information about the opera was disseminated there in a bizarre way following the publication

in 1842 of a Spanish translation of Eugène Sue's novel *Paula Monti*, in which the characters perform fragments from Beethoven's opera. In Paris, the opera-going public had become acquainted with *Fidelio* back in 1829 during the tour of the opera troupe from Aachen. Beethoven's symphonies, which had also been performed at Parisian concerts a year earlier, were already becoming fashionable.

From 1866, Beethoven's symphonies began to be performed in Spain. Soon biographical notes about the composer appeared in magazines, including information about his only opera; from 1867, concert programs began to include different versions of the overtures to *Fidelio* [6, p. 94–95]. However, the first production of the opera in Spain took place only in 1893 at the Teatro Real in Madrid. It was warmly received by the public and critics. Conducted by Juan Goula, the solo parts were sung by Teresa Arkel (Léonore), Josefina Huguet (Marcelina), Emilio de Marchi (Florestan), Francesco Navarrini (Rocco), Alfonso Mariani (Pizzarro) and Antonio Oliver (Jacquino). Judging by the list of names, not only Spanish but also foreign performers took part in the premiere.

This performance cannot be called authentic: the text was sung in an Italian translation, spoken dialogues being replaced by recitatives; moreover, the opera was divided into three acts, although it was the original two-act version that was performed [6, p. 98]. Other details about the preparations for the Madrid premiere of *Fidelio* are given in an article written by Carolina Queipo and José María Domínguez [7, p. 149–163].

However, *Fidelio* never become part of the permanent operatic repertoire in Spain. Following the Madrid premiere in 1893, there was only one additional production in Barcelona at the Liceu Theatre in 1921, which was in German. Perhaps they saw no need for their own interpretations of *Fidelio*, since, thanks to the spread of radio broadcasts and recordings in the 20th century, Spanish music lovers could get to know it in the best German and Austrian performances, which were considered benchmarks. However, certain figures in Spanish culture had a special passion for Beethoven's opera and knew it well.

A surprising and touching testimony to the deep interest in *Fidelio* is preserved in the archive of the famous Spanish playwright and librettist Guillermo Fernández-Shaw Iturralde (1893–1965). This consists in a typescript of his unrealised film script based on the plot of *Fidelio* [8].

Fernández-Shaw proposed that *Fidelio* be set in 18th-century Spain during the reign of King Ferdinand VI (1713–1759) or that of his brother Charles III (1716–1788). The central figure of the script was the Marquis de la Ensenada (Zenón de Somodevilla), a powerful state adviser to both kings. Florestan and Leonor have become representatives of Seville's high society — Don Florestan de Monteflorido ("From the Flowering Mountain"), Marquis of Guadalquivir, and his young wife, Doña Leonor de Mendoza. Their enemy and persecutor turns out to be the Corregidor

of Seville, Don Juan de Sandoval. The Corregidor's henchmen abduct Florestan at night from his bedroom and take him away to an unknown location. Dressed in men's clothing and taking the name Fidelio Mendoza, Leonor sets out on a journey with her faithful servant Trapillo in the hope of finding the place where Florestan is being held. After experiencing many romantic adventures, riding horses and listening to the songs of Andalusian gypsies, the heroines finally arrive at the Seville prison where Leonor is hired as an assistant to "Uncle Roque." The further development of the plot follows that of Beethoven's original opera. The prison manager, Don Luis Pizarro, who is alarmed by the news of the arrival of the minister Don Fernando de Céspedes, decides to immediately execute the secret prisoner, Florestan, who is being held in prison without trial or investigation. After saving her husband from this fate, Leonor explains to the minister that Florestan was imprisoned for his friendship with the disgraced Marquis de Ensenada [8, p. 19]. The once all-powerful politician was arrested on the night of July 20, 1754, accused of treason and exiled first to Granada and then to Cadiz. Since he still had many influential supporters, the Marquis of Ensenada was able to return to court in 1760 following the accession of Charles III, but by that time he had lost his political weight.

Fernandez-Shaw's script did not envisage the genre of a film-opera; instead, the plot of *Fidelio* served as an external canvas and transformed into a purely Spanish story, albeit with a distinctly Andalusian flavour. However, as is clear from the project, the film was supposed to open with the sound of Beethoven's *Leonore* Overture No. 3, which was often included in concert programs as an independent work.

Since the end of the 20th century and into the beginning of the 21st century, *Fidelio* has been staged in Spain several times. In 2006, a highly spectacular production using computer effects was staged at the Queen Sofia Palace of the Arts in Valencia (directed and designed by Pierre Alli, conducted by Zubin Mehta); this performance, with the magnificent Waltraud Meier in the leading role, was a huge success and was recorded on video disc. During the 2007–2008 season, the opera was performed at the Teatro Real in Madrid, while in 2009, a concert performance took place in Seville, at the Teatro Maestranza, under the direction of Daniel Barenboim.

In Latin American countries, the only performance of *Fidelio* in the 19th century was in 1891 in Mexico City in English [9, p. 592]. A full production then took place in Buenos Aires (1927, in Italian, with sets by Nicolas Benois); since then, the opera has periodically returned to the stage of the Teatro Colón (in 1933, 1937, 1943, 1950, 1953, 1958, 1966, 1970, 1980, 1988, 1997, 2003, 2016). The popularity of *Fidelio* in Buenos Aires, which is completely atypical for Spanish-speaking countries, can be explained by the high international reputation of this theatre and the international composition of the local audience, where representatives of the German and Italian diasporas play a significant role.

In 2020, when the world celebrated the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, *Fidelio* was staged in various Latin American countries, including even those where a full-fledged theatrical production of this work would be unthinkable. A concert performance of an abridged version of *Fidelio* with piano accompaniment was organised by the local Philharmonic Society took place in the Bolivian capital, La Paz [10]. Thanks to the recording posted by the organisers on the portal *YouTube*, one can see with what care and love the Bolivian artists mastered the most difficult parts in German, and with what sensitivity to Beethoven's style Carlos Tejada performed the piano part.

In Mexico, the National Institute of Fine Arts and Letters and the National Opera Company staged a vibrant and contemporary production of *Fidelio* in 2021 (directed by Mauricio García Lozano, set designer Jorge Ballina, conductor Nixa Baresa). Without innovative pretensions, the directors created a performance about the realities of a typical Latin American dictatorship of the 20th century. The Spanish-language subtitles helped to bring the classical opera closer to the current situation. The musical level of all the performers met the highest standards (Léonore — Monica Chavez; Florestan — Francisco Araiza).

Illustration 8. Finale of *Fidelio* (Mexico, 2021). Screenshot from the performance recording on YouTube (accessed 30.10.2024)

We have seen that the plot of *Fidelio*, as relevant as it is universal, allows for any nationally coloured interpretation. However, it seems quite natural that the "Spanish trace" that was initially present in the libretto should find various embodiments in the opera theatre of subsequent centuries.

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