



Heartbeat Opera's
Fidelio

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Ubuntu Men's Chorus photo by Ethan Heard

Letters from Inside

In 2018, Heartbeat Opera collaborated with more than 100 incarcerated singers and 70 “outside” volunteer singers in six prison choirs across four Midwestern states (Ohio, Kansas, Minnesota, and Iowa) to create a special music video of “O Welche Lust,” the Prisoners’ Chorus in *Fidelio*.

Heartbeat company members sent letters to our incarcerated colleagues, sharing about our process and asking questions like “What was it like learning this music and singing in German? What does the story of *Fidelio* mean to you? What would you like audiences to know about you?” These are their responses, displayed here with their permission.

1. What does Fidelio / this story / project mean to you?

Fidelio speaks to the humanity and hope that exists within the walls of prison and for the love ones waiting on the outside. To dramatise the struggle by those (us) within the struggle is honest.

2. What was it like to learn the music? The German?

Even though we learned a snippet of the music it was beautiful and challenging. Admittedly, I was never a fan of the sound of the German language, but afterwards I learned to appreciate the power and beauty of the language.

3. What has surprised you about working on this material?

~~Even~~ Even a small piece of material can stir emotions. The experience wanted me to explore more of this piece.

4. How does it feel to ~~using~~ using this music in the context of the story? Strangely it drew me closer to my wife who I believe would do the same act for me.

5. What would you like us to know about you? Your choir?

The creativity I possess is still within me, prison has not taken away my hope. Ubuntu is a motley crew of men trying to rise above their situation.

- J. Smith

April 2018

The reach of an historic
Opera, from Beethoven's time
to now, seems almost as
distant and prolific as
our voices (The Voices of Hope)
reaching the stage in NYC.
Yet it has been done, and
has opened the minds and
hearts of inmates to the
power of music, and guests
of the theatre to the
existence of our voices!

Bravo! - Hannah

Randall E. Waller

April 17, 2018

Fidelis means to me more than any can imagine. It shows how much loved ones and even friends will do for their loved ones freedom, one day. Its an agape love without any strings attached; only those who truly know one can exasperate. I've seen it only a few times in my lifetime. There's nothing comparable to me.

To learn the music in German I had a reserve and sceptical attitude at first. But as I heard the music and learned the pronunciations in German the walls slowly came down. Part of my heritage is German. It sounds really great (I now) and I'd like to learn and sing more.

What surprised me?

A lot actually. I thought we would never get it but it began happening and it felt so wonderful. I caught myself in the prison after rehearsals singing my part aloud and guys looked at me. I guess they may have thought I was losing it after almost 30 years

2.

straight in prison. But be assured I'm still all there in my mind ha ha.

How does it feel to sing the music in the context of the story?

It puts me there in the place of time. I feel the pains and hurt of not only the physical but mental aspects that had to be felt. I've actually felt that for years literally, but being guilty of my crimes as I pled that to them in court.

What would you like us to know about you? Your choir?

I'm a very loving person who doesn't look at skin color or abilities. I'll help anyone if I can and they need help. I pled guilty for my crimes and have begun my road of rehabilitation that still continues to blossom going on 30 years straight in prison. I love to sing and it tends to sooth my soul somehow.

I admire and adhere to Dr. Romas every move and sounds

as she teaches me my notes and sounds to sing. She is a great lady who shows she really cares.

I sang in a choir she had at Warren Correctional Institution years ago in which we recorded a C.D. there, it was great.

There's a gospel band I formed years ago called "Pierced". It was all original songs of lyrics I wrote and music to. I play acoustic guitar and am self taught. I can go on and on.

When I transferred here from Pickaway Correctional Institution I never knew Dr. Roma was teaching a choir here. When I found out I couldn't wait to see her and join the choir.

Then when I saw many of the guys that sang at Warren Corr. Inst. are here it touched me deeply and I knew God directed me here Amen.

I'm so amazed at ^{how} we are going to be seen for good.

There's always bad it seems in news coming from prisons. I'd deeply enjoy hearing the final outcome of the combined music and exchange letters too.

Michael "Black" Powell II

Question

What does Fidelio mean to you?

Answer

Fidelio presents a chance for prison to be experienced in a new way for both people in free society and those of us that are incarcerated. We (people incarcerated) know the ins and outs of prison from our perspective but, not from the perspective of a loved one. At least not in the way Fidelio depicts. Plus, people in society can experience prison without the intimate heartache. Being able to sing for a project like this is great because we get to branch out of our normal singing and attach our names in a way to a positive prison story.

Question

What was it like to learn the music?

Answer

German was hard!!

Question

What has surprised you about working on this material?

Answer

I didn't think I would be able to embody the emotion of what we were singing the way I did.

Question

How does it feel to sing this music in the context of the story?

Answer

You would think it would be easy to be a prisoner. Turns out becoming a character isn't a seamless transition. Dr. Kotia did a wonderful job of getting us to understand what we were portraying. It felt really good to perform it correctly.

Question

What would I like you to know?

Answer

The Kuji Men's chorus is full of eager learners and talented writers. We perform everything from Les Misérables to original hip-hop songs. We enjoy working with people in all genres of music so, feel free to reach out. Thank you again.

—Black

Marcelus Bibbs

1. The story of Fidelio means to me, the attitude of incarcerated men when we are involved in deep conversation about the struggle's and conversational secrets we go through, to keep silent when a staff member approaches the area while the secrets are being revealed.
2. The music was difficult at first because I didn't understand the language or the pronunciation of the words. Once the German language became known to me it was easy and relaxing to sing the lyrics.
3. I can't say that anything surprised me about working on the material, because I expected it to be challenging. However, if I would have to name something as being surprising, it would be the fact that I was able to accomplish it.
4. To sing the music in the context of the story was very moving and I was able to tap into an actor's mind and place myself on the prison yard with the rest of the men in Fidelio.
5. I would like you to know that I am a person who loves to sing and learn new ways to sing different styles of music. I'm a people person, energetic, easy to talk to and eager to learn new things. My choir is a group of men who I've grown to know as good men.

Learning German was hard
but once I got the hang
of it ~~My~~ thoughts of it
changed and gave me
a talent I didn't know
I had it was great
and now I SPEAK A
LITTLE GERMAN Yes

Ylada
Dini

This project has affected me more and more as time has passed. From the process of learning the music week to week and growing in confidence, misplaced or not, to recording the song live in our chapel. While at first rehearsals went as normal but gradually the gravity of what I was doing settled in, it was an honor that someone wanted us to be a part of not just their opera but their careers and lives. Having been in prison for over 20 years I have not had a place in the free world and this has been an opportunity for me to share something truly positive with my friends and family. They have looked up the Heart Beat Opera website and may even be following on Facebook. Thank you for allowing them to see me in another light. I have been a part of East Hill Singers for almost 5 years now and while not that great of a singer I have been fortunate to meet and bond with a great group of people and I almost feel free.

What has this meant to me? Fidelio

Freely to breathe again!

I am about to re-enter the world after spending the last 17 years in the grave. To lift myself up out of the dungeon of my own creation into fresh open air, I feel like I'm really living the words.

Up here alone is life, never the dungeon to return!

Marc Showalter

As an African American inmate, the chance to be a part of this project is quite incredible. The learning/singing these verses was quickly learned due to the pushing of our great director. After 47 years of life not much is surprising, but to hear that we were wanted to be part of an opera, that was surprising.

The context; the feeling the writer was trying to capture; to be an inmate waiting for, "...lust, in freier luft." It is hard to bring that excitement and joy out in the song, but I hope that the audience can feel enough to believe we are, once again, "Den Atem leicht zu heben!"

It ~~was~~ was definitely an honor and a privilege to be chosen to join the Heartbeat family in this project. I have four years left to do but I look forward to visiting for a show in the new and near future.

Robert Cappage 57217
Lansing, KS PO Box 2
66043

Cannie Ramirez

1. It means a lot to me and encourages me to fight for my rights as well as others, and also to show the outside world that we are somebody.
2. It was uncomfortable at first because I've never studied different languages but once I started learning how to pronounce the words I really started to enjoy it and would like to learn more. I have ^{some} German in me so that's cool to experience the German language.
3. What surprised me most is that we worked well together as a choir to help one another learn how to best pronounce the words.
4. It feels good to sing something so powerful and beautiful with so much power behind it.
5. I was never able to give myself very much credit for doing things out of my comfort zone but it's things like this that show me that I can do anything I set my mind to do. This choir has become my family and I have great love for each and every one of them.

What this mean to me is the love ~~at~~ that
interrelated men and women share ~~with~~ ^{with} each
other and that are family suffer also, and the
history of Fidelio relate to us all when it deal with
The Heart and that all that matter.

it look difficultly to learn but once we learned it
it was great to learn a different language especially
German.

That we learn it so fast and from the original
text.

it gave me a confidence that I can sing any
type of song with Dr Rome teaching us and really
when we learned about the truth history around
this song.

that love come from everywhere including
heart felt tear jerking painful song like
Fidelio. To learn that many people will be bless
by this project and that make me very happy
to be apart of this opera presentation.

appreciated it

Amund Craft

Ashley Jessup #84710

1.) It means to keep fighting for your freedom for your hope. To never give up for what you believe in. It was powerful to keep that hope alive because we can easily lose hope being incarcerated. For me being incarcerated for 7 years out of a 15 to life sentence I lose hope every now and then, but when you have sister's you can talk to or relate to it gives you that hope back you once lost.

2.) Learning the music wasn't that hard for me because growing up doing music I've had to learn many songs in German and other languages. It's always interesting learning other musical pieces.

3.) What surprised me about this piece is how it really caught my passion into the words of the meaning. How you can still find passion within you even in other languages getting into how it relates to you.

4.) It feels amazing because as I said before doing 7 years of my 15 to life sentence it gives me hope in the story to keep fighting for not just my freedom

but myself as well to find who I truly am inside and love myself more.

5.) My choir is an amazing sisterhood that we can lean on or trust upon. The ladies that come in from the outside are very powerful women who come in with compassion and no judgement. We are a chain of sisterhood and an amazing Bond. About me, I'm a woman who fights for women with life sentences as well as mine. A mentor to those who struggle with prison life and the loss of being away from their family and children. Just because we are incarcerated for months, years, or never going home we need to keep hope and faith alive in all of us because we are humans who make mistakes.

FIDELIO...

I was so shocked that I could do it,
I had so much fun learning German.
It was hard but we put our
effort and time into it and
got it....

I hope you like our piece
and we thank you for
this experience... I loved
the story behind the song
it truly touched me....

— DO awesome

— Tiffani M. Ivy

This project kind of caught me off guard. My reason is, I'm writing a book asking questions regarding if people truly care, when we look at the bias, and hatred people share. With all the violence in the world, the drug problems, and mass incarceration. I'm excited, and expecting to see some kind of result. This form of music, and actually singing in German was new, and thought provoking.

I was surprised how quickly I picked up on the German. Having been incarcerated for 29 plus years, the context of Fidelio, I identified with, hoping I'm not standing in my grave, alive. I'd love a chance to live free, I was 20 when I committed my crime, I turn 50 May 7th 2018, I've spent 60 percent of my life in prison. Think of me, remember me in your prayers.

Mark B. Springer
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What Fidelio project mean to me?

I think it is a wonderful experience for all of us who are HTH members.

Not only does it show that "faith and God is everywhere. It also shows that we are all from different cultures, yet we're striving to make this world a better and safe place for everyone in this whole wide world. Especially in jails + prisons.

Not truly knowing any German words. It was really a blessing even at my young age "69" to learn the words so quickly. It was truly amazing how the choir mastered this song so gracefully and swiftly.

We are all proud and happy to be a part in this production. "It is a blessing", from on High!!

Gwendolyn SHACKELFORD

D.C.I R-2 122

Gwendolyn Shackelford
D.C.I.

Buzman

- Fidelio, to me, is a story of Men who are on guard in prison. What it means to me is cohesiveness, unity. All men are on the same page.
- To learn the music was simple in understanding, but quite difficult in understanding. Overall, it was entertaining & worth while.
- That I was able to actually understand & learn it with relative ease after much repetition is what surprised me most.
- It feels like I'm telling a part of my own story through theirs. I try to put myself in that moment & transfer that energy & emotion through my voice.
- What I would want people to know about me is that no one mistake is greater than another in God's eyes. What effort has the person made in reforming their character? I strive daily to become the man God has created me to be by battling constant bias & ignorance of people who believe that somehow they're better than.

I personally would be delighted to respond to those that care about the injustices that come along with mass incarceration yes there is a variety of us who disagree with the jim crow laws and the system of entrapment especially here in the 2nd district of Ohio.

This song means so much to me personally it was interesting, difficult yet inspiring to learn the music and the German.

What has surprised me about working on the material is the fact I caught on the language rather quickly yet this song these words must be sung because we learned quickly. I would like people to know that I deeply care about the injustices on a global scale that, I'm a fighter that I pay close attention to the news to world watch, our choir continues to surprise me, it's ever evolving. I want to contact others about the song and reflections we can share

- Kelli Garrett

Denitra Cox

To me this was an important story and project. It is a very powerful story about the injustices in our justice system. I felt that using actual incarcerated voices will provide even more feeling to a powerful piece of work. I really enjoyed learning the music. Learning to sing in German was a challenge, but worth it. I have never even spoken German let alone sang it. It was fun learning a new language. It was a surprise to me how easy I learned this material. It was really fun doing this project. Singing this music in context of the storyline was inspiring. It tapped into how a lot of incarcerated people honestly feel. "We shall with all our faith trust in the help of God. We shall be free, we shall find peace"; that phrase to me embodies the overall feeling of the incarcerated. Especially those whose have faced injustices in our justice system. Our choir really came together and embraced this project from the first day it was presented to us. I have personally dealt with injustice in our justice system. I am currently serving a 14 year sentence for something I did not do. This really touched me and others very close. I hope we would be able to do more projects like this one.

I never thought that I would be involved in an Opera project, especially singing in German! I'm proud of myself, and of our choir for this. Being a "real prisoner" and being used as such is so creative and inspiring. Thank you for the opportunity!

I hope everyone enjoys what we have done!

Kim

Hello!

I didn't expect to learn German
OR at any time sing it. It took hard
work and patience but the end result
was amazing. The way we sounded
with the accompaniment made me feel
fantastic. Thank you for the chance

The story of Fidelio is a heroine's
tale. I love it. A powerful woman
who would not stand by and let wrong
doing go by. Especially of her loved one.

Voices of hope is a choir of many
who sing as one and treat each other
as family! Without this choir I would not
have been able to do my time this easily.

Amanda is

Amazing!

Thank You!
Bianca
M

Herron
Brantley
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Questionnaire Fidelio

1) This project means more to me, because we are apart of something bigger than ourselves. Any depiction ~~of~~ ^{that} ~~inmates~~ humanizes inmates is a beautiful thing for the community.

2) Learning the music especially in German, is another blessing because alot of us want how the opportunity to visit Germany, but alone learn German while incarcerated.

3) The one thing that has surprised me is the passion that is behind this project and the love and opportunity that has been given to us.

4) It feels that I am there, that I am living through the message that is given.

5) I have been singing ~~to~~ since I was 5. Opened for several NFL game national anthems. I was very excited to be able to be apart of the K&JZ Men's Chorus, because I have a very heart passion for music. Our choir has been here at MCI for about 3 years and the experience has been a blessing.

- 1) Fidelio, to me, is a story of a man buried in the prison system. The only one worried about him is his wife. As someone who has been buried and forgotten in this system it offers light to one of the positive programs in the penal system, and brings us to consciousness for people who might never think of us otherwise.
- 2) I studied German in school and was very involved in the orchestral side of musical theater, so for me it revitalized old fond memories from earlier in my life.
- 3) I have experience so nothing really surprised me.
- 4) In a position similar to the context of this opera it evokes a lot of emotion to be a part of this.
- 5) I would like people to know that just because we are locked up for our mistakes we are still human beings. Sometimes people feel that we are all animals that don't deserve a second chance. Truth be told, most of us are victims of our circumstances who when faced with adversities chose the wrong direction with our actions. This choir makes us feel that "normal" feeling for a short time every week. We are accepted as humans not looked at as numbers.

~~Fidelio means Hope~~ 3.

Fidelio, this story means to me, hope
peace and freedom.

To learn this music in German was
awesome and interesting. And to be able
to sing in German is delightful.

The surprising part of working with this
material is that I've learned it pretty
fast, and sounds great.

To sing this music in the context of
the story is beautiful. I love any song
that tells a story.

I would like for you to know about
me, that I am really inspired by this
piece and that I speak the same language
as this story, I am made out of love &
freedom inside & out is everything.

And to know about the choir, our choir
we are a bunch of beautiful women
ready to take on anything. We are
a powerful women & we are TIG!

Trained to Go! HA.

11/21
Dawnatha "Juce" Cagle #90415 DCI

Greetings Blessed Company,

Let me begin by saying that it is an honor and a privilege to be working on this project. At times it is as though Dr. Roma descended from the heavens to educe the very best from us. She challenges our personal perceptions, our musical limitations, and our environmental conditioning, all the while treating us with the utmost respect and requiring that we maintain our dignity as human beings. She presents one opportunity after another for us to grow individually and as a choir. Ubuntu is not just the name of the choir, it is the spirit in which we sing.

Knowing the size and potential magnitude of this project makes working on it all the more worthwhile. I love to sing so I'm with whatever within reason. ;^) Singing in German was definitely new and challenging. I have a new respect for the language. German has always seemed really clunky and unappealing to my ear when spoken but singing it has given me a new respect for the texture of the language. Dr. Roma also gave us a little history lesson on the relationship between English and German; that definitely helped.


The fact that Beethoven only wrote one opera and it had something to do with prison really surprised me. I've never studied Beethoven's work, however, I do enjoy some of Mozart's work from Don Giovanni. I often listen to classical music when I ride the exercise bike and imagine myself cycling in different places around the world. Overture K. 527 really spoke to me. I never knew why, but I guess you don't necessarily need a reason to enjoy music huh? When I read the Fidelio/Don Giovanni card and discovered what the current production of Don Giovanni is about I was not surprised. The music itself embodies intrigue and passion. It seems to speak directly to being torn in some way. But the issue of whether I am helping or hurting those we engage rings so true in men in situations such as mine because loving me could quite possibly hurt more than anything a person has ever experienced. So do I deny myself life's greatest offering? Or accept the fact that I'm hurting someone by believing that I'm worth it?

Singing this music in context really hits home. I'm 39 and have been incarcerated since I was 18. Having to be quiet when you want to express yourself for fear of repercussions is a feeling that may be universally recognized but not understood. Imagine what being free in your heart and mind yet unfree in your body feels like. Restricted in the expression of your joy, your pain, your apathy, or your rage... Almost scared of the sunshine. Relegated to a hush for a moment of joy.

Fidelio seems to be a great love story. Can you imagine...? Is love like that? Willing to go undercover as a man to find the truth and free her love; a truly amazing concept in today's world. A love that faces fear with courage and is willing to defy all the odds simply because the heart will not allow anything else. I guess it had to take place on stage.

I would like to thank EVERYONE who is a part of this production for allowing us to be a part of this masterpiece and wish you all well. May you find the place in your heart where your character lives and sing, play, dance, and project from there; whatever your part is. All of the technicians, stage crew, editors, arrangers or anyone else who has anything to with this. This means the world to me. I would love to join you on stage one day.

PEACE & BLESSINGS



Bryan K. Singleton 352-353

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Checkout a play we done on the ODRC youtube channel or the LOCI FACEBOOK page. The name of the play is, "The Big House."

All members of the choir can be contacted by email on Tpay.com. Its cheap, easy, and convenient. Put the Tpay app on your phone.

4-14-18

Tasha Carr

1. This story means a lot to me because I'm a witness of both sides of the struggle. On television I see countless young African American men lose their lives at the hands of the people who are supposed to protect and serve. The black lives matter movement is very important to bring awareness that this generational struggle needs to stop.
My experience as being an incarcerated female I have seen the struggle between us inmates and the officers the line of respect and disrespect can be crossed very quickly but because I'm the inmate I'm always wrong.
2. To learn the music in German was a challenge!! I did enjoy the challenge to take such a harsh sounding language and turn it into something so beautiful was an honor
3. The surprise I got out of this project was how all of my choir sisters stepped up to the challenge to learn this song in German and how hard we worked to pull it off
4. Singing this song in the context of the story is awesome and I'm very honored to have been chosen to participate in this project
5. I'm very grateful for hope through harmony and all the work that Dr. Roma puts into this choir because of her hard work. I have found a confidence and new self awareness that I never knew I had