

CHRIS LARGENT: Welcome back to the North Stage Door, I'm your host, Chris Largent. At the time we're recording this, San Francisco Opera has just begun rehearsals for a new production; Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Production of Fidelio, Act I, Overture

CHRIS LARGENT: The story takes place in a prison and in this episode, you'll hear guests speak on the intersection of justice and art. While preparing for *Fidelio*, San Francisco Opera has also been working with the Prison Arts Project and it's incarcerated participants at San Quentin State Prison. One of the participants wrote a short synopsis of the opera to help his fellow artists better understand the show and it's themes.

THOMAS TONGPALAN: My name is Thomas Tongpalan. I've been incarcerated for 26 years. I'm reading my brief synopsis of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. I wanted to make the story more accessible. Being a big fan of Beethoven, I was motivated to do it.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, Overture

THOMAS TONGPALAN: Leonore arrives at a prison disguised as a young man named Fidelio. She is the wife of a condemned prisoner Florestan, who is a political prisoner of the Warden, Pizarro. Leonore is hoping to find her husband. Meanwhile, the minister of state, Don Fernando, is on his way to the prison. So Pizarro resolves to execute Florestan beforehand, but before Pizarro can carry out his evil plan, Leonore disguised as Fidelio locates her husband with the help of the jailer Rocco. Just when Pizarro is about to succeed in his plan to execute Florestan, Don Fernando, the Minister of State, gives all the prisoners a reprieve; all the prisoners were political prisoners, including Florestan, Leonore's husband. The whole action of the opera is Leonore disguising herself as Fidelio to get into the prison, to release her husband before he gets executed. I guess that is true love, you know, I guess you would do anything for, uh, those you love.

CHRIS LARGENT: Love. Love overcoming hate, hope overcoming tyranny, sacrifice, freedom...and through it all, humanity's innate desire for compassion and empathy. Beethoven was both a musical and political revolutionary. He wrote *Fidelio* partially as a response to the horror of the French Revolution - and the piece has been consistently performed as artistic commentary after difficult times in history ever since. Director Matthew Ozawa expertly acknowledges this pattern, and speaks to both the timeliness, and timelessness of this piece with producer Jodi Gage and special guest, Janet Napolitano.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, #6 "Marsch"

JODI GAGE: Matthew Ozawa's production of *Fidelio* centers around the idea that "humanity has the power to defeat tyranny and shine a light on injustice". So, we at North Stage Door brought Matthew together with Janet Napolitano to discuss how the topics addressed in this opera shine a light on real-world experiences. As I mentioned, Matthew is the stage director for our new production of *Fidelio*; and Janet is a former US attorney and Attorney General in Arizona, former Governor of Arizona, Secretary of Homeland Security for the first five years of Barack Obama's presidency, and recently stepped down as president of the University of California to join the faculty at UC Berkeley.

Matthew, I'm just thinking through your concept that I've heard you speak about, for *Fidelio*, and if that's where you started in your contemplation, what did you draw from in the real world or your personal life that inspired how you envision this production?

MATTHEW OZAWA: I really aim to, with everything that I direct, dig into how the work can be seen through a contemporary lens and how its themes are relevant to today's society. We were, of course, at the time that we were initially creating our ideas, very aware and impacted by the immigrant prisons at the border. And the piece is unbelievably relevant because of how individuals or communities that are seen as threats to the government are often silenced or need to be put away. And I think we're trying to shine a light on those topics, trying to create a story where a female hero, through self sacrifice, frees her husband but in turn frees all the prisoners in the, um, facility and helps us investigate how we too can be agents of change.

JANET NAPOLITANO: Matthew at the beginning, you mentioned the border. I was wondering what you were thinking about there?

MATTHEW OZAWA: There's an incredible photograph of a child standing next to a guard. And he's in a, in a, sort of fenced enclosure, and he's by himself, and he's looking at a TV screen that is hung from the ceiling of the, of the warehouse and it's showing the news. And there was something that was so powerful about seeing this image of this kid who's done nothing wrong. I think I was struck with, in looking at those photos, that became I think, the inspiration for some of the architecture and environment of our space. And I think I also was really struck emotionally to the detention centers, and with children in these pictures because of the fact that my dad was born in an internment camp. There's something about you know, children who did nothing wrong, right, when we're talking about liberty and freedom and equality and justice, whether that maybe doesn't exist for everybody all the time.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, Overture

JANET NAPOLITANO: Y'know when you read the synopsis of *Fidelio*, um, and you listen to the opera, you can see it through several different lenses, you know, one is kind of the justice lens of people incarcerated unjustly by a political regime.

MATTHEW OZAWA: Right.

JANET NAPOLITANO: You can see it through the lens of a love story. And, you know, does, does love conquer all? Which one, in your mind, takes precedence?

MATTHEW OZAWA: I think how we have really leaned in towards this is from a broader, I guess, societal lens of the systems that are in place. And in particular, I think the reason why I say I think I'm drawn to this broader lens is because of the chorus, because of the gorgeous, powerful music that the chorus has in the show. And then at the very end, the triumphant music of everyone being released and of course, honoring this woman who is the catalyst for all of this to happen.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, Leonore's Aria "Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin?"

MATTHEW OZAWA: Leonora is the sole focus of this show. There is something so powerful and beautiful seeing this woman really be a vision for the modern age. The stakes are so high for her, she is in disguise, as a man, working in this system to actually release her husband from the system. So there's a lot riding on her shoulders. And I think that within the slower, you know, more thoughtful music, she's really grappling with that.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, Leonore's Aria "Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin?"

MATTHEW OZAWA: But the Allegro, and especially the horn that weaves in and out of her aria is where we see a more triumphant and very hopeful approach to the fact that she, as an individual, has the strength to go down there, has the strength to release him. And I think that her aria actually is a distillation of the entire show.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, Leonore's Aria "Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin?"

JANET NAPOLITANO: Yeah, I, um I think that's such a good perspective on the opera. And I'm wondering as you stage it, as they go from the surface into the prison and down. How do you handle that? And the music changes right?

MATTHEW OZAWA: Right?

JANET NAPOLITANO: Beethoven changes keys!

MATTHEW OZAWA: Yes.

JANET NAPOLITANO: And so when they're on the, on the surface, and in the sunlight, whatever, he's, he's in C major. And when he's in the dungeon, he's in a minor key.

MATTHEW OZAWA: Right! He's bombarded by light but also there's the absence of all light simultaneously. Again, some of this you know, looking at the black-ops site, forms of torture, of sound and deprivation and darkness, we were really kind of thinking about what strips a human of their dignity and creates a scenario where Florestan, you know, at the beginning of his aria is in such a dark place.

JANET NAPOLITANO: Well and he's in solitary confinement.

MATTHEW OZAWA: Yes, solitary confinement.

JANET NAPOLITANO: And we know that should be a very rarely used tactic or technique in incarceration facilities. It's way overused and because it, after even a small amount of time it's very damaging to a human being. We're social beings and so being held in solitary is, in itself, an extreme form of punishment.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act II, Top of the Act, Florestan's Aria "Gott! Welch Dunkel hier! - In des Lebens Fruhlingstagen"

JANET NAPOLITANO: And, you know, another perspective I thought about, with respect to *Fidelio*, is not only unjust incarceration, but over incarceration, that our country, the United States, incarcerates a far higher percentage of its population than any other country in the

world. And we really need to rethink our whole strategy there, and, and what we're really doing in our justice system. Particularly cases where young men were sentenced to life terms for what, in reality, are crimes that don't seem to merit a life sentence, and where the evidence produced against them at trial was very, very weak. So you know, almost daily, you read a story about someone who was incarcerated for 34 years getting out, getting their freedom. But I think that theme of unjust incarceration is part and parcel of *Fidelio*.

JODI GAGE: With all of these big questions you're both contemplating, how do you think art helps us confront and grapple with what we're going through as a society?

JANET NAPOLITANO: What I think that the audience will get from *Fidelio*, and gets from all performances of great operas, is the ability to ask questions. Why was Florestan in that solitary confinement in that judgment? Who gave Pizarro that power to do that? How did he maintain that power? And those questions I don't think are answered in the opera, but they certainly permit the audience to ask them. One of the striking things about *Fidelio* is it has this kind of dark theme of unjust imprisonment and abuse of power and all of that. And yet at the end, it has a happy ending, you know, it all comes out, okay. Boy, it's nice to have a little, uh, hope out there.

MATTHEW OZAWA: Yes, a light at the end of the tunnel.

JANET NAPOLITANO: Right. Right.

JODI GAGE: Well thank you both so much for taking the time to join me today, and for really showing us that we have the power, through this artform, to create and ignite change.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Overture

CHRIS LARGENT: Since our production of *Fidelio* is completely new, we on the stage crew are preparing for anything and everything that could happen on stage. But sometimes, the unexpected happens, and that's when opera becomes an adventure.

SFO's 2012 Production of Die Zauberflöte, Overture

JEN GOOD: There's nothing like live performance, and live opera performance really takes the cake. Suspending your disbelief in order to experience something live is nothing short of magical. The music begins and the gold curtain flies out, revealing a world on the stage that is

fluid, and seamless. The trick is to be sure the audience never knows about the magic makers behind the curtain. And at San Francisco Opera, during every performance, there's a well-oiled machine running backstage without which the show could not go on. My name is Jen Good, and I'm the head of the Production Department here at San Francisco Opera. I'm here today to talk with Chris Davis and Chris Largent. Chris Davis is a stagehand, he's a member of IATSE, local 16, and Chris Largent is the host of this podcast and our associate technical director. There's usually a multitude of people backstage when there's only just a couple people onstage, it can be up to a hundred people back there, you know?

SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I Overture

CHRIS DAVIS: The number of different art forms that are all happening together from the musicians in the pit to the singers on the stage to the prop people and the sound people and the carpenters and the lighting technicians and stage management and people dealing with wigs and makeup and incredible costumes. It's more people than you can possibly imagine.

JEN GOOD: Each one of those people has an assigned responsibility that has to happen at an exact right time.

CHRIS LARGENT: Like one of my favorite things is when something's called to fly in and it's with the music and it lands perfectly in that instance of the call. I, I, I get chills sometimes.

JEN GOOD: And if anything does not go according to plan, once the music starts, there's no opportunity to pause and fix things. Like the last time we did Francesca Zambello's American Ring Cycle, where time is, as always, a critical factor. The shift between scenes in *Das Rheingold*, where you go from the *Terrace of the Gods* into the underground land called *Nibelheim*, that scene change happens...

SFX: Ticking Clock

JEN GOOD: ...during music that is not going to stop. And if somebody took a peek backstage during that scene change, it would look like total chaos. There are so many people doing so many things, it looks dangerous. It's happening in an incredibly short amount of time. So, Chris Davis, tell us about how this was one of the hardest shifts you've ever been a part of on our stage.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2018 Production of Das Rheingold, Act I, Scene 1 → 2

CHRIS DAVIS: So going from scene 12 to 13 in *Rheingold* involves striking a rather large platform. That's about 50 feet across and about 10 feet deep and about three feet tall. It's just covered with bunches of little bits of wall and steps and props.

SFX: Busy Footsteps/Moving Set Pieces

CHRIS DAVIS: And we run out on stage and quickly flip all the steps up onto the platforms and then break the platforms apart. And then pick them up quietly. So you're not disturbing the music that's going on, just downstage of you. And then you carry them up this metal ramp and all the while, while this is going on, there is about a 4,000 pound wall coming in.

CHRIS LARGENT: Right. And we have 40 children in the wings standing by to come once it's safe.

CHRIS DAVIS: So it's kind of coming in like, I don't know, uh, an asteroid coming down to crush the earth while you're trying to clear everything out of the way so that you can get back to it fast enough to grab these little wooden ladders that are dangling down from the wall so that the wall can land.

CHRIS LARGENT: Right. So when that wall was coming in, it almost felt like Indiana Jones and his hat - everyone's running around trying to get everything out of the way before that wall came in and move those ladders.

JEN GOOD: And it's years of collective experience among the backstage team that allows for those feats of strength and ingenuity to occur. It reminds me of a story Chris Davis, you once told me. It was during intermission of a performance of *Die Fledermaus*, where a scrim completely ripped apart.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2006 Production of Die Fledermaus, Top of Act II "Introduktion"

CHRIS DAVIS: Uh, scrim is basically a, uh, in this case, giant curtain, about 110 feet across and 35 feet tall of a gauze like material, similar to a, uh, a bandage. Uh, it's a very fine net that will pretty much rip if you look at it hard. And in this particular instance it did, in a dramatic style.

CHRIS LARGENT: So what ended up going wrong?

CHRIS DAVIS: There was a large scrim that plays, uh, just in front of the main backdrop - Cyclorama we call it - and all of a sudden that scrim came crashing down to the ground.

SFX: Fabric tear, then something crashing to the ground

CHRIS DAVIS: It was crumpled up on the floor, right where we needed to push this two-story piece of scenery upstage and out of the way. So it was kind of a massive scramble to figure out how to take this thing apart. And, my boss figured out that we could hang that scrim by putting the bottom pipe back into it, stretching it back out with the bottom pipe into it. And then we hung it upside down. It felt like four seconds. Um, I think it was probably closer to maybe eight or 10 minutes. When it was all said and done, the audience saw none of it. I don't think they heard any of it.

JEN GOOD: It's also crazy to think about how little you can prepare for there's no way that you can, in advance, know every possible thing that could go wrong.

CHRIS DAVIS: It truly is a team effort. And I described it once as a well-oiled sports car. You're not talking about hitting on eight cylinders, you're talking about hitting 800. It's truly amazing that we can ever make it work at all.

CHRIS LARGENT: Yeah, I think the high intensity collaboration is one of the things I love the most about this

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Production of Die Zauberflöte, Overture

JEN GOOD: Yeah. It absolutely is something that you cannot do by yourself. And also the payoff is a theater full of people, absolutely being transported to another world.

CHRIS LARGENT: We do what we do so people can come see it, and they come see it because we do what we do.

CHRIS DAVIS: The choreographed chaos. That is stage work.

CHRIS LARGENT: We are the people behind the curtain. Thanks to Jen and Chris for taking time out of their busy days to chat with me.

At the beginning of this episode, we heard from Thomas Tongpalan, an incarcerated person at San Quentin State Prison. Now, I turn the mic over to producers Katherine Baltrush-Little and Celine Strouts, who spoke with individuals involved in the San Quentin Prison Arts Project.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Fidelio, Act I Overture

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: Often in opera, the characters we're most interested in are elite, well-connected, powerful, or even demi-gods. People like lawyers, notaries, officers, and prisoners are usually background figures, barely rating an utterance. But Beethoven's *Fidelio* inverts that norm. In this story, set in a State Prison, it's the detainees themselves that give us some of the most compelling music, and hope for the future. But this isn't just fiction - just a few miles away from the Opera House, across the Golden Gate Bridge, a real life group of incarcerated individuals and the officers who watch over them are engaging in creative, artistic exchanges that could teach us all about the healing power of art. To tell us more, let's meet Lt. Samuel Robinson, the Public Information Officer for San Quentin State Prison.

LT. SAMUEL ROBINSON: I'll tell you Katie, I fell into this thing. I thought I would do it short term but man, I think six weeks after touching down here at this prison and immersing myself in the job and, and interacting with the population, I made a decision early on that this was going to be my career and, 25 years later, I'm still here in San Quentin and I really, really, really have enjoyed every moment of it.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: Lt. Robinson may sound familiar to some of you. You can hear him close out each episode of Ear Hustle, the podcast created by former residents of San Quentin. Everyday, he sees the impact that the arts can have on folks on the inside firsthand.

LT. SAMUEL ROBINSON: I'll tell you this from everything I've got from just perusing and talking to the guys inside, many times people feel cut off from the rest of the world, right? And you are. The walls really don't allow you to peer beyond. We've been really, really fortunate to have these very, very unique opportunities and, and many different genres, uh, come inside and engage with our population, uh, experience the talent that we have inside. And give of themselves, the art that they share with the world to bring it inside to the people who are cut off and don't have any access to it at all. But to bring it inside freely and say, hey, we haven't forgotten you. To be able to share that moment for many guys, it brings them back to a point in time where they weren't in prison. For some guys they've never had the opportunity to experience that. And it's a first for them. It's really, really, powerful.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: Thanks to Lt. Robinson, we got the chance to hear more about that experience from one of the guys on the inside.

KEVIN SAWYER: My name is Kevin Sawyer and I've been incarcerated 25 years. The aggregate of all concerts and shows really inspire changes in the community. The accumulation of all events, the opera being one of them, just because it was a different genre of, uh, music, it opens people's mind to different possibilities.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: Here's Lt. Robinson.

LT. SAMUEL ROBINSON: There's a guy who I remember specifically the day that the opera was here and this guy had been in prison for like 35 years. He had been in prison for a very very long time and really, really poor. And so, and just in his life experience never, ever would have even considered going to the opera. Right? And I watched him take everything in. And when he walked out, he said, man this was amazing. He said, never, ever in my life, would I ever imagined that I would like something like this.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act II, Florestan's Aria "Gott! Welch dunkel hier"

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: But the men inside San Quentin don't just get to experience art. They get to create it, too. To tell us more about her artists and the programs that make it possible, here's Carol Newborg.

CAROL NEWBORG: I'm an artist, and the Program Manager of the San Quentin Prison Arts Project. The program is part of a larger statewide arts and corrections program that is funded from the Department of Corrections and their rehabilitation department, through the California Arts Council now to William James Association, which is the nonprofit that runs the prison arts project. There was strong support from the legislature for rehabilitation and the fact that people deserve access to the arts and the difference that can make in people's lives.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: Over 4 decades the William James Association has provided for a variety of arts programming for prisons all across the state. San Quentin's proximity to a major metropolitan area has created opportunities and access to a wide array of activities for their population.

CAROL NEWBORG: In the Prison Arts Project, we have, uh, painting, beginning drawing, watercolor class, printmaking. And also many people teach each other, like someone will learn a watercolor technique from the teacher and then work on it and develop their own take on it. And then share that with other students or other people out in the, you know, in the yard. There's so much sharing, and the teaching branches out from the studio.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: With our San Francisco Opera production of *Fidelio* in mind, our Diversity, Equity, and Community Department, in partnership with the William James Association, connected with Carol's Arts & Correction class to ask them to react through art to the themes of struggle and liberation in Beethoven's only opera. Some of the artwork that resulted from this project will be on display in the War Memorial Opera House during our upcoming performances of *Fidelio*. To learn more about a few of these works, here are two of San Quentin's artists, sharing what *Fidelio* inspired them to create. Starting with Thomas Tongpalan, who read a synopsis of the opera for us earlier in this episode.

THOMAS TONGPALAN: So we go into arts and corrections and she's like, they want you guys to make some artwork. I've been drawing and painting San Quentin as my subject matter, like the prison and the prisoners. I had no idea that *Fidelio* was about prison, that's part of the serendipitous nature of the situation because when I found out *Fidelio* is about prison I was like wow, I guess that makes sense.

DARREN RHEINHARDT: Okay. My name is Darren Rheinhardt. I've been incarcerated for 23 years, a little more than. I'm a graphic artist, right? I can draw in pen, pencil, colored pencil, and ink and whatnot, man. But I specialize in graphite. My graphite pictures look real. I really want my pictures, man, to be like black and white portraits, black and white photos. The theme that I chose for my piece, uh, the Mount Trustmore was, change, I guess. Yeah. Change, you know? Cause if you change, if you change the way a person thinks you change the way a person acts. Right, if we change what we think about ourselves it'll change the way we show ourselves. I came, came up with the idea of, of changing the face of Mount Rushmore, to Mount Trustmore; individuals that were more trustworthy, more concerned with the, the, the betterment of all human life. I came up with those people, man, uh, Martin Luther King, President Obama, Thurgood Marshall, and John Lewis, you know, these individuals were made of high moral standards and integrity.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: Thomas Tongpalan.

THOMAS TONGPALAN: Like this project that I've been working on for a year, for over a year. Wondering if anything would ever come of it. And then now, now I'm going to show us some of these, some of this work to people that are going to an opera and the opera happens to be about prison. I couldn't believe like, how serendipitous it was. I guess the universe'll work in ways to make things happen.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: In addition to Thomas and Darren, a number of Carol's Arts and Corrections students shared how the class has impacted them. Whether it's been an escape, a way to meditate, or a path to give back, for each person who shared, it seems the ability to practice art side by side with others has been a catalyst to a larger, personal transformation. Carol sees a powerful connection between the practice of art and personal growth.

CAROL NEWBORG: One guy says, "It's a place to get away from the bars and the negativity." This one man was just saying, he "Grew so much pride" from the artwork he was doing. Another man was talking about how to him it's "The experience is sort of like meditation or prayer", and-that "When the artists around you are all in that state of mind, and you're sharing that state of mind with the people right next to you that it's a really transformative of experience".

MUSIC INSERT: SFO'S 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act II, Florestan's Aria "Gott, welch dunkel hier!"

CAROL NEWBORG: The one guy was saying, "it's my way of giving back". There are so many people that are very aware of the crimes they committed, or the crime, and they're older now, and they've done a lot of work with anger management, and restorative justice, and they've come to so much more awareness of their responsibility. And they've also grown, a lot of folks are inside for, 20, 30, 40 years. They're so not the person that they were as an 18 year old, or 22 year old, and who is? It's such an instinct to want art and music and it's there and it's in people in one way or another.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: Here's Kevin Sawyer again:

KEVIN SAWYER: I think everybody has the capacity to do big things and great things. Uh, whether it's the faceless inmate inside of a prison, or if it's somebody who's well-recognized for the Grammy awards. Everybody contributes to the world in some way. And it's not always negative.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH LITTLE: Art, music, opera all have the power to transform not just by experiencing it communally, but by doing it. And you don't have to be a famous conductor or trained painter to create art. And by making the doing - the creating - possible, a world of new experiences opens up. And maybe new ways of thinking, too. Lt. Robinson sees firsthand what extraordinary things can happen when we have access to art.

LT. SAMUEL ROBINSON: It's a blessing to our guys. I think rehabilitation is about exposure right? Exposure to those things that are outside the usual. Um, a lot of our guys haven't been exposed to music beyond what they get on the radio. A lot of guys haven't been exposed to educational opportunities and job opportunities or just, culture itself. And so by bringing that here, it does open a guy's eyes to a world that's bigger than them. That's greater than them. And I think it helps to create a better well-informed man. A man who's not afraid of what he doesn't know.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Production of Fidelio, Act II Finale

CHRIS LARGENT: Thank you Katie, and all the members of the San Quentin community for taking us inside with this story. If you come see *Fidelio*, be sure to stop by the Opera House lobby and take a look at the artwork from the Prison Art Project.

In *Fidelio*, the chorus portrays the incarcerated individuals whom Leonore frees. Their voices express the innate desire for empathy in the opera. Producer Jeffery McMillan sat down with someone who has shaped the sound and the psychological understanding of the chorus in *Fidelio*.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, #10 "Finale", The Prisoner's Chorus

JEFF MCMILLAN: Maestro Ian Robertson, San Francisco Opera's illustrious chorus director for an astonishing 35 years, has shepherded his singers through more than 342 productions on the War Memorial Opera House stage. Following the recent announcement of his retirement, I sat down with the witty Scotsman and beloved Company leader to talk about the Prisoner's Chorus.

Welcome Maestro! *Fidelio* will be a highlight of your final season at San Francisco Opera. Can we start by talking about *Fidelio* for you - because this will be your third production in San Francisco - right?

IAN ROBERTSON: Well, yeah. And *Fidelio* has been with me throughout my career, both at Scottish opera, and here at San Francisco Opera. And it was one of the first things I've prepared. *Fidelio*, it's got a rich history, not only as an operatic masterpiece, but as a piece of political propaganda. And fortunately for me, the chorus has a large role in both of these legacies. The, some of the chorus scenes rank among the greatest in opera's choral repertoire, not only for their musical beauty, but how they dramatize the idea of freedom, fidelity and love overcoming tyranny. For instance, they're let out of their dungeon cells, these men, but they come out in small groups. So first of all, you have the basses followed by the baritones, and the second tenors and the first tenors and they use this rich harmonic progression leading to a sense of a sense of elation and reaching upwards as they see the fresh air and the light. They sing "Oh welche Lust in freier Luft" "Oh what joy what fresh air"

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, #10 "Finale", The Prisoner's Chorus

IAN ROBERTSON: Beethoven's very adept at creating that whole dramatic picture. And then later in the scene towards the finale, before the chorus is sent back to their dungeons, you can hear Beethoven using that beautiful key of B flat major which is a kind of nostalgic key.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, "Dreizehnter Auftritt", Finale

IAN ROBERTSON: The principals are singing, expressing their own diverse thoughts at this point but the chorus are singing "Leb wohl du warmes Sonnenlicht" "Farewell you warm sunlight". So the whole scene is very carefully thought out. And the chorus is just right there in the middle of it expressing the masses of the people in relation to the tyranny that's going on.

JEFF MCMILLAN: So, kind of a last reflection on this piece. And for people who may not know *Fidelio* very well, what in your mind would you say they can expect from this opera?

IAN ROBERTSON: You can never forget that in 1805, when he was writing this music, he was still a little under the thrall of Mozart, Haydn, still in the classical vein, and he was nevertheless with *Fidelio* as he did with the Third Symphony onwards, he was breaking the molds, he was breaking the molds, and we get a lot more characterization in the choruses in *Fidelio*...

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, #10 "Finale", The Prisoner's Chorus,

IAN ROBERTSON:...expressing much more emotion in a chorus than had been done before that. I don't think anything like that had happened in opera before. The expressive nature of the

prisoners' chorus is leading the way forward to Wagner, to Berlioz. This is Beethoven heading the way to all the 19th century operas that are coming. It's a linchpin. An early one 1805, wow.

JEFF MCMILLAN: Thank you Maestro Robertson, for illuminating the *Prisoner's Chorus*. For North Stage Door, I'm Jeff McMillan.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I, #10 "Finale", The Prisoner's Chorus
CHRIS LARGENT: Next, producer Michael Bragg interviews two beloved music-makers, and members of the San Francisco Opera community.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act I March

MICHAEL BRAGG: When you're watching an opera, there is so much to drink in. You're enveloped in stage light; you're dazzled by the richness of the costumes, the scale of the sets, and the immensity and splendour of the theater itself. If done right, the drama onstage is as captivating as the music itself. But the music isn't just from the singers on stage. Often, the most dramatic music comes from a nerve center of the theater known as the orchestra pit. You probably don't often think about all of the drama that is coming from the pit, so we at North Stage Door sat down with two incredible artists from the San Francisco Opera Orchestra to talk about what it takes to make opera come alive from below the stage.

Percussionist Patti Niemi has been with the company since 1992. And in that time, she's been the sound of heartbeats, danger, joy and, when called for, a good old crash of thunder. So Patti, my first question to you is what drew you to percussion?

PATTI NIEMI: I think what drew me to percussion is, when I was 10 years old and this is, you know, in the 1970s, so we had, music was just part of public school education, which I was the happy and lucky recipient of. So I was 10 years old and they said, what would people like to play? And I think I just wanted to play the loudest, uh, most show-offy instrument I could. And that was percussion. So - and there were not that many girls playing it. So that was fun for me too. I like to be a part of something that not everybody else was doing.

MICHAEL BRAGG: For Rufus Olivier, the orchestra's principal bassoonist since 1980, his instrument selection wasn't choice - it was providence. And, more accurately, the process of elimination.

RUFUS OLIVIER JR.: Well, uh, they ran out of everything else. So they gave me a bassoon! What can I say? I was trying to, I was trying to get into an orchestra, you know, it started on the saxophone in junior high. So I'm sitting there looking at *Sound of Music* and listening to this orchestra and I said, oh my goodness. I want to do that. I want to, I like that sound. So when I went to the teacher, I said, what do I have to do to get in the orchestra? She says, well, there's no saxophones you know. I says, I'll, whatever you want. She says, okay, we'll put you on the oboe. And I thought, oh no, not that, but I said I will take one for the team. Okay. I'll do it. So I went to pick up the oboe and the guy says, we're out of those, take this bassoon.

MICHAEL BRAGG: And that was it. That the rest is history.

RUFUS OLIVIER JR.: And that was it. But it, I got to tell you when he said, here's the bassoon, it clicked right away. I mean, I actually felt it in my body like, you know, this is going to work.

MICHAEL BRAGG: Amazing. And so what drew you to opera?

PATTI NIEMI: I think for me, it's the combination of music and storytelling. I mean, the sound of an orchestra is incredible on its own.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2007 Production of The Rake's Progress, beginning of Anne Trulove's aria
"No word from Tom"*

RUFUS OLIVIER JR.: Well, I always felt that every musician going through any conservatory or anything should have to play opera, because every piece of music has a story. And you don't really blossom until you see an opera, you see a show where this thing unfolds. Every piece of music is like that. Every symphony piece has a story. And I've learned, through the years, to apply that to the music.

MICHAEL BRAGG: So I have to ask, when you are playing in the pit, how do you connect emotionally to what's happening on stage through your instrument?

RUFUS OLIVIER JR.: Oh, you're in it. When I first started, I could see the stage all the time. It's very distracting. But you can't, pay attention to what's going on because - there's many things going on. I think, you have your six senses, I think, to be an opera musician, you have seven, you have seven senses. You're, you're listening to the singer. You're looking at the conductor. You have strings on the other side of the pit, you have brass behind you, your senses or I call them my spidey senses, you know, they're working overtime all night long.

PATTI NIEMI: It depends on the part because there are times when I'm, I have to concentrate so hard on what I'm doing. Very heavy percussion parts, very difficult xylophone parts. I would say it's, it's quite difficult to connect emotionally, to what's going on on stage. I have to concentrate too hard. However,

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2016 Production of Aida, Triumphal March

PATTI NIEMI: ...there are many times like playing cymbals, I can put one ear up on the stage and really connect. I mean, I've cried in the pit. I've definitely cried in the pit. There's so much beauty there.

MICHAEL BRAGG: I know, absolutely. So as you both know, we're getting ready to start rehearsals for *Fidelio*. What would you suggest that audience members keep an ear out for in Beethoven's only opera?

RUFUS OLIVIER JR.: I would say the overture, I mean, it's that the, the overture is so good.

PATTI NIEMI: there's a moment in the overture to *Fidelio*. For me that's an incredibly exciting moment, it comes near the end that the first violins start, uh, playing a passage and the second violins have to pick up on the same passage and it's like jumping on a moving freight train.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Overture

PATTI NIEMI: And every time I hear it, I'm stunned at how well they can do it.

MICHAEL BRAGG: So Rufus, you've been with the company since 1980, you've played a number of titles multiple times. What's different in your playing? How has it evolved?

RUFUS OLIVIER JR.: My Mozart is better today than it was 20 years ago. Uh, and it was good. But, age, age! Musicians are like wine, you know, um, we only get better with age.

MICHAEL BRAGG: And Patti, what about you? What keeps you coming back night after night?

PATTI NIEMI: I literally have the best seat in the house. And also this incredible music, the more you hear it, the more it breaks your heart. It's not hard to keep it fresh. It's a pleasure to play it.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Overture

MICHAEL BRAGG: When you come to *Fidelio*, or whatever your next opera may be, as the curtain rises, and the first note plays, remember to listen for Patti, Rufus, and the rest of the incredible San Francisco Opera Orchestra - theirs may be the voice you remember most. For North Stage Door, I'm Michael Bragg.

MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2005 Production of Fidelio, Act II Finale

RACHEL GAROON: North Stage Door is a production of San Francisco Opera.

Our production team includes Katherine Baltrush-Little, Michael Bragg, Chris Davis, Jodi Gage, Chris Largent, Jeffrey McMillan, Jeremy Patfield, Barbara Rominski, and Celine Strouts.

Our sound designer and audio engineer is Tod Nixon.

Our show was developed with help from Marisa Brink, Trey Costerisan and Troy Smith.

Rachel Garoon is our coordinating producer.

Our Consulting Producer is Elena Park, and our Executive Producers are Molly McBride and Jen Good.

San Francisco Opera's Music Director is Eun Sun Kim; and our General Director is Matthew Shilvock.

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We want to thank all of our labor organizations whose members, artists, and craftspeople bring our operas to life.

Thank you to our guests Janet Napolitano, Carol Newborg, Patti Niemi, Rufus Olivier, Matthew Ozawa, Darren Rheinhardt, Maestro Ian Robertson, Lieutenant Sam Robinson, Kevin Sawyer, and Thomas Tongpalan.

Tune in next time for our fourth episode, where we'll focus on a show that saw its premiere at San Francisco Opera - Dream of the Red Chamber.

For more on this and other episodes, visit our website at sfopera.com, and type "North Stage Door" into the search box.

We want to hear from you! If you have something you want to ask the North Stage Door team, follow the survey link on our website.

We'll meet you next time at the North Stage Door!