

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

prisoner of the state

David Lang

David Lang does not like to repeat himself. He can seem a strikingly different composer from one work to the next, and the unifying feature of his oeuvre, which encompasses about 200 works, appears to be his constant, insatiable, circuitous curiosity. He has written for a broad spectrum of media — works for single instruments; chamber pieces for often unconventional combinations; compositions for dance, for film, for band, for chorus, for orchestra; and works of opera or more broadly defined musical theater, of which *prisoner of the state* is his 13th.

He does not shy away from daunting aspirations. In 2015 he wrote *questionnaire* to honor the 120th anniversary of New York's Third Street Music Settlement and accordingly scored it for 120 guitars. Many audience members may have witnessed, or even participated in, *the public domain*, his piece for 1,000 performers divided into five sub-choirs, presented outdoors at Lincoln Center during the Mostly Mozart Festival in 2016. New Yorkers turned out in force last October to experience *the mile-long opera*, for which 1,000 performers from across the city were arrayed along the length of The High Line, singing individual texts derived from firsthand interviews about the transition from day to night around the hour of 7:00 p.m. — all set to music by Lang.

One recurrent theme within Lang's output is his personal confrontation with towering masterpieces of the classical-music canon and how those compositions spur him to create new works in the rays of illumination or shadows of perplexity they cast. This niche of his catalogue includes what has become his most famous composition, *the little match girl*

passion, which earned him the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Music. It retells a tale by Hans Christian Andersen using the general form, dramatic methods, and emotional magnetism of J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. His *love fail*, a 2012 work for women's vocal quartet, takes on the myth of Tristan and Isolde as filtered through ancient and modern narratives, incorporating a nod to Wagner's opera. In *death speaks*, premiered in 2012, he confronts Schubert songs on the theme of mortality, drawing inspiration from that composer's musically-dramatic architecture and even quoting from 32 such songs.

One of the most widely performed of American composers, Lang is a co-founder and co-artistic director of New York's influential music collective Bang on a Can. Since 2008 he has served as professor of composition at Yale School of Music. He was honored as *Musical America's* 2013 Composer of the Year and was named to Carnegie Hall's Debs Composer's Chair for 2013–14. He was given the 2016 Audiences and Engagement Award of the Royal Philharmonic Society for his

In Short

Born: January 8, 1957, in Los Angeles, California

Resides: in New York City

Work composed: 2018–19, co-commissioned by the New York Philharmonic in collaboration with Rotterdam's de Doelen, London's Barbican, Barcelona's l'Auditori, the Bochum Symphony Orchestra, and Bruges's Concertgebouw

World premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 65 minutes

In the Composer's Words

For the past 40 years I have wanted to make my own version of *Fidelio*. There is none of Beethoven's music in my piece, but *prisoner of the state* is built on 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, or which gave me opportunities to go a little deeper into environment or character or narrative. I compiled Beethoven's 1805 and 1814 texts, and then I wrote my own libretto to comment on them. The characters of the original, the story, the performance history — all of these became meaningful for me to think about, to comment on, and to adapt.

My process was to simplify the parts of the libretto that I kept, and to comment on them, by adding language from other, outside texts that might deepen our understanding of the original. For example, after The Governor orders The Jailer to help him kill The Prisoner I have added an aria that is a paraphrase of Machiavelli's famous dictum "it is better to be feared than to be loved." To describe the prison's structure I have added a paraphrase of English philosopher Jeremy Bentham's theory behind the invention of the "modern" prison, modern being 1791. To The Prisoner's aria I have added references to Rousseau; to The Guards' definition of punishment I have added references to Hannah Arendt. I was curious just who Beethoven thought prisoners were in 1805, when *Fidelio* premiered, and I searched for contemporaneous lists of crimes and criminals; I found a list from 1805 of those crimes for which English prisoners could be transported to Australia and I used part of it as a way for the prisoners to introduce themselves to us.

Last but not least, the title comes from Beethoven's original libretto:

Leonora (to Rocco, the Jailer):

I often see you coming out of the underground vaults of this castle, almost breathless and exhausted. Why don't you let me accompany you?

Rocco:

You know I have the strictest orders not to let anyone near the Prisoners of the State.



— David Lang

memorial ground, a piece for massed singers and soloists that he created for the East Neuk Festival and 14–18 NOW, a British cultural program surrounding the centennial of World War I, to mark the Battle of the Somme.

Aficionados of capital letters will not find fulfillment in Lang’s titles, which eschew them. In an interview with Michael Cooper

of *The New York Times*, Lang ruminated on how lowercase titles may maintain an aura of mystery that differs from the certainty projected by capital letters. Particularly in pieces overtly descended from classical masterworks, lowercase titles might project a demeanor of humility — or, as he put it, “It feels like I’m not trying to say, ‘Well,

Sources and Inspirations

In the late 1970s I saw two performances of Beethoven’s opera *Fidelio*, within a few months of each other. One was a fully staged production, in an opera house, with costumes and sets and drama, and the other was in a concert hall, with an orchestra on stage, singers in concert clothes, and performed oratorio style. I enjoyed them both, but what I most noticed was how the format and location of each performance influenced how I thought about the piece. In the opera house I paid more attention to the opera’s narrative, while in the concert hall I paid more attention to the opera’s ideas.

One of the historic observations about *Fidelio* is that the ideas are more defined than the narrative. The opera contains some of Beethoven’s most noble and beautiful and powerful music but the shape of the drama can make staging the opera very difficult. There is talking in between the scenes, there is a mistaken identity / secondary romance plot that is maybe more at home in a comic opera setting, there are things that get introduced and then dropped, etc. We spend the entire opera in a dark prison but at the end there is a happy chorus of townspeople we have never seen before — where exactly did they come from?

For me the most problematic observation about *Fidelio* is that at the end, after the prisoner is freed, I always want the townspeople to sing about freedom, or about tyranny, or about justice, and instead they sing about how great it is for a wife to save her husband. “All who have such a wife, join our song!” And of course, only one of the prisoners has been freed. What happens to the rest of them?

For a classical music nerd like me, and maybe like you, we may learn how to think about and organize and express our feelings from internalizing lessons from the great music that we love. For those of us who started loving this music when young we may have learned these lessons before

we realized there was anything else to learn. I have always felt that that makes these lessons worth exploring, worth questioning, worth probing, just to make sure that there is nothing in our culture or in ourselves that we take for granted.

— David Lang



The prisoner being freed by his wife in Act III of Beethoven’s *Fidelio* in an illustration of Théâtre Lyrique’s 1860 staging in Paris

Beethoven did this, and now it's my turn to do that.' ”

Beethoven is, in fact, the figure with whom Lang grapples in *prisoner of the state*, and specifically with his opera *Fidelio*. After its unsuccessful premiere in 1805 (under the title *Leonore*), Beethoven revised it and reintroduced it in 1806 (again as *Leonore*, again a failure), and finally found success in 1814 when it took new form as *Fidelio*. Especially in its earlier incarnations, it was a curious mixture of deadly serious opera and lighthearted *opéra comique*. Aspects of that remained in the eventual *Fidelio*, mainly in the romantic flirtations at the piece's outset, but what accounts for the opera's reputation in posterity (apart from Beethoven's music, of course) is its defiant posture against political oppression. That is

the aspect of *Fidelio* which inspired Lang's *prisoner of the state*.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets (one offstage), two trombones, timpani, orchestra bells, vibraphone, whip, snare drum, low tom-tom, two bass drums, two suspended cymbals, and strings; in addition to a cast comprising The Assistant (soprano), The Jailer (bass-baritone), The Governor (tenor), The Prisoner (baritone), Guards (four male singers), and a men's Chorus of Prisoners.

prisoner of the state is published by Red Poppy Music (ASCAP).

From the Archives

In 1865 the New York Philharmonic responded to the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln with a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony — minus the Ode to Joy, which was deemed inappropriate for the occasion. It would be just one of the times this Orchestra, and others, would offer musical responses in times of conflict and emotional strife. Examples can be viewed in the New York Philharmonic Archives exhibit *Music of Conscience: The Orchestral World Responds* in the Bruno Walter Gallery on the Grand Promenade (Orchestra Level). Highlights include:

- A letter from New York Philharmonic musicians thanking Arturo Toscanini for his stance against Fascism during World War II
- Bernstein's marked score of Mahler's Symphony No. 2, *Resurrection*, used on the November 1963 televised performance following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy
- Audience letters reacting to the performance of German music — “music of the enemy” — during World War I
- Photographs from Cold War-era visits to China and the USSR by the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, and The Philadelphia Orchestra

— The Archives



In 1959, the height of the Cold War, the New York Philharmonic performed a concert in Moscow, where Dmitri Shostakovich, himself often at odds with the Soviet regime, embraced Leonard Bernstein following a performance of his Symphony No. 5.