

Comparing the two Operas of Rossini and Beethoven: "La Donna Del Lago" and "Fidelio"

Qiaochu Wang *

Beihua University, Jilin, China

* Corresponding Author Email: bohr@hirootbohr.com

Abstract. The virtuosic characteristics of Rossini's works and the philosophical characteristics of Beethoven's works have both made significant contributions to the world of music. In the field of musicology and music theory, Rossini's operas have already been analyzed by many scholars. However, the number of people analyzing Beethoven's only opera is few. Comparing and analyzing the operas of these two composers together is even rarer. This article focuses the operas *La Donna Del Lago* and *Fidelio* from the perspectives of historical backgrounds, music and theatrical analysis. It also briefly analyzed the heroic image of the female protagonists in the two operas. Furthermore, a comparative analysis was conducted on the two arias "Tanti affetti" and "O wär' ich schon mit dir vereint" in these two operas. From music and theatre perspective, the author investigates the characteristics of these two composers in their operatic works.

Keywords: theatrical analysis, musical perspective, Rossini, Beethoven.

1. Introduction

Many experts in the field of music have already analyzed Rossini's operas and conducted numerous studies on the arias in Rossini's operas. Xingxing Li studied the soprano vocal techniques to explore the artistic characteristics of the aria "I Hear Beautiful Singing" from Rossini's opera "The Barber of Seville" [1]; Chanyu Luo briefly discussed the musical features of Rossini's vocal suite "Regatta at Venice" [2]. But the number of people analyzing Beethoven's only opera is few. Comparing and analyzing the operas of these two composers together is even rarer. Musicians and scholars have mixed reviews on Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, with many considering it to be an opera lacking in awareness. However, in Limin Chen's paper "Beethoven: Did Genius Fail in Opera?", the author mentioned that *Fidelio* is a very philosophical opera, surpassing many other artistically perfect operas [3]. Therefore, this paper analyzes the different characteristics of Rossini and Beethoven by analyzing the two heroines and two arias in the two operas.

2. Historical Background

At the end of the 18th century, Italian composers compared opera to a sword used to resist European romantic culture. Rossini, Bellini and Verdi were the representatives of this period. They not only protected the traditional Italian art, but also extensively collected the musical materials of rural folk all over Europe. This added a lot of fresh blood to the field of art song creation, which is still circulating today. In the 19th century, the romantic trend of thought, starting from literary works, gradually penetrated into many fields such as philosophy, architecture, music and so on. The creation of music art moved towards freedom. The emergence of the "Bel Canto singing" system made art songs, which had always been closely combined with literature and poetry, active on the music stage in a new genre form [4].

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Europe was in the Romantic period, which emphasized emotions, individualism, and nature. People sought to break away from classical traditions and emphasize the expression of personal emotions and creativity. Rossini was one of the three great Italian opera masters in the early nineteenth century [5], and his opera "La Donna Del Lago" was adapted from Scott's novel of the same name, incorporating his own understanding of dramatic

conflicts and character traits. It tells a love story about the Scottish king's transformation into an adult through twists and turns, creating a portrayal of a strong and unwavering woman in love.

"Fidelio" is Beethoven's only opera, born in the early 19th century. The entire creative process was full of twists and turns, lasting for ten years. The story of this opera takes place in a dark and huge prison in Seville, Spain. It mainly tells the story of the nobleman Florestan who is imprisoned for opposing tyranny, and his wife, disguised as a man named Fidelio, infiltrates the prison and ultimately rescues her husband. This opera, like Rossini's "La Donna Del Lago", portrays a strong and unwavering woman who is loyal to love. This work was created at the same time as his well-known works such as "Heroic Symphony" and "Passionate Sonata." He hoped that the plot would present dramatic conflicts on the level of realism, where justice could triumph over evil, rather than romantic metaphors, embodying the humanism of early opera works [6].

3. Theatrical Analysis

La Donna Del Lago was composed by Rossini in 1805. The story is set in 18th century Spain. The entire opera revolves around the female protagonist Elena and tells a tumultuous love story. Elena is the daughter of rebel king Douglas, who once led an alliance against the king. Elena is known as the "Lady of the Lake" for her outstanding beauty. During a hunting trip, she unexpectedly met King James, who introduced himself as Uberto. The King was deeply drawn to Elena's beauty, but unfortunately Elena is the daughter of the bandit leader Douglas, and she is already betrothed to Rodrigo, one of her father's allies. However, Elena's true love is not Rodrigo, but the brave Malcolm. Elena and Malcolm struggle with the conflict between love and duty. As the enemy army approached, Malcolm abandoned personal feelings for his children and officially pledged loyalty to the career of resisting the king. Rodrigo also set aside his emotional entanglements. At this moment, the king expressed his love to Elena, but Elena insisted that there was only friendship between them. Before Elena left, the king insisted on giving her a ring, saying that it would ensure her safety. Not long after, Douglas and Rodrigo were defeated and surrendered, with Douglas becoming a captive. Elena arrived at the palace holding a ring, where Uberto revealed his identity as the king. In the end, he pardoned Douglas and Malcolm of their crimes and withdrew from the competition, blessing Elena and Malcolm to live happily ever after. [7]

Beethoven's only opera, Fidelio, was composed in 1805. The story is also set in 18th century Spain. It tells the story of Leonore, who disguises herself as a man named Fidelio to infiltrate a prison in order to successfully rescue her husband who has been falsely accused. Fidelio, originally named Leonore, is the female protagonist of this play and a loyal wife. Florestan, the husband of Leonore, was falsely imprisoned by King Pizarro. He was a loyal patriot, but Pizarro framed him as a traitor and sent him to jail. In prison, he maintained his strong beliefs and unwavering will. Pizarro, the antagonist in this drama, is an ambitious king. To consolidate his power, he doesn't hesitate to frame the loyal and create political injustices. In prison, Leonore bravely faced various difficulties. She and her husband Florestan encouraged each other, strengthening their belief in overcoming adversity. At the same time, Leonore also cleverly established a connection with the chief jailer Rocco, creating favorable conditions for the rescue operation. Rocco is the warden of the prison, as well as a loyal follower of Pizarro. He plays a complex role in the play, being both loyal to the king and to some extent sympathetic to Leonore and Florestan. His inner conflict adds a lot of tension to the plot. With Rocco's assistance, Leonore successfully rescued her husband with her own intelligence and courage. Pizarro's conspiracy was exposed, ultimately leading to his downfall. After experiencing a thrilling adventure, Leonore and Florestan finally reached a happy and reunited ending.

Overall, Rossini's La Donna Del Lago explores themes such as love, family honor, and personal choice, showcasing the complexity and contradictions of human nature. Rossini successfully created vivid character images through beautiful melodies and dramatic plots, allowing the audience to not only enjoy the music but also to contemplate the meaning and value of life. Fidelio, as Beethoven's only opera, not only has high artistic value, but also reflects the composer's profound thoughts on

humanity, love, and justice. This opera has become a classic in opera history due to its unique musical language and dramatic conflicts. Whether it's *La Donna Del Lago* or *Fidelio*, both works effectively portray the status of women in society. In 18th century Europe, the social status and roles of women underwent some changes, but overall were still constrained by traditional limitations. Firstly, in *La Donna Del Lago*, Elena only saved her father and her beloved by using the ring given to her by the king; in *Fidelio*, Leonore disguised herself as a man and became a prison guard to ultimately save her husband. Does this imply that women can only achieve ultimate success through the help of men or by pretending to be men themselves? Secondly, in *La Donna Del Lago*, Elena initially had to obey her father and marry Rodrigo, while in *Fidelio*, Leonore went to great lengths to save her husband. Does this also suggest that women are subject to their fathers before marriage and then must devote themselves entirely to their husbands after marriage? Although these two operas still have some male-dominated elements, it also foreshadows the development of feminism in the 18th century. [8] Although there were restrictions and constraints on women in 18th century Europe, some women began to pursue education and career opportunities, striving for more social involvement and political rights. With the progress of society and the development of the women's movement, the status of women gradually improved. This also indicates that these two operas were both significant in Europe at that time.

4. Music Analysis

"Tanti affetti" is a aria sung by the female protagonist Elena in the opera "La Donna del Lago". This aria expresses the complex emotions that the protagonist is unable to put into words after experiencing many ups and downs. From the perspective of curved structure, this piece is a serenade with a double theme rondo structure. The first theme is presented by a female solo, and the second theme is presented by a choir. Through the continuous alternation of the two themes, they eventually merge and synchronize. In terms of tonality, the main key is B major. The melody starts with the middle note descending to the tonic, clearly establishing the tonality feeling. It ends on the tonic chord, emphasizing the central position of B major. The prelude is short in scale, starting with short and intense dissonant chords, creating a dramatic musical effect. The first theme, after the prelude, is presented by a solo female voice showcasing the main theme material. The melody features dramatic leaps, colorful rapid ascending and descending runs, and mostly short, brisk notes rhythmically. The emotions are lively, expressing the protagonist's excited and surging feelings. The second theme, presented in choral form, often uses smooth melodies with a wide rhythm. It uses long durations and regular rhythmic patterns to express cheerful and beautiful melodies, rich in pastoral scenery, creating a pleasant and joyful atmosphere. The accompaniment always adopts a march-style rhythm to drive the development of emotions and maintain musical momentum. Afterwards, solo singing and choir singing alternate continuously in two different thematic forms, and finally merge at the 134th bar, showing a magnificent and passionate musical effect, which gives the work a dramatic development. This passage vividly portrays the mixed emotions of the female protagonist Elena. Rossini used several cadenzas in the composition, to better represent the musical style, but also more intuitively show the composer's intended emotions.

"O wär' ich schon mit dir vereint" is an aria sung by Marzelline in *Fidelio*. This aria expresses Marzelline's admiration and longing for Fidelio. Even though Marcelina is just a minor character in the play, her psychological activities interspersed throughout drive the entire opera forward, making it more dramatic. From the perspective of curved structure, "O wär' ich schon mit dir vereint" is a ternary form aria. The third section repeats the first section and adds a colorful section. The overall piece transitions from C minor to C major and then back to C minor. In the first section, there are continuous crescendo markings and many sixteenth notes to express Marzellina's worries and love for Fidelio. At the beginning of the movement, appoggiaturas and acciaccaturas appear, the presence of these two types of appoggiaturas is mainly to highlight the fantasy and uneasiness in the heart of the character Marcelina in the opera [3]. In the second part, the music changes to C major, with a

relatively bright style, implying a change in Marcelina's emotions, expressing her hopeful anticipation for the future. The third part is almost a reproduction of the first part, although the melody is the same as the first part, the emotions are very different. In this section, the melody progresses step by step, pushing the music towards a climax. It ends with sixteenth note triplets and octaves in both hands, perfectly showcasing Marceline's surging emotions. Marcelina finally sang out her final feelings, expressing her longing and anticipation for a beautiful life with Fidelio [8].

Both Rossini and Beethoven have their own characteristics and strengths in terms of both musical structure and accompaniment features. Rossini's works are more flashy, emotionally rich, and have a colorful rhythm; while Beethoven's music is more infectious, with greater overall fluctuations and some specific interval structures. Both are outstanding figures in the music world. Rossini's operas shone in the field of Italian vocal music in the 19th century. Rossini's operas are superior to most composers of the same period in terms of expression and appeal. His rich life experience laid the foundation for the unique style of his operas, and led Bellini, Donizetti and other composers in the field of art song creation. Rossini's opera has established its special position in opera creation with its distinctive musical style, dramatic vocal technique and rich emotional expression. Beethoven, as an outstanding composer in the period of classicism, brought us the most impressive music works and promoted the epoch-making progress and change of European music. His works are widely spread and have far-reaching influence. In the aspect of the creation of instrumental works, his symphonic works not only reflect the high artistic level, but also reflect the strong spirit of The Times -- humanistic spirit, which makes his instrumental works still irreplaceable classical music masterpieces. His opera "Fidelio", as the only child in the field of opera creation, although it has not had a significant impact on the development of opera, it plays a very important role in reflecting Beethoven's character, opera creation skills and creation ideas, and cannot be ignored. Although Beethoven only created one opera in his lifetime, this opera marked a successful conclusion to the development of "saving opera" for twenty years and ushered in a new era of serious opera. Just as the existence of "saving opera" is like a flash in the pan, on the one hand, its transformation of comic opera is innovative, laying a solid foundation for the development of French grand opera in the future. On the other hand, it is a very straightforward reference for studying the relationship between opera development and society [9].

5. Conclusion

This article focuses the operas *La Donna Del Lago* and *Fidelio* from the perspectives of historical backgrounds, music and theatrical analysis. It also briefly analyzed the heroic image of the female protagonists in the two operas. It also compares and analyzes the two arias *Tanti affetti* and *"O wär' ich schon mit dir vereint"* from the two operas from the perspective of musical analysis. Regardless of the plot or musical characteristics, Rossini and Beethoven both have their own distinct features. Rossini's works are flashier, while Beethoven's works are more logical. Both have created unique female hero characters from a theatrical perspective. Both are highly outstanding figures in the music industry. This article does not provide a detailed analysis of the relationships between characters in the drama. If the relationships between characters were included, it would better showcase the heroism of the two female protagonists and the feminism mentioned in this article.

References

- [1] Xingxing Li. An Exploration of the Artistic Characteristics of the Aria "I hear the beautiful singing" in Rossini's opera "The Barber of Seville". [J]. Home of Drama, 2023 (31): 57 - 59. DOI: 10.3969/j.issn.1007 - 0125. 2023. 31. 019.
- [2] Chanyu Luo. A brief Discussion on the Musical Characteristics of Rossini's Vocal Suite "Regatta Veneziana" [D]. Henan University, 2020.
- [3] Limin Chen. Beethoven: Genius Stumbles in Opera? [J]. Music Enthusiasts, 2015 (9): 38 - 42.
- [4] Jianpin Zou, Guoxian Shi. Rossini[M]. Beijing: Oriental Press, 1997. 1.

- [5] Meng Wang. Analysis of the Aria "Che il bel sogno di Doretta" from the opera "La rondine". Xi'an Conservatory of Music, 2023.
- [6] Yixin Wang. Characterization and Singing Analysis in the Opera "Fidelio" - A case study of the aria "Oh! If only we were already united", 2021. 9.
- [7] Zhangqi Wang. Rossini: La gazza ladra. [J]. Music Art (Journal of Shanghai Conservatory of Music), 1993 (2): 77 - 78.
- [8] The Metropolitan Opera. <https://www.metopera.org/user-information/synopses-archive/fidelio>. Acquired on 7. April 2024.
- [9] Wei Wei. Exploring the Eescue Opera "Fidelio". Shanghai Normal University, 2015.