Fidelio: Melodramas of Agency and Identity

Author(s): Jonathan Goldberg

Source: *Criticism*, Vol. 55, No. 4, A Dossier of Essays on Melodrama (Fall 2013), pp. 547-565
Published by: Wayne State University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/criticism.55.4.0547

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/criticism.55.4.0547?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Wayne State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Criticism*

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

FIDELIO: MELODRAMAS OF AGENCY AND IDENTITY

Jonathan Goldberg

This essay was meant to be an introductory paragraph or perhaps a page on the way to an analysis of Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and two films widely recognized as being in its orbit, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) and Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven* (2002).[1] My aim was to read these melodramas in terms of the ways in which sexual identity affected possibilities of agency. In the course of thinking about that question, it occurred to me that it also might be asked about a much earlier example of melodrama. This essay takes up that point; it stands as a prolegomenon to an investigation that would lead to Sirk and the melodramas in his debt. That future path is, at times, indicated.

* * *

In the score of Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio* (1814), the duet between Leonore and Rocco in the second act is introduced by what the heading for musical number 12 calls a "Melodram."[2] This is the appropriate technical term for this brief two-minute stretch of the opera: the two characters speak, their utterances punctuated with musical phrases. Beethoven's opera is formally a *Singspiel* or *opéra comique;* everywhere else in the score, we find either speech or concerted numbers. If the orchestra is playing, the singers will be singing. If not, the singer speaks. Music and speech never interact except in this melodrama. This raises some obvious questions: Why does Beethoven introduce melodrama into his opera? Why at this point in his score does he violate the rules of composition about speech and song? In his stunning 1972 essay "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Drama," Thomas Elsaesser has pointed to melodrama of the kind we find in *Fidelio* as a "system of punctuation" through which the emotional weight of the moment is underscored.[3] For

Criticism Fall 2013, Vol. 55, No. 4, pp. 547–565. ISSN 0011-1589.
© 2013 by Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan 48201-1309

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Elsaesser, this formal feature lies at the heart of all melodrama, in the work most readily associated with melodrama in the twentieth century—the films of Douglas Sirk, most notably. What it might be doing in an opera, where, it is easy to presume, the singing voice heightens emotion, is a question that Elsaesser does not ask.

Elsaesser's point is not about opera but does help to remind us how much the plot of Beethoven's opera and the moment at which it arrives at its dramatic/musical Melodram brings his score into the orbit of a family drama. Leonore is, at this moment, descending into the lowest reaches of a prison in the company of Rocco, the jailer in charge of the prison. In male disguise and bearing the name Fidelio, she has insinuated herself into Rocco's company by winning the affection of his daughter Marzelline away from her previous lover, Jaquino. Now engaged to her, she has persuaded her future father-in-law that she should be a fuller partner to him in his job, his assistant in the most arduous tasks. The job before them is to dig the grave of a long and unjustly held political prisoner whom the commandant of the prison, Pizarro, is about to murder. This prisoner may be her husband Florestan, as Leonore suspects, and as we, but not she, know it is. This is why she has disguised herself—to find him, to save him. At this melodramatic moment of disguise and blocked knowledge—at this moment when Beethoven writes a Melodram—discoveries of identity—his, hers—are incipient. Will all be revealed or will she be there only to witness his death, to prepare his grave?

Beethoven's Melodram (figure 1) begins with a brief descent partway down a scale, ending with a tremolo punctuation on a diminished seventh chord. After this moment of musical descent and suspension, Leonore speaks in a voice that, the stage direction indicates, is "halb laut" (164), mezza voce: she remarks how cold it is this deep underground. Rocco responds by commenting that it is quite natural since they are down deep ("Das ist natürlich, es ist ja tief" [164]). Rocco's common sense is belied by the unresolved musical descent down the scale and by a tremolo chord that changes from a seventh to a diminished seventh. However much one can name these musical elements, the line of music is anything but predictable: its effect is to open a space of irresolution and not simply to illustrate the downward movement of the characters, as commentators claim it is doing. When the music stops on the tremolo, it opens the way for a voice that is only half-voiced, and in a space that, however much it is located in this world, is nonetheless below the earth, "unterirdisch," underground: hell, a grave, another world. As André Lischke comments, the music that accompanies this scene of underground cold and the imminence of death produces an effect that we might expect today in a horror movie.[4]

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

164

Zweiter Auftritt.

Rocco. Leonore. Florestan.

(Die beiden Ersteren, die man durch die Oeffnungen bei dem Schein einer Laterne die Treppe herabsteigen sah, tragen einen Krug und Werkzeuge zum Graben. Die Hinterthür öffnet sich und das Theater erhellt sich zur Hälfte.)

№ 12. MELODRAM und DUETT.

Poco sostenuto.

Oboe I.
Corno I. II. in Es.
Violino I.
Violino II.
Viola.
Violoncello e Basso.

pp

Leonore (halb laut). Wie kalt ist es in diesem unterirdischen Gewölbe!

Rocco. Das ist natürlich, es ist ja tief.—

sempre pp

Leonore (sieht unruhig nach allen Seiten umher). Ich glaubte schon, wir würden den Eingang gar nicht finden.—

Allegro.

p

Rocco (sich gegen Florestan's Seite wendend). Da ist er.

Leonore (mit gebrochener Stimme, indem sie den Gefangenen zu erkennen sucht). Er scheint ganz ohne Bewegung.

Rocco. Vielleicht ist er todt.

Leonore (schaudernd). Ihr meint es?

Poco Adagio.

Florestan (macht eine Bewegung).

Rocco. Nein, nein, er schläft.

Allegro.

sempre pp

Vcl.

Rocco. Das müssen wir benutzen und gleich an's Werk gehen, wir haben keine Zeit zu verlieren.

Leonore (beiSeite). Es ist unmöglich seine Züge zu unterscheiden.—

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

165

Andante con moto.

(Die Hörner halten so lange aus, bis die Worte vorüber sind.)

pp

Gott steh' mir bei, wenn er es ist! _

Rocco (setzt seine Laterne auf die Trümmer.) Hier, unter diesen Trümmern, ist die Cisterne, von der ich dir gesagt habe.

Vcl.

C.B. pizz.

Wir brauchen nicht viel zu graben, um an die Oeffnung zu kommen. Gieb mir eine Haue, und du stelle dich hieher.

(Er steigt bis an den Gürtel in die Höhlung hinab, stellt den Krug und legt das Bund Schlüssel neben sich. Leonore steht am Rande und reicht ihm die Haue.)

Du zitterst, _ fürchtest du dich?

Allegro.

Leonore (mit erzwungener Festigkeit des Tones). O nein, es ist nur so kalt.

Rocco (rasch). So mache fort, im Arbeiten wird dir schon warm werden.

Andantino.

Vcl.

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

When the music resumes after this initial exchange about depth and cold, it repeats the descending motif, starting anew, but a half step lower, a key change that has nothing to do with the key anticipated by the suspended seventh chord. This descent is a truncated version of the initial musical line; the descent this time is sudden and interrupted, landing precipitously on a chord that is, this time, sustained; but, once again, it is, like the earlier tremolo conclusion, augmented, producing yet another change in key and further irresolution. Leonore's words at this point—"I never thought we would find the entrance" ("Ich glaubte schon, wir würden den Eingang gar nicht finden" [164])—describes the music as easily as it does the terrain they are exploring as they seek the cell that holds the prisoner. In what key is the Melodram? There is no answer to that question, it appears. However, three chords in quick succession follow her observation, disrupting that supposition. The tempo changes, as well, from the "Poco sostenuto" of the first two descending phrases to an "Allegro" in which the music, for the first time, arrives somewhere harmonically; the three chords resolve in D major. "There he is" ("Da ist er"), Rocco says, as if the arrival in a key is equivalent to the discovery of the man. "Er scheint ganz ohne Bewegung" ("He seems totally without motion"), Leonore responds. To Rocco's commonsense observation—"Da ist er"—Leonore offers a chilling rejoinder. In what sense is he there if he is not moving? Does not moving mean not living? Does the D-major resolution underline his identity, that he is there, or is it a way to definitively mark his end? Her words all but say that he is dead; the equivocation of appearance—"er scheint"—seems overridden in the chordal progression that follows: the Allegro continues, the D-major chord replaced by a D-minor chord underscoring the ominous possibility that they have found him dead already. Rocco gets the point: "[P]erhaps he's dead" ("Vielleicht ist er todt" [164]), he says, but once again the statement is not definitive: "Vielleicht."

The music continues, two more chords follow, once again moving to a diminished seventh, opening musically the possibility in the "perhaps," the possibility of moving forward, beyond the life–death quandary. Leonore questions Rocco, "[R]eally dead?" and the music answers when the diminished chord is followed by a passage in F major marked "Poco Adagio"; an arpeggio ascends in the key of F, descending in the C7 that is its harmonic partner. This is the second time in the Melodram that we experience an expected harmonic progression; this time, it is prolonged. For the first time, speaking voice and music overlap and coincide, for, at the same time that the music plays, Rocco speaks. "He is asleep" ("[E]r schläft"), he says. The music continues, again changing speed, again

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

changing key, prompting Rocco to speak again in the interval opened: it's time for them to get to work, he urges. The opening—the discovery of the sleeping man—gives them an opportunity that must be seized. But when the music resumes, it does so only to come to an immediate halt. A staccato C-major sequence is replaced with a sustained C-minor chord that then modulates into a series of more than measure-length chords that come to a halt on yet another seventh. As it sounds, Leonore speaks: "It is impossible to distinguish his features" ("Es ist unmöglich seine Züge zu unterscheiden" [164]); the chord continues with an additional note, and she speaks over it again: "Gott steh mir bei, wenn er es ist!" ("May God help me if it is him!" [165]).

That it *is* him, and that her wish may be answered, seem indicated by the Andante con moto that follows in the key of E flat that resolves the chord upon which Leonore hung. But the musical phrases keep passing in and out of the minor; Rocco again enjoins them to seize the moment and begin to dig. The melody resumes, this time punctuated by tremolos that Rocco translates quite literally into an observation about his companion—"[Y]ou're trembling," he says. "Are you afraid?" Leonore denies it, after a brief Allegro passage moves away from the major–minor theme to a series of chords that appear to be heading for G-flat major; the answer to Rocco's question is couched in his naturalizing language. "It's so cold," she says, that's why she's trembling—as if the temperature could explain her affect, as if there simply was an outer cause for her inner turmoil. Not that Fidelio could say to Rocco, I'm Leonore, not your future son-in-law; that man might be my husband. To the kind of explanation possible to be uttered, Rocco can respond in his usual commonsensical way—work will warm you up, he promises. After she speaks, the key changes, however, to A major for three measures before arriving at A minor, the key in which the duet is set. Speech is replaced by singing; the Melodram is over.

Why is this melodrama here? What has happened in it? Outwardly, nothing. Leonore still does not know whether the man she sees is Florestan. Rocco sees beside him a trembling young man, his future son-in-law Fidelio, apparently cold, perhaps afraid of the job to be done. He does not know Fidelio is Leonore. Florestan does not know that his wife is there. The melodrama, half-voiced, spoken at cross-purposes, is remarkable (as Daniela Kaleva notes in her essay on Beethoven and melodrama[5] that has helped guide me in the analysis of this scene) for how various its uses of musical punctuation are, sometimes between utterances, sometimes alongside. Sometimes speech occurs while music plays, sometimes as a chord or pedal point is sustained, sometimes in the silences between which the music keeps reinventing itself in its extraordinary series of key

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and tempo changes. "The harmonic language relies on prolongation of dissonance, tonic-dominant progressions, and major–minor relationships for illustrative purposes," Kaleva writes.[6] But illustrative of what? Kaleva notes Leonore's agitation, anxiety, and fear, along with Rocco's impatience. She assumes that the music underlines the dramatic tensions of the scene. This is true, as far as it goes. Kaleva assumes we are to read Fidelio as Leonore, that the truth of disguised and unknown identity is what lies beneath the surface.

This is a very unsettled and unsettling passage, and I would suggest that's what it's about—not about some underlying truth wanting to be revealed, but about the irresolutions, the what-ifs and as-ifs, hesitations, suspensions, and doubts that undermine any naturalizing understanding and show it to be inadequate. Whatever this Melodram is about, it's not the temperature that's making Fidelio tremble, not a matter of a young man not up to the man's work that Rocco has been sent to perform. (Earlier Rocco hesitated when Pizarro wanted him to kill the prisoner; Pizzaro had asked him, "[A]re you a man?" ["Bist du ein Mann?" (91)], staking his own manliness on the murder.) Nor is the scene merely about the question of the identity of the prisoner. For Leonore to know she has found her husband, for Florestan to know that Leonore has found him, for Rocco to know that Fidelio is Leonore and that the young man is a woman: these knowledges certainly could and will dissipate some of the tension in this scene. For the rest of the opera, as this knowledge surfaces, the strict decorum of speaking and singing will be maintained.

The question not asked in assuming that these suppressed revelations are the underlying truth of the Melodram is this: Will identity revealed in itself produce a solution? Isn't Florestan in prison precisely because he is Florestan? How then would his knowing that Leonore is there, how would her knowing that he is there, save Florestan from Pizarro? To suppose that the lifting of the veil and the revelation of identity would empower action assumes a correlation between action and identity. It devalues the space of melodrama as an impasse whose effects are visceral (the cold that is repeatedly remarked) and emotional; it assumes that such forms of embodiment are merely hindrances, as if the body disappeared when true identity is known. But how and why would clarification of identity empower action? The answer to this question is in question; the situation is more complicated than an either/or. The Melodram, however much it involves disguise and uncertain knowledge, is not simply some false state that would be relieved by true knowledge, nor is it in the service of an equation of such supposedly true knowledge with power. We can readily see that formally: the Melodram does not represent a violation

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

of the rules of the opera's separations of speech and song that needs to be repaired so much as a moment dense with musical invention and with experiments in the relationship between speech and music not confined to strict separation. These various states of hesitation, musical irresolution, cross-purpose, key change, suspension, and half-voicing are themselves kinds of knowledge, if only in the multiplicity of arrangements they represent. In its plotting, the Melodram explores states of possibility marked by disguise. It is as Fidelio that Leonore has arrived where she is, as male and marriageable (rather than as female and married) that Fidelio has been able to act. That doing may be tied to a false identity but is nonetheless real action. It may thereby call into question the assumption that action is tied to true identity. It may call into question, moreover, the singularity of identity.

To assume that Leonore is the truth of the character and the basis of what is happening makes everything, all possibility, hinge on the revelation that Fidelio is Leonore. It makes that identity her only identity, her one true identity. This Melodram is just about the last moment that Fidelio can be Fidelio; in the next musical number, she will know who the prisoner is: he will be Florestan, not just an unjustly imprisoned man; once he is Florestan, she will be Leonore. But these true names, and the knowledge of them, are something more than the truth of personal identity. "*Fidelio* is based on the French drama, *Léonore, ou L'amour conjugale* by J. N. Bouilly," as Kaleva reminds anyone unfamiliar with the basic information.[7] The moment that she is "herself" she will also be Florestan's wife. "Tödt' erst sein Weib!" ("First kill his wife!") is the tremendous line in which she stands up to Pizarro and reveals who she is: "Sein Weib?" ("His wife?"), asks Pizarro; "Mein Weib?" ("My wife?"), asks Florestan; "Ja, sieh' hier Leonore," she says, speaking in proprio persona, as his wife, as Leonore (194).

"Yes, Leonore is here. Look!" she says, and melodrama is over. Beethoven has not used it for the revelation of identity, nor for the resolution of action, but to sustain irresolution. Nonetheless, if we return to the score of the Melodram, we can see that it more than hints where it is going. It does so from its first note, an F in the cellos and double basses. The Melodram is the second number in act 2 of *Fidelio*; it follows the scene and aria in which Florestan first appears. Florestan's aria is in the key of F, and the final chords are the expected C7-/F-major harmonic resolution. When the F sounds in the strings at the beginning of the Melodram, we are, musically, still in his world. Coincident with the uncanny, unearthly locale, Leonore is also located there. The tremolo, which Kaleva follows Erich Schenk in calling a "shiver motif"[8]—as if Leonore's remark about the cold is simply to

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

be taken at face value—recalls the tremolo heard toward the end of the first part of Florestan's aria when he sings about the chains that are his reward for his commitment to the truth (158). If the tremolo functions in his aria in the melodramatic mode of simultaneously underscoring his words and imitating the clinking sound of his chains, it also carries an additional kind of meaning. The chains are not the reward that truth deserves. The climate of the cell is politically unnatural. The tremolo marks the lack of fit and serves as a critical comment, another language. This function carries over into the Melodram, but not necessarily bearing the identical meaning.

Next, when Rocco pronounces the calming news that the prisoner is not dead but asleep, the music plays on the C7-/F-major resolution, as we've noted already. This is not merely the same harmonic resolution we hear at the end of Florestan's aria. An oboe traces the melody of the broken chords; an oboe played the very same notes in Florestan's aria as he sang the words on these very notes, "Leonoren, die Gattin, so gleich" ("Leonore, my wife, so like") (162): the identification of Leonore is a series of likenesses. The literal likeness is the picture of Leonore that he holds in his hand; Florestan's hope of freedom fastens on her, a literal reunion, perhaps, but, even more, a heavenly one, for he thinks he sees her or thinks he sees an angel that looks like her. At the moment that Rocco confirms that the prisoner is asleep, not dead, the music plays the tune that keeps him alive: the dream of Leonore as rescuing angel. This dream of a wife represents her husband's freedom. Erich Schenk calls this the "Leonore-motif" without mentioning that it's a melody sung by Florestan; the motif is attached to the fantasy-wife figuration. Schenk quotes Willy Hess on this point: it is the vision of freedom—of the angel of freedom—who bears the face of Leonore.[9]

This oboe melody that Schenk calls the Leonore-motif, is, as he notes, resounded in the Melodram: "Beide Male wird durch das Motiv Leonorens Person und die Idee der Hoffnung auf Freiheit beschworen" ("Both times, the motif attached to the character of Leonore will be dedicated to the idea of the hope for freedom").[10] This is Leonore as she is for Florestan, the Leonore that would make him whole, who would remove his chains (as she actually will do in the closing moments of the opera). Leonore is Florestan's wife: beneath the disguise is not Leonore in herself; her true self involves something more, her status as a wife. Now, it is true that as Fidelio the character also is allegorized—as fidelity—and in the masculine. In fact, as the Melodram continues after these initial placements of its music in the domain of Florestan, its 6/8 section recalls an earlier duet between Fidelio and Rocco from the finale to act 1 (127). There, Fidelio pledged to aid Rocco in digging the grave of the unjustly

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

imprisoned man, a commitment that parallels what Fidelio had done just before when the prisoners were let out of their cells to enjoy a bit of sunlight that their rousing chorus addresses as "Freiheit." That word ecstatically ends Florestan's aria; freedom, the central value of Beethoven's opera, is played out on a gendered terrain.

In *Fidelio,* we are clearly placed in the world of the prisons of the ancien regime as seen in the postrevolutionary period before the modern prison system housed those who had been designated as criminals in a new regime of identity. The prison in *Fidelio* is a site of social injustice, not of social management. This marks a difference between earlier and more modern melodrama, and it indicates the difference in the nature of identity and of the truth that speaks in the occluded spaces of melodrama. In the duet with Rocco that follows the Melodram, Fidelio commits himself to the prisoner whose grave they have come to dig: "Wer du auch sei'st" ("Whoever you are"), she sings, "ich will dich retten" ("I will save you" [171]). However fleetingly, she commits herself at this moment not as a wife come to rescue her husband and restore him his freedom; rather, she is someone committed to freedom for anyone unjustly deprived of freedom. Anyone male, that is. Apparently, the commitment voiced here is one only a man can make and act upon. The opera finesses the difference between the freedom Leonore can give her husband and the freedom Fidelio expresses here.

For there is a difference between them. Leonore's ability to grant her husband freedom fulfills a Kantian paradigm of marriage: his freedom lies in the public sphere; her place is the domestic sphere to which the man relegates his sexual desire precisely so that he is free to act in the world.[11] Fidelio's ability to act, and to act on behalf of any man, is set within an understanding of gender difference that allies activity and political efficacy with men. Fidelio is not exactly a man, of course, although he is engaged to a woman and has been empowered to act alongside his future father-in-law precisely by securing himself a wife. (Marzelline's aria [no. 2] is about the hope for fulfillment in marriage, which, again, in a Kantian vein represents the freedom a woman can have—to reign supreme at home.) The opera locates its action in the impossible space in which it might be possible for a woman to act in the public sphere. It imagines the possibility of female heroism and of female agency and does that most gloriously musically in Leonore's big act 1 aria, in which, for the first time, she soars ferociously into soprano territory, freed from singing the alto line to Marzelline's soprano. These heroics, the aria concludes, are in the service of an inner drive ("inner'n Triebe") equated with the true love of a wife ("treuen Gattenliebe" [109–10]).

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

This ideological restriction—the naturalization of Fidelio's love as wifely love—does not match what the music conveys in the exultant conclusion of the aria. Similarly, when Leonore and Florestan rejoin in act 2, they sing of a a joy without a name ("namenlose Freude" [210]) constituted in their reunion; they sing of each other as husband and wife, but do so singing exactly the same notes. At a moment like that, the music attempts to equate the two, making "nameless" (namenlose) the names wife and husband. In their duet, the usual procedures of naming and differentiating that obtained in the first scenes of the opera, in which soprano and alto lines marked difference, are suspended. This is not the end of the opera, however, and such differences will recur as the opera comes to a close and Leonore is restored to wifely subordination even as she is hailed as savior of her husband's life.

In her act 1 scene and aria, the heroism of Fidelio had to do with the transgression of the alto limit. This must remind us that, at least when the opera begins, the audience does not know that the woman singing a male part, wooing a woman, is someone else's wife. Indeed, the audience would not know whether the fact that a woman is singing means that the character is to be understood as female. A long-standing tradition of operatic casting is involved, one familiar to modern operagoers from Mozart's Cherubino or Strauss's Octavian. This is the convention of the so-called trouser role. This convention provides a critical reflection on gender difference and the nature of sexual desire, often adding a dollop of same-sex lesbian titillation. The Melodram in *Fidelio* is the last moment in the opera fully to sustain the gender ambiguity of Fidelio. When Leonore stands up to Pizzaro, thrusting herself before Florestan, offering her body to his blade, the gesture of declaring herself a wife also marks her limits as a wife: she can die for him; she cannot, by herself, rescue him. At this moment, a trumpet sounds, announcing the arrival of a minister who proves benign. The trumpet stops Pizarro from killing Florestan. A deus ex machina is the only way out of the impasse.[12]

This is a political dilemma that Jacques Derrida contemplates in *Politics of Friendship* (1997), deploring the equations of liberty, fraternity, and equality that work only in the masculine, and which, according to him, taint the revolutionary promise with a suspect "virile homosexuality" that he hopes will not obtain in the heterosexual democracy of which he dreams.[13] Feminist music critics like Susan McClary and Lawrence Kramer have deplored Beethoven for a mastery that they equate with a hypervirility; Adrienne Rich's powerful 1972 poem, "The Ninth Symphony of Beethoven Understood at Last as a Sexual Message," could join this company.[14] There, the shouts of joy accompanying

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the call for brotherhood are read by Rich as an impotent, infertile cry of a man wrapped up in himself, hating women, loving men as he loves himself.

Introducing the Cambridge Opera Handbook on *Fidelio* that he edited, Paul Robinson lauds "the only opera by a composer, Beethoven, universally considered among the greatest in Western music" for its ability to transcend "the frivolity and exhibitionism endemic to opera."[15] "Every listener senses the discrepancy between the domestic comedy (and lightweight idiom) with which the opera begins and the emotionally charged, musically resplendent political allegory with which it ends."[16] Robinson conveniently seems to forget how closely tied the allegory of political freedom is to a domestic situation, a domestic resolution that saves Fidelio from the same-sex frivolity of marriage to Marzelline by hitching Leonore to Florestan. Or, rather, to be more exact, when he develops his point in the essay he contributed to the volume, Robinson does not forget this: rather, he insists that the marriage of Leonore and Florestan is desexualized, "[U]tterly untouched by eroticism. . . . Leonore and Florestan are well past the ardours of the first love. Theirs is essentially a companionship of the spirit. . . . In every meaningful musical and dramatic sense Beethoven treats her exactly as if she were a man. More precisely, he treats her as a generic human being."[17] It's not difficult to imagine what Rich would make of Robinson's analysis. And given that Robinson is not at all closeted (his most recent book is an unsympathetic account of gay conservatives and a brief for the politics of gay liberation), it is not difficult to see Derrida's thesis seemingly demonstrated, as well.[18]

Robinson's remarks can certainly be understood as Kantian in his view of marriage as productive of an essential humanity that depends upon desexualization. He is certainly not making a feminist critique of this paradigm, nor is he offering it in order to suggest a homoerotic possibility. Indeed, on the page before, he insists that Leonore's transvestite performance is devoid of sexual interest, just as earlier he voids any possibility that Beethoven might, through Leonore's love for Florestan, be identifying his love for his nephew with hers. Political liberation is, for Robinson, the real subject of Beethoven's opera—that is, Leonore's true "ardour." Yet, one has to wonder at this claim: it can't just be political ardor to which Marzelline responds, for example. Moreover, both Leonore and Florestan end their big arias by invoking the other in the most musically exultant passages. If these do not convey sexual ardor, it's hard to know what else to make of them. Is Leonore really bent on saving Florestan only out of a political commitment? Is there any way to separate her desire to free an unjustly imprisoned man from the desire to save her husband?

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

I think Robinson wants to void all questions of sexuality precisely so that the political commitment he values can be extended to gays in a way that would evade Derrida's critique of the homoerotics of liberal politics. Robinson will not admit any homoerotic subtext in the opera (neither same-sex male nor same-sex female). Kant at once desexualizes marriage but also deplores same-sex sex: he insists on denying any connection between desexualization and sex, whereas Derrida exposes what Kant denies. This makes difficult a space for gay affirmation, especially for someone like Robinson, who is committed to a separatist, minoritarian version of gay male sexuality. Not interested in any universalizing understanding of sexuality, which he reads as a conservative gesture that would void gay identity and identity politics, he can't imagine a nonidentitarian position or a politics that has broken with liberalism. To save the value of "freedom" for a gay liberation that is separate from the sphere in which Beethoven's opera operates, Robinson denies any homoeroticism in Beethoven's opera. Hence, he insists that politics and sexuality have nothing to do with each other in the opera precisely so that its politics can be detached from its sexual politics. His recourse to universalism and humanism nonetheless exposes invidious ideologies of gender and sexuality.

Beethoven's opera is located within the contradictions of this ideology. As I've suggested, the Melodram is one privileged place in *Fidelio* in which we can see its seams quite fully exposed. Another locus might be the quartet in the first act (no. 3), composed in strict canonic form. Formally, that is, the four singers—Rocco, Jaquino, Fidelio, and Marzelline—must repeat one another. There is no room for them to diverge and thereby express what we might assume to be their individual true selves, their real and conflicting emotions. As everyone writing about the opera notices, the canon breaks away from the rather light musical modes that characterize the opening numbers, in which the love triangle of Marzelline–Jaquino–Fidelio is vocalized: the stillness and solemnity of the music along with its insistence on a form that refuses to individualize the singers are noteworthy. The spoken prompt into the quartet is Rocco's claim to be able to see what is in the hearts of the young people. He presumes, that is, the kind of equation between "inner drive" and heterosexual desire that we find explicitly stated at the end of Leonore and Florestan's later arias. But, as we have already seen, those desires seem denaturalized in the opera. The canon denaturalizes that assumption musically, as well: Jaquino's disappointment at having lost Marzelline's affections, and Fidelio's dilemma, having succeeded with her, get expressed identically; they are in line with Marzelline's opening of the canon as she expresses her wonder at having

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

gotten just what she desires, and with Rocco's complacent vision of their forthcoming marriage.

What gets voiced in the quartet in repeated soundings of the same musical line is something like the impossibility that Elsaesser notices in Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1956), where "Dorothy Malone wants Rock Hudson who wants Lauren Bacall who wants Robert Stack who just wants to die."[19] In the canon, impossible realization and the impossibility to realize are voiced as if they are identical. The wonder of getting what you think you want and the misery of not getting it are equated. There is no bottom-line real in such an equation. The hollowness of human experience is nonetheless borne by a musical form rich in its complexity and sonority. Its stillness seems to glimpse another world, possibilities that go beyond the impasses and show them not to be impasses. Whereas the Melodram brings music to a crisis of continual reinvention, the canonic form of the quartet makes resolution and impossibility coincident.

At this moment, I'm reminded of Anne Carson's brief essay "Why I Wrote Two Plays about Phaidra *by Euripides*" (2006).[20] Carson ventriloquizes Euripides, who attempts to fathom the nature of desire: "[W]hat is the question of desire? I don't know. Something about its presumption to exist in human forms. Human forms are puny. Desire is vast. Vast, absolute and oddly *general*."

* * *

In his book-length interview with Jon Halliday, Douglas Sirk notes that several of his own German films were "melodramas in the sense of music + drama."[21] Sirk claims that a precedent for his Universal Studios melodramas can be found as far back as classical Greek drama: "Aeschylus and Sophocles wrote plenty of melodramas."[22] This observation about plot, as Kaleva notes in her essay on Beethoven and melodrama, applies also to the formal structure we have been exploring: "[T]he underlining of dramatic text with music had been part of theatrical performances before the eighteenth century, the earliest example of which is a form of melodrama in Greek drama called *parakatalogue*."[23] (In this context, it's worth recalling that the earliest films—so-called silent movies—were accompanied by music.) Sirk does not mention this formal feature in Greek tragedy, nor does he have much more to say about Aeschylus and Sophocles. The dramatist that claims his attention is Euripides, and the play that comes to his mind more than once is *Alcestis*. "Let me just refresh your memory about the play," he says to Halliday, "a king is about to die; his wife,

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Alcestis, who loves him very much, offers herself instead. Death is satisfied. The husband hesitates. If he accepts he is ruined. If he doesn't he is dead. It is an impossible situation."[24]

Sirk's plot summary (which is not quite accurate) must remind us of *Fidelio,* although what he has in mind are his own melodramas, *Magnificent Obsession* (1953) in particular. There, playboy Bob Merrick (Rock Hudson) is first responsible for the death of a Dr. Philips, then for the blinding of Philips's wife Helen (Jane Wyman). Impossibly, Hudson and Wyman's characters fall in love; impossibly, Merrick reforms, becomes an eye surgeon, and restores her sight. The impossible situation for which Sirk appeals to Euripides for a precedent is this: to accept love from the person responsible for such grief. In Euripides, as Sirk points out, the solution to the dilemma that Admetus faces in accepting his wife's sacrifice is solved when "the god steps out of his machine"[25] and restores her to him. In his own films, Sirk says, the happy ending tacked on to *Magnificent Obsession*—and not just that film, but *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* (1956), and *Imitation of Life* (1958), as well—is just such a deus ex machina; if some in the audience are happy for the promise of happiness, those in the know know better. Much the same can be said for the ending of *Fidelio.* The joyful reunion of the couple and the freeing of Florestan returns Leonore to a future in which she will be his faithful wife, celebrated for her willingness to sacrifice her status and gender. The freedom that the opera extols returns her to her place.

Euripides's *Alcestis* illuminates this ending. In the play, King Admetus has been spared from dying, thanks to the gratitude of Apollo to his "host / and friend, Admetus" (7–8)[26] who "revered [his] sacred rights" (11). Admetus has extended hospitality to Apollo, and Apollo repays him by striking the bargain that Death accepts, allowing someone to die in the king's place. It is not Apollo, however, who brings Alcestis back from death, but Hercules, and, again, in thanks for an act of hospitality. Admetus is thereby saved from what he allowed when Alcestis died in his place: the shame of having accepted her sacrifice. Only after she dies does he see this, voicing it as what others will say about him: "Look at the man, disgracefully alive, who dared / not die, but like a coward gave his wife instead / and so escaped death. Do you call him a man at all?" (955–57).

The glory of Alcestis is to be a wife who would die for her husband; what she would do, she does, dying a third of the way into the play. At just that point, Hercules arrives, seeking hospitality; Admetus is in a difficult position since the death of his wife precludes the offer of hospitality, but to deny hospitality to Hercules would only add to what might be said against him and would, moreover, not relieve him of his loss, as he tells

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the Chorus: "My misery would still have been / as great, and I should be inhospitable too, / and there would be one more misfortune added to those / I have, if my house is called unfriendly to its friends" (555–58).

His solution is to prevaricate with Hercules, keeping him from knowing who has died, and thus opening a space between his wife's promise to die for him and its accomplishment. "Being and nonbeing are considered different things," Hercules insists to him (528), but Admetus denies the difference. Later, after Admetus experiences the shame of letting his wife die, Hercules learns that Alcestis has died and decides to defeat death in order to reward Admetus for his extraordinary hospitality. He gives Admetus a veiled woman who he has won for him, a woman who, when uncovered, looks exactly like Alcestis—she is Alcestis, Hercules insists. The woman remains silent as the play ends.

Richmond Lattimore, in the preface to his translation of the play, claims that its theme "is not 'if a wife dies for her husband, how brave and devoted the wife,' so much as 'if a husband lets his wife die for him, what manner of man must the husband be?' "[27] The solution of the play rewards Admetus for *xenia,* Lattimore explains, a term that refers to his civilized, hospitable, and reverent behavior. What Lattimore does not say is that this form of sociality is one that takes place between men; a wife could be sacrificed for this, and she could as readily be saved as a token of what men will do for each other. What form is Euripides's drama? (It is his earliest extant play, we might note.) Lattimore calls it a tragicomedy.[28] In the preface to her radically stripped-down translation of *Alkestis,* Anne Carson does not settle on a name for it. Comparing the play to Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), she writes that "both works explore the psychological weirdness of ordinary people and everyday existence by jarring comic and tragic effects against one another as if they belonged to the same convention. In fact no one knows what convention *Alkestis* belongs to."[29] Perhaps "melodrama" is the name of the convention. At the end of *Alkestis,* as Carson goes on to say, we do not know whether the woman brought to Admetus is his resurrected wife, nor, if she is, whether a happy ending lies ahead.

Swept up into the political joy of the final measures of *Fidelio,* with everyone extolling the wife who has saved her husband and won him his freedom, Leonore savors the extraordinary moment at which she has arrived. Her love has been rewarded by God, she believes. Florestan is hers again, she sings, while everyone celebrates the freedom she has given him. As much as in Euripides, the solution of the play, while couched in the tones of comedy—Beethoven hammers out C-major chords with abandon—remains disquieting when one considers what lies ahead. "In

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the Hollywood melodrama characters made for operetta play out the tragedies of humankind," Elsaesser comments (89). The formula is perhaps reversed in Euripides. Beethoven begins his opera in the world of operetta, formally in its speech–song separations and in its plot, where a woman has, unknowingly become betrothed to another woman; marriage is being played for laughs or for untoward titillation. *Fidelio* concludes with the happy ending that marks the end of the trouser role of Fidelio: marriage played for keeps, the male drama of freedom and humanity sutured onto domestic propriety. Leonore assumes the fantasy position of savior when the force she calls God, who in the opera is represented by the minister Fernando, has saved Florestan and ended the reign of political tyranny. The formal use of melodrama in the opera brings to a crisis the ideologies of gender and sexuality that the happy ending glosses. In the Melodram, neither speech alone nor song is apt; resolution is momentary. The ending of the opera leaves ahead the possibility of reflection and critical distance that Sirk claimed for melodrama by way of Euripides:

> Many are the shapes of things divine.
> Many are the unexpected acts of gods.
> What we imagined did not come to pass—
> God found a way
> to be surprising.
> That's how this went.[30]

Jonathan Goldberg is Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor at Emory University. His most recent book is a monograph on Alfred Hitchcock's Strangers on a Train *(Arsenal Pulp Press 2012).*

NOTES

1. The three films are considered together, in a discussion that rarely goes further than plot summary, in John Mercer and Martin Shingler's *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility,* Short Cuts (London: Wallflower, 2004), 60–77.
2. The 1814 *Fidelio* was the third version of the opera; from Beethoven's sketchbook, it appears that the Melodram was in its 1805 and 1806 incarnations (see Daniela Kaleva, "Beethoven and Melodrama," *Musicology Australia* 23, no. 1 [2000]: 49–75, quotation on 58). Citations of text and music that follow from the score of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Fidelio* are the page numbers from the Dover edition (New York, 1984). Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of German text in this essay are mine.
3. I cite from Thomas Elsaesser's essay reprinted in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodramas,* ed. Marcia Landy, Contemporary Approaches to Film and Media (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 68–91, quotation on 74.

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

4. André Lischke, "Commentaire musical et littéraire," *Fidelio, L'Avant Scène Opéra,* no. 164 (1995): 10–78; see p. 54 for his remarks about number 12.

5. Kaleva, "Beethoven and Melodrama."

6. Ibid., 59.

7. Ibid., 53.

8. Ibid., 56.

9. Erich Schenk, "Über Tonsymbolik in Beethovens 'Fidelio'" [On sound symbolism in Beethoven's "Fidelio"], in *Beethoven-Studien* [Beethoven studies], ed. Erich Schenk (Vienna: Böhlaus, 1970), 223–50; citation of Hess: "In beiden Fallen die Steigerung der Gedanken und Gefühle des Gefangenen in eine lichte, schöne Vision—das einmal ist es das holde Bild seiner Gattin, das seine Sinne erfüllt, das zweitemal die Vision der Freiheit, der Engel der Freiheit mit den Zügen der Leonore" (245).

10. Ibid., 246.

11. I have discussed Kant's positions on marriage, sexuality, and gender difference in *Tempest in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 130–31. Isabel V. Hull contextualizes Kant in a discussion of the ways in which the movement from an absolutist state to civil society repositioned women in marriage (*Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700–1815* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996], 301–13). Eric O. Clarke, while ignoring gender in his analysis, points to the incoherence in Kant's position in relationship to male homosexuality (*Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere,* Series Q [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000], 101–25). Beethoven is assumed to have some acquaintance with and interest in Kant; phrases from Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) appear in Beethoven's notebooks (see William Kinderman, *Beethoven* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995], 5).

12. Joseph Kerman, "Augenblicke in Fidelio" (in *Fidelio,* ed. Paul Robinson, Cambridge Opera Handbooks [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 132–44), points out that, in the 1805–6 version of the opera, the reunion of husband and wife carried no assurance of a political solution but just the opposite, in fact; the 1814 opera collapses Florestan's freedom into recovery of his wife with a "suspicious alacrity" (133) that Kerman associates with the other moments ("Augenblicke") of magical instantaneity. These, I would suggest, are as often ideological collapses as they are unthinkable finesses of otherwise insuperable differences.

13. I cite Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship,* trans. George Collins, Radical Thinkers, vol. 5 (London: Verso, 1997), 279.

14. On this, see Sanna Pederson, "Beethoven and Masculinity," in *Beethoven and His World,* ed. Scott Burnham and Michael P. Steinberg, The Bard Music Festival Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 313–31. Adrienne Rich's poem can be found in her *Poems: Selected and New, 1950–1974* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 205–6.

15. Robinson, introduction to *Fidelio* (see note 12), 1–6, quotation on 1.

16. Ibid., 2.

17. Paul Robinson's essay is "*Fidelio* and the French Revolution," in Robinson, *Fidelio* (see note 12), 68–100, quotation on 97.

18. I refer to Paul Robinson, *Queer Wars: The New Gay Right and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). The range of Robinson's interests is reflected in his collected essays, *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

19. I cite from Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk: Interviews with Jon Halliday* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 86.

20. Anne Carson, "Why I Wrote Two Plays about Phaidra *by Euripides,*" in *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides,* trans. Anne Carson, New York Review Books Classics Series (New York: New York Review Books, 2006), 309–12, quotation on 311. For another classical connection, see Martin Meisel, who connects Leonora saving her husband to the "erotic and sacrificial possibilities" of the figure of Roman Charity, the image of filial piety (a daughter offering her breast to her father) transferred to the husband/wife relationship (*Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983], 304).

21. Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk,* 93.

22. Ibid., 94–95.

23. Kaleva, "Beethoven and Melodrama," 52.

24. Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk,* 95.

25. Ibid.

26. I cite line numbers of the English translation of *Alcestis* in Euripides, *Euripides I: Four Tragedies: Alcestis / The Medea / The Heracleidae / Hippolytus,* ed. and trans. Richmond Lattimore, Complete Greek Tragedies, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 1–53, quotation on 44.

27. Richmond Lattimore, introduction to *Alcestis* (see note 26), 2–4, quotation on 3.

28. Ibid., 5.

29. Anne Carson, preface to *Alkestis,* in *Grief Lessons* (see note 20), 247–52, quotation on 247.

30. I cite the final chorus in Carson's translation (*Grief Lessons,* 306). Sirk quotes it, in a different translation, in Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk* (132).

This content downloaded from
128.32.10.230 on Wed, 05 Feb 2020 22:37:00 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms