LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Leonore Overture No. 3, Op. 72b
BORN: December 16, 1770, in Bonn
DIED: March 26, 1727, in Vienna
WORK COMPOSED: 1806
WORLD PREMIERE: March 29, 1806, in Vienna

Beethoven wrote four overtures for his only opera, three listed as Leonore, his initial choice for the opera’s title; only the fourth carries the final version of the stage work’s accepted name. The emotionally unfulfilling No. 1 (1804) is a concert rarity. No. 2 (1805) — strongly preferred by Robert Schumann — has considerably more power but is filled with passagework, especially in the winds, that proved daunting to his contemporary musicians. The third attempt, Leonore No. 3, is a fully worked out, essentially autonomous, mini-drama that all but eclipses the drama of the opera’s first act.

The overture begins with a solemn passage from Act II, comprised of descending octaves evoking the descent by Leonore into the dungeon where her husband Florestan has been imprisoned by the evil Pizarro. This expectant and anxious passage yields to a melody heard in Florestan’s second act lament, “In des Lebens Frühlingstagen” (“In the springtime of life”). What follows is equivalent to a symphonic development building to a powerful climax cut short by the trumpet call announcing the arrival of the good minister, Don Ferrando, which spells freedom for the Florestan and the many other political prisoners abiding in the dreadful subterranean dungeon. An extended coda reprises earlier themes from the overture, including a transformation of Florestan’s lament into a victorious fanfare.

Scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

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