

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770-1827)

Leonore Overture No. 3

Born in the small German city of Bonn on or around December 16, 1770, Ludwig van Beethoven received his early training from his father and other local musicians. As a teenager, he was granted half of his father's salary as court musician from the Electorate of Cologne in order to care for his two younger brothers after his father gave in to alcoholism. Beethoven played viola in various orchestras, becoming friends with other players such as Anton Reicha, Nikolaus Simrock, and Franz Ries, and began taking on composition commissions. As a member of the court chapel orchestra, he was able to travel some and meet members of the nobility, one of whom, Count Ferdinand Waldstein, would become a great friend and patron. Beethoven moved to Vienna in 1792 to study with Franz Josef Haydn and, despite the prickliness of their relationship, Haydn's concise humor helped form Beethoven's style. His subsequent teachers in composition were Johann Georg Albrechtsberger and Antonio Salieri. In 1794, he began his career as a pianist and composer, taking advantage whenever he could of the patronage of others. In the fall of 1801, at the age of 30, Beethoven revealed his ever-increasing hearing loss and stated in a letter that he would "seize Fate by the throat; it shall not bend or crush me completely." Beginning in 1803, Beethoven was good to his word as he embarked on a sustained period of groundbreaking creativity. In later years, he was plagued by personal difficulties, including a series of failed romances and a nasty custody battle over his nephew, Karl. He died in Vienna on March 26, 1827.

Though Beethoven was, by all accounts, an extraordinary improviser, composition came only after long and arduous hammering out ideas. Beethoven's love for opera was lifelong and not requited. Subjects as diverse as "Macbeth" and the Medieval French tale of the fairy "Mélusine" failed to come to fruition, and the success of the one opera he actually wrote, the work that began as "Leonore" and came finally to be called "Fidelio", arrived slowly and sorely lacking in enthusiastic public reception. Though strongly motivated to create a narrative work reflecting his own ideas and feelings about personal freedom, Beethoven was essentially a composer who thought instrumentally and his sense of theater was in no way commensurate with his musical instincts. Partly for this reason, a full decade was required for "Fidelio" to come to fruition.

Ultimately, Beethoven wrote four overtures for this, his only opera, the first three called "Leonore" and the fourth with the name "Fidelio". Despite its number, "Leonore no. 3" (1806) is Beethoven's second version of the overture. Although it is more concise and less symphonic than his first effort, it does not avoid the pitfall of musically telling the story of the entire opera before the curtain goes up. Beethoven ultimately understood the situation and wrote the "Fidelio" overture to mitigate this issue. In the concert hall, where it has ultimately retired, the "Leonore Overture No. 3" is as compelling as any symphonic poem in the literature.

OF NOTE:

Mendelssohn was the first conductor to program all four overtures together, during a concert at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, in 1840.