

Da! Ahronovitch and 'Fidelio'

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"FIDELIO' is a genius opera. It is about people in critical situations, what happens to them when there are big troubles. It is also about tyranny and freedom and love and loyalty. And these things are important for all of humanity."

The impassioned speaker is Yuri Ahronovitch, the Soviet-born conductor who is in Chicago to lead Lyric Opera's "Fidelio", which opens Wednesday, Oct.29, in the Civic Opera House.

It is mid-morning, two weeks ago. Ahronovitch is standing next to the picture window in his lakefront hotel suite, pouring cognac into two water glasses and a stray teacup. Hospitality, Russian-style.

"Za vashe zdorov'e!" Ahronovitch calls out heartily. "Or, how do you say in English, cheers?"

THE BLUE-EYED Russian bear cub of a man looks like a cross between Boris Spassky and Dustin Hoffman. But the unruliness of his bushy hair is pure Beethoven. And although he doesn't wear Gucci, his fashionable yellow sweater and silver digital watch are far from drab.

His left hand takes civilized grasp of the cognac glass, while his right hand curls into a fist.

" 'Fidelio' takes place in Spain," he says, relaxing into his native tongue. "Why? Because Beethoven wasn't allowed to talk about Germany." His attractive Israeli wife, Tamar, listens to her husband's dark, deep voice and softly translates the steady stream of words.

"It was a political necessity that Beethoven dress his characters in Spanish clothes." Ahronovitch's features harden. "Tyranny is not a problem that was born today. For me it has very deep meaning."

The volatile, 43-year-old conductor is reluctant to talk about the circumstances that made him decide to leave Russia. He was appointed to the prestigious post of chief conductor of the Moscow Radio Orchestra in 1964.

" I said I wanted to emigrate to Israel, in October 1971. In five minutes I lost my job. I had to wait almost another year, to get permission to leave."

AHRONOVITCH met Tamar (her name means "palm tree") after he arrived in Israel. They were married 2½ years ago, and now have an apartment in Jerusalem.

This season, the maestro will begin commuting from Cologne, Germany, where he is the principal conductor of the Gurzenich Orchestra.

He is reticent about his past, and has no desire to follow in the footsteps of such famous defectors as Solzhenitsyn or Nureyev.

"I am a conductor," says Ahronovitch firmly, "not a politician. I have come away from Russia because I don't want to touch any political subject at all."

But with a plot like "Fidelio's," it is hard to skirt social issues.

Gwyneth Jones and Rose Wagemann share the role of Leonora in Lyric's production.

Leonora disguises herself as a boy, Fidelio, to gain the confidence of the soft-hearted, old jailer Rocco (Walter Berry), and so rescue her husband Florestan (Jon Vickers) from an unjust imprisonment.

She succeeds with a little help from the Spanish army.

There are, of course, subplots and sub-subplots going on while Leonora faces her dilemma. "In a middle-class work, if there is only one idea, it is still OK," comments Ahronovitch.

"But with something fantastic like 'Fidelio,' there are always many ideas and many levels. Love between husband and wife exists. But when Beethoven is talking about it, then it is a situation for the whole human race."

BUT IS it a situation in two acts? And is it Beethoven's 1805, 1806 or 1814 version of the opera?

The questions have to be asked because "Fidelio" has one of opera's messiest, most confusing pasts. The disappointment and frustration Beethoven experienced with "Fidelio" made him feel that "the whole business of opera is the most distressing thing in the world."

Though the story was taken from a true incident in the French Revolution, Leonora was Beethoven's own special Eliza Doolittle, his idea woman. "Fidelio," originally written in three acts, failed twice in Vienna and never got off the ground in Prague. Today it would be like Neil Simon writing a book that didn't sell.

Finally, three "Leonora" overtures and countless revisions later, "Fidelio" was a smash. This two-act, 1814 version is the one generally used today.

"I have conducted 'Fidelio' in Russia," says Ahronovitch, who follows the tradition begun by Gustav Mahler of inserting the "Leonora" Overture No. 3 between the scenes of Act 2.

AND HE has had plenty of time to determine his own plan for the work. "I made my conducting debut at the age of 5." His expression slowly melts into a smile like a Russian spring. "It was Mozart's Symphony No. 38 with the Orchestra of the Leningrad Conservatory. I remember it like yesterday."

But Ahronovitch's mathematician-violinist father opposed his violin and piano lessons. "He did not think it was healthy for me. I was so involved emotionally with the music that always in the evenings I would get high fevers." Ahronovitch confirms the truth of such a remark when he looks you straight in the eye with poker-hot intensity.

During World War II, there was little time for music. "I was alone in the siege of Leningrad. I forgot everything. How to read and write. How to play music. After the war, I had to begin again."