



Ludwig van Beethoven, *Leonore Overture No. 3*

Julia Perry, *Ye, Who Seek the Truth*

Johannes Brahms, *A German Requiem*

In 1805, **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827) completed his one and only opera, *Fidelio*. It tells a thrilling story: the heroine, Leonore, disguises herself as a prison guard and risks her own life to rescue her unjustly imprisoned husband from political execution, celebrating the triumph of courage, justice, and devotion over tyranny. It sounds like the perfect recipe for success, so why did Beethoven never write another opera? After all, this is the composer who gave us nine symphonies, 32 piano sonatas, and 16 string quartets—you might expect there to be a whole shelf of Beethoven operas.

There are several reasons. For one, opera demands a different kind of composer. Beethoven was a master at taking small musical ideas and transforming them into vast, compelling structures, but opera also requires a gift for dramatic pacing, characterization, dialogue, and stagecraft—areas that did not come as naturally to him. Opera is also an intensely collaborative art form, requiring composers to compromise with librettists, singers, directors, and theater managers. Beethoven, however, was famously independent and fiercely protective of his artistic vision.

An even bigger reason was the extraordinary ordeal of composing *Fidelio*. Beethoven began work on the opera in 1804, and its original three-act version premiered in 1805. Poor reception during the French occupation of Vienna prompted him to revise it extensively. He condensed the work into two acts for a new production in 1806, composed a new overture, and continued making changes, but disputes with the theater brought performances to a halt. Still dissatisfied, Beethoven returned to the opera years later, working with a new librettist on a final revision that premiered triumphantly in 1814. The years of rewriting, coupled with the frustrations of theatrical collaboration, made *Fidelio* such an exhausting experience that Beethoven vowed never to compose another opera.

One lasting result of all those revisions is that Beethoven left us not one, but **four** overtures for *Fidelio*. Tonight's concert begins with *Leonore Overture No. 3*, the most dramatic and expansive of the four. (Beethoven ultimately decided it was too grandiose an opening and replaced it with the more restrained *Fidelio Overture*.) *Leonore No. 3* is best experienced as a drama without words. The dark, ominous opening evokes the imprisoned hero, while the lyrical passages offer moments of hope and Leonore's steadfast devotion. As the tension mounts, the famous offstage trumpet call announces the arrival of justice and rescue, and from that moment the music surges inexorably toward one of Beethoven's most exhilarating and hard-won triumphs.

Julia Perry (1924–1979) was a gifted conductor and singer and recognized as an important and innovative American composer whose music bridged European modernism and African American musical traditions. Raised in an upper-middle-class African American family, she studied at Westminster Choir College, Juilliard, and in Europe, earning major honors such as Guggenheim Fellowships and the Prix Fontainebleau. Her breakthrough came with *Stabat Mater* (1951), and during the 1950s and 1960s she established herself as one of the most promising American composers of her generation, with performances by major ensembles and growing recognition from publishers and recording companies. Perry's music moved from early works influenced by spirituals, blues, and choral traditions to more abstract, neoclassical compositions. In response to the civil rights struggles of the 1960s she increasingly reengaged with African American musical idioms, incorporating elements of rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and reflections on race relations into her work. A devastating stroke in 1971 severely limited her career, but she persevered, relearning how to write and continuing to compose despite significant physical, emotional, and financial challenges.

Perry's *Ye, Who Seek the Truth* (1952) was originally composed for solo tenor, choir, and organ, but tonight you will hear an arrangement for string orchestra. Written during a period when Perry was refining her own distinctive musical voice, the work unfolds in long phrases that combine radiant harmonies with moments of quiet intensity. The music seems to breathe, gradually expanding and contracting before dissolving into a serene conclusion. In just four minutes, Perry creates a meditation of luminous beauty.

During the 1860's, **Johannes Brahms's** (1833-1897) skills as a concert pianist and composer quickly earned him recognition with Viennese audiences. His musical career was beginning to take off: he had a vast repertoire at his command, performing works by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann, as well as original compositions for solo piano and new chamber works for piano and strings. In 1865, however, he received an urgent telegram from his brother: "If you want to see our mother once again, come immediately." Brahms hurried home to Hamburg, but he arrived too late—his mother had already passed away following a sudden stroke.

Brahms processed his loss and grief by completing *A German Requiem* (1868). Instead of setting a traditional Latin Requiem Mass, Brahms selected passages from Martin Luther's German translation of the bible to create a work that comforts the living rather than prays for the dead. The seven movements trace a path from sorrow and uncertainty to the quiet assurance that love, faith, and hope endure. And one does not need to understand all the German text to appreciate the warmth, humanity, and compassion that make *A German Requiem* one of the most deeply moving choral masterpieces ever written.

I. *Selig sind, die da Leid tragen* ("Blessed are they that mourn) opens quietly, like a gentle embrace. The warm choral writing unfolds patiently before gradually growing in confidence.

II. *Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras* ("For all flesh is as grass) begins like a solemn funeral procession, with steady, deliberate rhythms. Midway through, everything changes: the music

brightens as the text speaks of God's eternal word, eventually building to a majestic *fugue*: a single musical idea is introduced, then woven throughout all voices in increasingly intricate combinations.

III. *Herr, lehre doch mich* ("Lord, make me to know mine end) features a baritone soloist who sings humanity's questions about the meaning and brevity of life. The choir responds like a community joining the individual's search for understanding. The movement concludes with another thrilling fugue, expressing confidence after uncertainty.

IV. *Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen* ("How lovely are thy dwellings") is the emotional heart of the work. Peaceful melodies and graceful rhythms offer a vision of rest and belonging.

V. *Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit* ("Ye now have sorrow") features a soprano soloist as a comforting, and perhaps maternal, presence. She sings with tenderness and reassurance in a dialogue between solo voice and orchestra.

VI. *Denn wir haben hie keine bleibende Statt* ("For here have we no continuing city") is the most dramatic movement of the entire work. It begins with restless searching, builds steadily in intensity, and finally erupts into one of Brahms's grandest fugues, a thrilling affirmation that "death has been swallowed up in victory."

VII. *Selig sind die Toten* ("Blessed are the dead") doesn't conclude *A German Requiem* in a blaze of glory, but with quiet acceptance and profound peace. The emotional journey comes full circle, ending not in grief, but in serene acceptance.

--David H. Johnson

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