



A Modern-Day Florestan: *Fidelio* on Robben Island and South Africa's Early Democratic Project

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Abstract

In 2004, Cape Town Opera mounted a production of Beethoven's *Fidelio* at the former apartheid prison on Robben Island. Sponsored by Den Norske Opera, and endorsed by the South African government, the production was presented as a celebration of the country's tenth year of democracy. This article investigates the vision of democracy performed by *Fidelio* on Robben Island and asks how it interacts with the founding principles of the new South African political order. Situating the production within the context of contemporaneous debates about cultural identity and representation in a democratic South Africa, I argue that *Fidelio* on Robben Island performed a legitimizing function designed to endorse the validity of the state and of opera as a democratic cultural form.

'Beethoven would have been proud on Saturday night', proclaims the opening sentence of a review titled 'Island Past and *Fidelio* Enrapture Audience', published 29 March 2004.¹ Journalist Marenet Jordaan's remarks were inspired by a Cape Town Opera (CTO) production of the composer's only opera two days earlier. The reason for Beethoven's presumed satisfaction was not aesthetic, but political. For on 27 March 2004, *Fidelio* became a symbol of South Africa's liberation. Incorporated into the country's official celebrations of ten years of democracy, the opera was performed at the notorious former apartheid prison complex at Robben Island. Before an audience of foreign and local dignitaries, former political prisoners, and members of the cultural and political elite, *Fidelio* became part of a programme of national memorialization and myth-making built on the country's recent history of struggle and emancipation.

South Africa formally became a democracy on 27 April 1994, when the country held its first freely contested and comprehensively enfranchised elections. This event marked the formal end of the apartheid regime (1948–94), and entered South Africa into what Samuel Huntington termed the 'third wave of democracy'.² In a political transition widely hailed as 'miraculous', power transferred apparently seamlessly from the white supremacist National Party to the former liberation movement, the African National Congress

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- 1 'Beethoven sou Saterdagagaand trots gewees het'. Marenet Jordaan, 'Eilandverlede en *Fidelio* Verruk Gaste', *Die Burger*, 29 March 2004. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
- 2 Samuel P. Huntington, *Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

(ANC).³ Over the next decade, as the young democracy sought consolidation, South Africans grappled with complex issues of justice, reconciliation, and remembrance, all of which were refracted through the lens of a splintered and contested civic identity. Challenged to imagine a new future for their country while wrestling with the wounds of the past, South Africans – at grassroots and government level – laboured to determine what democracy meant for this fractured society and how best to achieve its ideals.

Fidelio on Robben Island participated in South Africa's ongoing project of democratic self-definition. The production drew together diverse historical and contemporary strands of meaning, thereby portraying a vision of democracy inextricably intertwined not only with local narratives of struggle and overcoming, but also with Enlightenment ideals of universalism, popular sovereignty, and secular humanism. Beethoven's opera, situated at the symbolically laden site of Robben Island, and incorporated into a celebratory agenda of national validation, offers a remarkably revealing glimpse into the divergent – occasionally contradictory – imaginaries laying claim to the democratic project at the time. The opera's enactment of a liberation narrative familiar to most South Africans afforded an opportunity for various cultural and political stakeholders to assemble their distinct hopes and expectations for the 'new South Africa' around a single commemorative event. Closer analysis of this musical episode presents a chance to unpack the meaning of democracy in South Africa and to measure the role played by Western art music in general, and opera in particular, in formulating this meaning.

This article engages with four interrelated questions regarding the relationship between *Fidelio on Robben Island* and the early South African democratic project. Proceeding from a detailed consideration of the currents shaping the country's operatic and democratic cultures between 1994 and 2004, it asks, first, what (and whose) understanding of democracy is represented by *Fidelio on Robben Island*. Second, it investigates how the opera performs this vision of democracy. Third, situating the production within a larger web of sociopolitical concerns, the article examines how *Fidelio on Robben Island's* version of democracy interacts with the broader South African democratic project at the time. Finally, it asks what *Fidelio on Robben Island* reveals about the role of opera in the transition to democracy in South Africa.

Fidelio on Robben Island

The ferries departed at 15:30.⁴ Ministers and foreign dignitaries boarded their designated vessel – a catamaran named *Ashumato* – through a back door, avoiding the prying eyes of ticket holders queuing around the front for their places on the historic *Susan Kruger*. Police escort boats and a helicopter secured the crossing.⁵

3 On South Africa's 'miraculous' transition, see Adrian Guelke, *South Africa in Transition: The Misunderstood Miracle* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1999) and Allister Sparks, *Beyond the Miracle: Inside the New South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

4 Cape Town Opera and Den Norske Opera, Invitation: *Fidelio on Robben Island*, Artscape Archive. My thanks to Celeste Reynolds, archivist of Artscape, for her generous assistance in tracing and accessing archival documents despite Covid-19 restrictions.

5 Robyn Cohen, 'Island-Style Opera', *Cape Times*, 6 April 2004.

Upon arrival, guests were treated to a lavish dinner in the Prison Hall. Refreshments, the return ferry, printed programme, and a souvenir gift – a piece of Robben Island quarry stone, ‘mounted in an inset frame with logos of Cape Town Opera, Norwegian National Opera and other partners in the event’ – were all included in the ticket price of R1,250 (approximately R3,200, or £150, today).⁶ While they waited for the production to start, guests were taken on swift guided tours of the prison, accompanied by former inmates who had themselves returned to the island for the event.⁷

Once the audience was seated in the prison courtyard, the lights were lowered. But rather than the syncopated opening exclamations of Beethoven’s overture, it was the voice of struggle hero and former Robben Island prisoner Nelson Mandela that rang out: ‘Never, never, and never again, shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another, and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world. The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement. Let freedom reign! God bless Africa.’⁸ Then the music started.

The opera was performed by Cape Town’s resident opera company, CTO. South African-born Irish soprano Elizabeth Connell sang the role of Fidelio/Leonore, while Cuban tenor Moises Parker played Florestan. Norwegian singers Carsten Stabell and Trond Halstein Moe played Rocco and Don Pizarro, respectively, while South African husband-and-wife team Bongani Tembe and Linda Bukhosini portrayed Jacquino and Marzelline. Abel Moeng, trained in South Africa but based in the United States, sang Don Fernando. CTO’s director, Angelo Gobbato, directed the production, with design by Michael Mitchell and lighting by Kobus Rossouw and Asbjørn Hagen. The opera was recorded and live-streamed to a big screen in Green Point Stadium on the mainland. There, Cape Townians who had not made it onto the exclusive guest list, or who could not afford the ticket price, were invited to attend the performance for free.

Afterwards, critics agreed that an opera performed outdoors in a prison courtyard was never going to be an entirely satisfying musical experience.⁹ The acoustics were terrible.¹⁰ The orchestra, situated behind the singers under a maze of walkways and steel scaffolding, was barely audible. The cold night air wreaked havoc on the players’ intonation. Singers had to negotiate the chilly weather and an unreliable orchestra, and they had to do so without

6 Cohen, ‘Island-Style Opera’.

7 One reviewer described finding herself on a tour with struggle icon Ahmed Kathrada. See Shirley Apthorp, ‘Freedom to Raise the Roof’, *Financial Times*, 1 April 2004.

8 Transcribed from the SABC recording of *Fidelio on Robben Island*. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Fidelio*, Video recording, Cape Town Opera, cond. by Heinz Fricker. South African Broadcasting Company, March 2004. My thanks to Eric Mkhwanazi of the SABC archive for his help in obtaining this footage. The Nelson Mandela quotation is from his inaugural address as president of South Africa, 10 May 1994. A full transcript is available at: www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/read-nelson-mandelas-inauguration-speech-president-sa.

9 Daniel Somerville, ‘A Long Walk to Fidelio’, *Mail & Guardian*, 2–7 April 2004; Deon Irish, ‘Island Opera Celebrates Freedom with Passion’, *Cape Times*, 31 March 2004; John Allison, ‘The Song Road to Freedom’, *The Times*, 5 April 2004.

10 I aggregate these impressions from reviewers’ comments and my own viewing of the SABC recording of *Fidelio on Robben Island*.

a direct view of conductor Heinz Fricke, who was placed behind their backs. Nonetheless, critic John Allison declared, 'the setting could not have been stronger'.¹¹ Daniel Somerville concurred, claiming that Robben Island was 'arguably the most appropriate alternative home for Beethoven's freedom opera'.¹²

The setting certainly offered scope for authenticity. With the action relocated to South Africa in 1990 – the year of Nelson Mandela's release from Robben Island – the production went to great lengths to evoke a real apartheid prison experience. The set incorporated structures from the existing prison building, while singers' costumes exactly replicated the uniforms worn by guards and inmates during apartheid. Wardens from Cape Town's Pollsmoor Prison, hired as supernumerary actors, were stationed on the prison walls and towers during crowd scenes.¹³ Small details added to the sense of realism: Don Pizzaro, the evil prison governor, wore a pin of the old South African flag (the 'Vierkleur') on his suit, while the benevolent state minister, Don Fernando, was adorned with a pin of the new flag. Even the ferry ride to the island had a touch of authenticity: one of the guests' designated vessels, the *Susan Kruger*, and her captain, Jan Moolman, had been employed under the apartheid regime to transport prisoners to and from the island along the very route audience members took to the opera.¹⁴

Excerpts from Mandela's speeches accentuated the production's apartheid references. These sound clips, broadcast from one of the prison towers, replaced almost all of the opera's original dialogue. They were also played during scene changes. The Mandela extracts narrated a passage from politically motivated incarceration to freedom. Thus, South Africa's first democratically elected president was recast as a kind of modern-day Florestan; the protagonist in a real-life enactment of Beethoven's opera.

Taken together, the production's explicit references to apartheid South Africa confirm that CTO's staging of Beethoven's opera was intended as an allegory for the country's democratic struggle. The comparison is apt. *Fidelio* is, after all, concerned with political subjugation and the quest for liberation.¹⁵ Just as, in Lewis Lockwood's words, '[a]ny [early nineteenth-century] Viennese theatregoer would have recognized the [opera's] liberation plot . . . as resonating with one of the most important questions of the age, namely governmental punishment for political beliefs and its social and personal consequences', any South African audience member would have identified in *Fidelio on Robben Island* the liberatory experiences of the country's post-apartheid transition.¹⁶

11 Allison, 'The Song Road'.

12 Somerville, 'A Long Walk'.

13 Director Angelo Gobbato claims in his memoir that the chorus, with the permission of the Department of Correctional Services, used the uniforms actually worn by Robben Island prisoners during apartheid. See Angelo Gobbato, *A Passion for Opera* (Cape Town: Staging Post, 2018), 287.

14 Cohen, 'Island-Style Opera'.

15 Lewis Lockwood, 'Beethoven's *Leonore* and *Fidelio*', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36/3 (2006), 480; John Bokina, 'Opera and Republican Virtue: Beethoven's "Fidelio"', *International Political Science Review* 12/2 (1991), 111.

16 Lockwood, 'Beethoven's *Leonore* and *Fidelio*', 477.

Paratexts also drew attention to the parallels between *Fidelio*'s storyline and South Africa's struggle for democracy. In the production's souvenir programme, numerous stakeholder messages remarked on the opera's appropriateness as a celebration of the country's democratic decade. Struggle hero Ahmed Kathrada, in his capacity as director of Robben Island Museum, observed that *Fidelio* mirrored 'all aspects of our own history and our own struggle', and that the production was therefore a timely artistic venture:

Fidelio couldn't have come at a better time, when we are celebrating 10 years of our democracy. And there could not be a better place for its performance than Robben Island Museum. Through the experiences of the unjustly imprisoned Florestan, we will relive our own stay on Robben Island and the stay of our thousands of fellow prisoners who were jailed in all apartheid prisons . . . Yes, in *Fidelio* we will see all aspects of our own history and our own struggle.¹⁷

His Excellency Michael Lake, ambassador of the European Union to South Africa, was more ebullient in his dedication:

What a venue, what music, what a way to commemorate ten years of democracy! Tonight's performance is not only a celebration of the ten years, more profoundly it is about that point in this country's history where South Africa regained freedom, dignity, humanity – at every level of society . . . In the South African context, *Fidelio on Robben Island* cannot but symbolise the victorious fight over apartheid, and the subsequent birth of democracy – just as it did almost two hundred years ago in Europe.¹⁸

For these commentators, the link between Beethoven's opera and South Africa's democratic celebration was inevitable: given the similarities between the two stories, there was no more appropriate way to commemorate the country's political liberation than with a production of this work.

CTO's 2004 production was not the first time *Fidelio* had been associated with South Africa's democratic transition. In 1990 and 1994, the opera enjoyed two outings that coincided almost exactly with key moments in the country's shift to democracy. The first was a staging by the Cape Provincial Arts Board (CAPAB) – CTO's predecessor organization – in January 1990, a few weeks before the South African government freed Mandela from prison after twenty-seven years. According to Wayne Muller, there is no evidence to suggest that the concurrence of these events was more than a 'rather serendipitous' coincidence.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the 1990 production became the first step towards *Fidelio*'s mythologization as a symbol of South African democracy.

17 Ahmed Kathrada, Message from the Robben Island Museum, Programme for *Fidelio on Robben Island*, Cape Town, 27 March 2004.

18 Michael Lake, 'Ambassador's Message', Programme for *Fidelio on Robben Island*, Cape Town, 27 March 2004.

19 Wayne Muller, 'A Reception History of Opera in Cape Town: Tracing the Development of a Distinctly South African Operatic Aesthetic (1985–2015)' (DPhil diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2018), 146.

The opera's next democratic showing was more intentional: a week before the country's first free elections, CAPAB again presented the opera.²⁰ After this performance, Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs remarked on the opera's link with South Africa's struggle: 'When the prisoners emerged from their cages [at the end of Act II] my whole body trembled. This had been the experience of our generation. We had survived jail, life in the underground, banishment, exile. Our ideas had triumphed. Beethoven was speaking for us in a glorious, unashamed voice.'²¹

CTO's decision to stage *Fidelio* as part of the country's 2004 celebrations was not, then, without precedent. If anything, it appeared to continue a tradition already started – even if accidentally – in 1990, and consolidated in 1994. But the true circumstances behind this ostensibly 'inevitable' alignment appear to have been more ambivalent. In his memoir, CTO's director, Angelo Gobbato, recalls that the idea to stage *Fidelio* on Robben Island had been his. Having been approached by Den Norske Opera with an offer of sponsorship and collaboration, Gobbato saw an opportunity to realize his long-held ambition to present Beethoven's opera at the historic prison. However, given Robben Island's status as a protected heritage site, the director realized that he would need to make a political case for the project. Gobbato recalls having extensive meetings with members of the ANC and the directorate of Robben Island Museum to obtain permission to host the production there. He used the ten-year anniversary of democracy as justification: after a carefully pitched campaign that emphasized the opportunity of cementing diplomatic relations with Norway, as well as the commemorative potential of the event, CTO received permission from the government and other stakeholders to stage the opera on Robben Island.²² According to Gobbato, in other words, the explicit association of the 2004 production with the country's decade-of-democracy celebrations was a strategic move after the fact, designed to obtain rights of access that would otherwise not have been granted.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the production's promotional material tells a different story, framing the project as an initiative of the national government. In a message from Victor Julius, 'Deputy General-Director Department of Arts and Culture [sic]', *Fidelio on Robben Island* is construed as evidence of the government's commitment to inclusivity in its celebrations and of the success of the Department of Arts and Culture's efforts at democratic transformation:

Commemorating our 10th anniversary of South Africa's democracy allows us time for celebration, thanksgiving and renewed commitment. The Government has adopted a multi-sectorial approach to this milestone in the history of our country in order to ensure that all South Africans and the international community join in celebrating our democracy. The collaboration between the Department of Arts and Culture, Den Norske Opera and Cape Town Opera in mounting a full version of Beethoven's 'Freedom Opera' *Fidelio* on Robben Island embodies all the objectives

20 Muller, 'A Reception History of Opera in Cape Town'.

21 Quoted in Douglas Carew, 'Freedom Hits Right Note on Robben Island', *Weekend Argus*, 27 March 2004.

22 Gobbato, *A Passion*, 286.

for these celebrations as well as an opportunity to enhance Danish/South African [*sic*] bi-lateral relations. The Arts and Culture sector should be proud of its achievements in the past ten years and the contribution it has made to the democratic society South Africa enjoys today. We should also reaffirm our commitment to nation-building and social cohesion.²³

As Julius's message attests, the South African government embraced *Fidelio on Robben Island* as a project of national memorialization and international relations. It recognized in the production a chance to expand its commemorative offering beyond the usual political rallies and public homilies. Crucially, the opportunity came at limited cost to the state's coffers: primary funding was provided by the Norwegian government through Den Norske Opera, with supplementary sponsorship from the South African National Lotteries Distribution Trust Fund, the Western Cape Provincial Government, and the Western Cape Cultural Commission.²⁴

Robben Island, as venue for this democratic celebration, functioned as the real-life embodiment of Florestan's prison. But it also offered a specifically South African discursive site filled with politically overdetermined histories of local struggle and overcoming. The island, which was dedicated as a South African National Heritage Site in September 1996, and as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in December 1999, represents, in Elizabeth MacGonagle's words, 'legacies of racism and oppression, while also marking the eventual triumph of the long liberation struggle against apartheid'.²⁵ For many South Africans, the island is hallowed ground – a near-sacred geographic representation of the suffering the country's most revered political heroes endured in pursuit of democracy. If Robben Island therefore offered an appropriate venue at which to celebrate the success of the democracy for which these heroes fought, such celebrations had, as Sachs remarked later in 2004, to be in keeping with the sombre and dignified spirit of the place:

One day when I was coming out of the [constitutional] court I was invited to a party given by the press in another part of [Constitutional] hill.²⁶ And I was very shocked. There was loud music and a rap singer. And I felt this is sacred ground. This is a place of terrible suffering. How can you have rap music? And I was saying to my son that the opera 'Fidelio' was put on at Robben Island, at the famous prison. And I said that's all right, 'Fidelio' is solemn. And it's about prison and freedom. And my

23 Victor Julius, 'Message from the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Republic of South Africa', Programme for *Fidelio on Robben Island*, Cape Town, 27 March 2004. Julius's reference to the enhancement of bilateral relations with Denmark rather than Norway seems to be no more than an unfortunate blunder. All accompanying material clearly points to Norway's role in the production.

24 UCT News, 'Freedom Opera to Mark Milestones', 23 March 2004, www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2004-03-23-freedom-opera-to-mark-milestones.

25 Elizabeth MacGonagle, 'History and Memory in an African Context: A Case Study of Robben Island', in *Area Studies in the Global Age: Community, Place, Identity*, ed. Edith Clowes and Shelly Jarrett Bromberg (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016), 54.

26 South Africa's Constitutional Court was created in 1994. It is situated within a former apartheid prison, called Number 4, in Johannesburg. The hill upon which the prison-turned-court is located is called Constitutional Hill.

son said to me, 'If I know the prisoners who were locked up here, they would be much happier with rap music than "Fidelio"'. We have a certain elitism, cultural elitism, of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate.²⁷

Sachs's comment is telling for several reasons. It recognizes the almost 'sacred' status of Robben Island in public memory. The judge attributes this inviolability to the fact that many people suffered there, and that the site serves as a symbol of the struggle for freedom. For Sachs, these characteristics are reason enough to earmark a specific, 'solemn' form of cultural expression as the only appropriate artistic vehicle through which to mark the site's significance. Opera, with its constructed legacy of dignity, refinement, and restraint, is a fitting musical form for this setting. 'Loud' rap music, on the other hand, is not. Hence, *Fidelio* is suited not only to the celebration of democracy, but also to the venue chosen for such celebration.

But then, in a striking about-face, Sachs recognizes the 'cultural elitism' that lies behind his attitude. The judge ascribes his chauvinistic outlook to a more widespread social orientation. He argues that 'we', South Africans, rather than he, Albie Sachs, have 'a certain elitism . . . of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate [in these circumstances]'. This is not merely a relinquishment of responsibility. Rather, it offers a view of the complex dynamics that shaped cultural representation in the period following the advent of South Africa's democracy. The role and status of different musical forms after apartheid were conditioned by competing ideas about which kinds of music were appropriate for representing South Africans and their democracy. These debates influenced cultural policies developed by the new government; they also fed into a larger narrative of operatic reinvention that was taking place in the wake of apartheid. Amid hard-fought and often controversial changes to the new democracy's cultural policies, opera became an icon of both the oppressive past, and the reconciliatory future.

Opera and the New Democracy

Christopher Ballantine describes the post-apartheid popularization of opera as 'one of the most remarkable musical developments in South Africa since the formal installation of democracy' – a phenomenon that is 'both extraordinary and totally unforeseen'. For Ballantine, the genre's post-apartheid prominence raises questions about 'why, in a country still struggling to come to terms with the legacies of apartheid, opera has developed such a strong foothold, especially among black audiences'.²⁸ The legacy of white exceptionalism and European aspiration that underpinned the institutionalization of opera under apartheid renders the widespread acceptance of the art form by Black citizens of post-apartheid South

27 Albie Sachs, 'Reflections of Albie Sachs during his visit to memoria abierta', Buenos Aires, 2004, www.memoriaabierta.org.ar/pdf/albie.sachs.eng.pdf.

28 Christopher Ballantine, 'Opera and the South African Political', in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Imagination*, vol. 1, ed. Mark Grimshaw-Aagaard, Mads Walther-Hansen, and Martin Knakkegaard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 292.

Africa surprising. It suggests a wholehearted embrace of a cultural tradition deeply implicated in the oppression from which the country still reels.

The transformation of opera into a sociopolitically representative form of South African music-making has received much attention in recent years.²⁹ A multitude of social, political, economic, and historical circumstances converged to facilitate the art form's transition into the new South Africa. I do not revisit the entire spectrum of contributing factors here. Rather, I zero in specifically on the political aspect of opera's democratic afterlife by focusing on the cultural priorities of the new dispensation and on how operatic institutions such as CTO renovated themselves to align with these concerns.

Opera's political transformation was driven in part by the *White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage*, a set of directives issued by the new government in 1996, designed to incorporate the arts into a vision for a democratic South Africa.³⁰ These policies, underscored by a newly implemented, progressive Constitution, advocated an egalitarian and representative framework for the celebration of the country's diverse cultural traditions.

Policymakers based the *White Paper* on values that emphasize the role of the arts in the advancement of South Africa's democracy. Acknowledging that 'access to, participation in, and enjoyment of the arts, cultural expression, and the preservation of one's heritage are basic human rights', and that it is 'the role of government to facilitate the optimum conditions in which these rights may be enjoyed and practised', the *White Paper's* list of values enumerates the ways in which the arts may foster democratic culture among citizens. It recognizes that 'the principle of freedom of expression' is 'a fundamental prerequisite for democracy', and that the arts' rootedness 'in freedom of expression and creative thought' means they have 'a vital role to play in development, nation building and sustaining [South Africa's] emerging democracy'. The list further states that access to culturally fulfilled lives is crucial to helping South Africans 'realise their full potential, and act as responsible and creative citizens'. Finally, it points out that the arts have a role to play in building an empowered and free-thinking society, and that cultural practice may also participate directly in the democratic process by 'promoting reconciliation'. The *White Paper's* approach to the arts 'is premised on international standards in which culture is understood as an important component of national life which enhances all of our freedoms [and which] should not be used as a mechanism of exclusion, [or] a barrier between people'.³¹ Collectively, these values demonstrate that the newly elected South African government wished to promote, through the *White*

29 See Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Sheila Boniface Davies and J. Q. Davies, "'So Take This Magic Flute and Blow. It Will Protect Us as We Go": *Impempe Yomlingo* (2007–11) and South Africa's Ongoing Transition', *The Opera Quarterly* 28/1–2 (2012); Innocentia J. Mhlambi, 'The Question of Nationalism in Mzilikazi Khumalo's *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu* (2002)', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 27/3 (2015); Hilde Roos, 'Indigenisation and History: How Opera in South Africa Became South African Opera', *Acta Academica, Supplement* 1 (2012); Donato Somma and Neo Muyanga, "'The Musical Thread": Neo Muyanga on Opera and South Africa', *African Studies* 75/1 (2016).

30 Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST), *All Our Legacies, Our Common Future: White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage* (1996), www.dac.gov.za/content/white-paper-arts-culture-and-heritage.

31 All from DACST, *White Paper*.

Paper, a view of creative and cultural life premised not only on the principles of acceptance and equal representation – what could be described as ‘passive’, or ‘endowed’ values – but also on the active principles of participation and reconciliation, and the development of citizens’ critical and self-representational capacities. In other words, the *White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage* was based on the conviction that the arts could support the consolidation of the country’s democracy by encouraging South Africans to become democratically engaged subjects.

As part of its agenda of redress and representation, the *White Paper* resolved to restructure existing funding models, and specifically to withdraw state subsidy from old apartheid institutions.³² The document points out that the racially exclusive Provincial Arts Councils (PACs) established by the apartheid government had prioritized Western European forms, relationships, and influence, rather than fostering South Africa’s identity as an African country, or nurturing connections with other African countries. This had to change:

We are of Africa, yet have poorly developed cultural relations with our neighbours, as well as our numerous partners in the South, especially Asia. In developing these new links, we shall of course maintain and also extend our links with the North . . . Official cultural policy previously favoured relations with Europe and North America which resulted in a particular bias. The Ministry’s policy asserts the fact that we are an African country with many cultures and traditions, of which these traditions are an integral part. This policy therefore regards relations with these countries as essential for the continued development of our country within a framework of multi-culturalism.³³

For South Africa’s established opera companies and state-funded arts organizations, the withdrawal of subsidy and the reorientation towards an African-centred cultural identity created an existential dilemma. Challenged to stay both financially viable and socially relevant, not all PACs survived the transition. Of the former organizations, only CAPAB managed to sustain its activities and preserve its central staff and facilities by turning itself, in 1998, into CTO, the company responsible for *Fidelio on Robben Island*.³⁴ In the gaps left by the disbanding of the other PACs, a changing roster of new opera companies emerged, including Opera Africa, Gauteng Opera, Dimpho di Kopane (now performing as Isango Ensemble), Umculo Opera, and the Black Tie Ensemble. Responding to the *White Paper*’s stipulations, these companies developed managerial and artistic approaches suited to the changed circumstances of opera in South Africa. Solutions included the transformation of management structures; the development of sustainable funding models; increased investment in outreach and education; the promotion of previously marginalized cultural forms and grassroots arts projects; and

32 DACST, *White Paper*.

33 DACST, *White Paper*.

34 A more detailed overview of CAPAB’s transformation into CTO can be found in Hilde Roos, ‘Opera Production in the Western Cape: Strategies in Search of Indigenization’ (DPhil diss., Stellenbosch University, 2010). Roos also recounts the disbanding of the other PACs and their replacement by new opera companies.

importantly for the formerly privileged forms of opera and ballet, the development of explicit projects of indigenization.

Experiments in indigenization focused especially on transposing Western canonical works to an African context. *Fidelio on Robben Island* is a representative example, with its infusion of South African visual and narrative references and its incorporation of local historical content. Other productions went further, opting to translate parts (or entire works) into indigenous languages, and even rearranging musical material for local instruments.³⁵ Such adaptations served a dual purpose: first, as Roos argues, they sought to make opera 'relevant' to local audiences, thereby not only attracting new patrons, but also aligning the art form with the new Arts, Culture, and Heritage policy's African continental focus.³⁶ Second, as Davies and Davies have shown, the incorporation of local forms and meanings served to showcase a national narrative of reconciliation, non-racialism, and 'rainbow nationalism' – the values from which South Africa's young democracy was to be fashioned.³⁷ To understand how *Fidelio on Robben Island* interacted with these principles, closer inspection of their role in and importance to the new democratic project is warranted.

The foundational principles of early South African democracy

According to Ahmed Bawa, the first decade of democracy in South Africa can be divided into two distinct periods, organized around divergent ideals.³⁸ The first five years, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, were dominated by a 'reconciliation agenda' that was 'shaped in terms of and emphasized the ANC's *one nation, many cultures* approach'.³⁹ Formulated on the tenets of the anti-apartheid struggle and the negotiated transition, the principles of South Africa's first democratic half-decade prioritized compassion and forgiveness, as well as a shift away from the focus on racial difference entrenched by the apartheid regime. Three concepts dominated the political agenda between 1994 and 1999: the policy of non-racialism, the ideal of the 'rainbow nation', and the humanist philosophy of *Ubuntu*.

Non-racialism, which envisioned a social and political order in which the construct of 'race' had little influence on people's treatment or prospects, was enshrined in chapter 1 of South Africa's newly created Constitution.⁴⁰ It had been a founding principle of the ANC, and was adopted in democratic South Africa as a corrective to the race-based policies of the previous

35 Much has been written on operatic localization in post-apartheid South Africa, including Roos, 'Opera Production'; Roos, 'How Opera in South Africa'; Andrew Olsen, 'Mozart's African Jacket: *Die Zauberflöte* and its Localisation in *The Magic Flute (Impempe Yomlingo)*', *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* 9/1 (2012); Davies and Davies, "'So Take This Magic Flute'"; André, *Black Opera*, esp. Chapter 5.

36 Roos, 'Opera Production', esp. 212–13.

37 Davies and Davies, "'So Take This Magic Flute'".

38 Ahmed C. Bawa, 'South Africa's Young Democracy, Ten Years On: Guest Editor's Introduction', *Social Research* 72/3 (2005), xviii.

39 Bawa, 'South Africa's Young Democracy', xii, original emphasis.

40 Article 1(b), *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996*, 'Chapter 1: Founding Provisions' (1996), 3, www.justice.gov.za/legislation/constitution/SACConstitution-web-eng-01.pdf.

dispensation.⁴¹ Though, in hindsight, the agenda of non-racialism appears at best idealistic, and at worst wilfully naïve – especially given the country's ongoing struggles with racial violence and inequality – its humanist position was consistent with prevailing attitudes of the time, embodied especially by the twin concepts of rainbow nationalism and *Ubuntu*, which had been popularized by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Tutu's rainbow nation was in effect a colourful metaphorical realization of the ANC's 'one nation, many cultures' philosophy, capturing in a single, positive image the notion of a country united in the diversity of its histories and cultures. *Ubuntu*, in turn, advocated a social order resembling emancipatory communitarianism.⁴² Derived from the expression '*Umuntu umuntu ngabantu*' ('a person is a person because of/through other people'), the term 'emphasizes that our true human potential can only be realized in partnership with others'.⁴³ Like the ideals of rainbow nationalism and non-racialism, *Ubuntu* stressed a 'stronger together'-style collectivism that encouraged South Africans to set aside their differences and work together towards national healing and reconciliation.⁴⁴

Following the ascent to power of Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki, in 1999, public discourse shifted from a focus on reconciliation to an agenda of reconstruction and reparation.⁴⁵ Between 1999 and 2004, policies geared towards Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), introduced '[a layer] of complexity' to the nation-building project 'in order to couple the agenda of political empowerment so powerfully achieved in the process of [pre-1994] negotiations to the agenda of economic empowerment'.⁴⁶ Mbeki's vision extended beyond nurturing a peacefully coexisting society, towards achieving economic equality for previously disenfranchised citizens.⁴⁷ Additionally, South Africa's second democratically elected president took seriously the country's 'African' identity. Propounding a vision of what he termed 'the African Renaissance', Mbeki 'imagined himself', in Davies and Davies's words, 'at the head of a future-oriented movement that would turn its back on "Afro-pessimism"'.⁴⁸ Mbeki's African Renaissance sought to combine localist epistemologies with an

41 See David Everett, *Non-Racialism in South Africa* (London: Routledge, 2014).

42 Though *Ubuntu* is similar to communitarianism, Mvuselelo Ngcoya argues that the two philosophies are distinct due to the former's focus on what it means to be human, which precedes the latter's primary preoccupation with legal rights. See Mvuselelo Ngcoya, 'Ubuntu: Toward an Emancipatory Cosmopolitanism?', *International Political Sociology* 9/3 (2015), 255.

43 Ngcoya, 'Ubuntu', 253.

44 As I finalize this manuscript, public attention is again focused on Tutu's ideals of *Ubuntu* and rainbow nationalism, following the former archbishop's death, aged 90, on 26 December 2021.

45 Economic empowerment policies were not altogether absent from the Mandela years, but their focus was – like the rest of the dispensation's priorities – more conciliatory than subsequent models have been. Shortly before the 1994 elections, the ANC launched the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which aimed to foster economic growth and create employment for South Africans. See S. J. Mosala, J. C. M. Venter, and E. G. Bain, 'South Africa's Economic Transformation since 1994: What Influence has the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) Had?', *The Review of Black Political Economy* 44/3–4 (2017).

46 Bawa, 'South Africa's Young Democracy', xviii.

47 See Bill Freund, 'South Africa: The End of Apartheid and the Emergence of the "BEE Elite"', *Review of African Political Economy* 34/114 (2007), for an explanation of the BEE agenda and its policies.

48 Davies and Davies, "'So Take This Magic Flute'", 57.

internationalist diplomatic and economic agenda. It combined a re-engagement with and embrace of African philosophies, histories, and cultural values, with the pursuit of global modernity and international influence.⁴⁹

The emphasis on economic empowerment under Mbeki's rule drew attention to a crucial factor in public attitudes to South Africa's democratic transition, namely the widespread hope that the new political dispensation would lead to material gains for poor citizens, the majority of whom were (and still are) Black. In their 2002 assessment of South African political culture, Carlos Garcia-Rivero and colleagues ask whether 'commitment to democracy was intrinsic or instrumental' in South Africa.⁵⁰ Intrinsic commitment, the authors explain, argues that democracy is a social good 'in and of itself', and should be pursued regardless of its material or economic effects. Instrumental support, on the other hand, is conditional: it views democracy as 'a means to other ends', such as the reduction of poverty, the elimination of economic inequality, and the improvement of living standards.⁵¹ Drawing on surveys conducted after the country's first democratic elections, Garcia and colleagues conclude that South Africans 'seem not to associate [democracy] to a form of rule; it seems rather, and principally, to be seen as a means of dealing with economic deprivation'.⁵² In that sense, voters' commitment to democracy was revealed as predominantly instrumental, rather than intrinsic. Mbeki's democratic project, with its focus on economic redress, attuned itself to the broad citizenry's instrumentalist attitude towards political transformation.⁵³ Moreover, it incorporated this priority into his future-oriented, Africanist agenda, by emphasizing South Africa's role as an agent of modernity and political and socioeconomic influence on the continent.

Fidelio on Robben Island hence entered a political context focused on the re-assertion of African identity and the reallocation of resources to benefit previously disadvantaged individuals and communities. But, as the next section argues, the production's own priorities seemed more closely aligned with the reconciliatory and communitarian principles of Mbeki's predecessor.

***Fidelio on Robben Island* and democracy**

As shown earlier, critics and government officials believed *Fidelio on Robben Island* to be singularly suited to the celebration of a decade of democracy. In their view, the opera's narrative arc and ethical priorities aligned perfectly with South Africa's history of political struggle and

49 Bawa, 'South Africa's Young Democracy', xiv.

50 Carlos Garcia-Rivero, Hennie Kotzé, and Pierre du Toit, 'Political Culture and Democracy: The South African Case', *Politikon* 29/2 (2002), 169. Garcia-Rivero et al.'s work is based on Michael Bratton and Robert Mattes, 'Support for Democracy in Africa: Intrinsic or Instrumental?', *British Journal of Political Science* 31/3 (2001).

51 Garcia-Rivero et al., 'Political Culture', 169.

52 Garcia-Rivero et al., 'Political Culture', 169.

53 Compared to the more radical rhetoric surrounding recent measures towards reparation, represented by the Radical Economic Transformation (RET) faction of the ruling party, Mbeki's fiscally conservative approach to economic redress may be argued to fall well short of its professed aim – a view supported by the fact that only a small sector of the Black population benefited from BEE policies. See Mosala et al., 'South Africa's Economic Transformation'; and Freund, 'South Africa'.

transition. What these commentators did not acknowledge, however, was that the opera performed several competing versions of democracy, which both underscored *and* complicated dominant ideals of the time.

The visions of democracy articulated by *Fidelio on Robben Island* related ambiguously to the governing principles of Thabo Mbeki's administration. Rather than economic redress, for instance, the opera's glamorous profile and expensive tickets appeared to endorse a more traditional social structure marked by class privilege. Though the performance was live-streamed to Green Point Stadium, where a mass audience attended the open-air screening for free, there is no escaping the distance – physical as well as symbolic – between those gathered on the mainland and those assembled on the island. Rather than bridging the political and economic divide between the haves and the have-nots, this *Fidelio on Robben Island* widened it.

Similarly, the production neglected the specifically 'African' part of Mbeki's 'African renaissance', opting instead for a musical form and a patronage relationship that reinforced the country's influence in the West. Of course, the government's prioritization of an African-centric agenda did not preclude engagement with European forms or diplomatic relations. But the decision to celebrate the very heart of South Africa's democracy – its history of oppression and overcoming – with a gaze to Europe, does seem to imbue the democratic celebrations with Western, rather than African, precedence.

Fidelio on Robben Island appears to have exchanged Mbeki's Afrocentric, restitutive democracy for a more ambiguous political ideal, one that may be summarized in terms of three main characteristics. First, the production and its paratexts equate democracy with freedom. Second, the democracy celebrated by *Fidelio on Robben Island* is rooted in struggle, opposition, and ultimate liberation. Finally, the opera portrays democracy as a universal, rather than a local, value. In what follows, I offer a more detailed consideration of each of these points.

Discourse surrounding the CTO production repeatedly described *Fidelio* as Beethoven's 'freedom opera'.⁵⁴ Newspaper headlines and official messages alike underscored the opera's liberation narrative as evidence of the work's aptness for South Africa's democratic celebration. At surface level, the reasoning is clear: Florestan's political imprisonment and ultimate emancipation map directly onto the experiences of many South African anti-apartheid activists. 'Freedom', then, refers to freedom from imprisonment on political grounds – an interpretation that was as true at the opera's premiere in 1805 as it was in 2004. But the equivalence of what may first and foremost be regarded as a system of rule (democracy) with what is in effect an abstract concept (freedom) also reflects a certain ambiguity about the meaning of democracy. According to Lioba Moshi and Abdulahi Osman, citizens and political regimes across the African continent often use the concepts of 'freedom' and 'democracy' interchangeably.⁵⁵ This may, on the one hand, indicate an incomplete understanding of

54 Somerville, 'A Long Walk'; Carew, 'Freedom Hits'; Julius, 'Message'; Peter Matlare, 'SABC Celebrates Our Young Democracy as Broadcasting Partner of the Opera *Fidelio* from Robben Island', Programme for *Fidelio on Robben Island*, Cape Town, 27 March 2004; Cohen, 'Island-Style'; Allison, 'The Song Road'.

55 Lioba Moshi and Abdulahi A. Osman, *Democracy and Culture: An African Perspective* (London: Adonis & Abbey, 2008), 212.

the concept of democracy. On the other hand, it may also gesture towards the fact that most African democracies were born out of a struggle against colonial rule. In other words, 'democracy' is meaningful not because it promises universal suffrage, but because it signals a shift towards national (and, indeed, individual) self-determination and emancipation from foreign (or, in South Africa's case, minority) control. Democracy-as-freedom is a form of healing – a plaster to stick over the wound of oppression.

The second feature of *Fidelio's* version of democracy is closely related to the first. If the opera implies that democracy is equivalent to freedom born out of oppression, it follows that such democracy is rooted in experiences of and resistance to domination. In this configuration, democracy as political practice exists only in conjunction with its negative, oppression. For Richard Marback, 'the democratic triumph of South Africa needs a tragic past to persist, not simply as historical fact, but also as formative influence, as always at work in narratives of the present'.⁵⁶ Elizabeth MacGonagle concurs, writing that '[t]he narrative of struggle and resistance lies at the heart of the new South African state'.⁵⁷ The democratically elected state relies on its history of struggle as a form of identity and a source of legitimacy.

South Africa's contradictory reliance on an oppressive past as basis for a democratic future is suggestive of what Chantal Mouffe calls 'the democratic paradox' – an acknowledgement that the nature of the democratic ideal is frequently shaped in advance by the material and political conditions from which democracy emerges.⁵⁸ In Mouffe's reading, as in work by Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo, the political relations between past and present often manifest as continuity and replication, especially where new democratic configurations emerge as negotiated settlements out of authoritarian regimes.⁵⁹ South Africa's democratic imaginary, itself the product of a negotiated transition, also relied on pre-democratic history. However, unlike the configurations theorized by Mouffe and Albertus and Menaldo, this relationship was negative, rather than positive. Instead of embracing continuity with the past, South African democracy defined itself *against* what came before.

In both Marback's and MacGonagle's views, Robben Island offers an ideal site upon which to reinscribe this historically rooted, negative understanding of South African democracy. The island has become a symbol of 'the triumph in Africa of the struggles against racial inequality and for democratic justice'.⁶⁰ As a discursive space, in other words, Robben Island looks both forward and backward, offering hope for the liberated future, but serving also as 'a poignant reminder to the newly democratic South Africa of the price paid for freedom'.⁶¹ By situating *Fidelio* on Robben Island, CTO infused Beethoven's 'freedom opera' with this same sense of

56 Richard Marback, 'The Rhetorical Space of Robben Island', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34/2 (2004), 9.

57 MacGonagle, 'History and Memory', 55.

58 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

59 Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo, *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

60 Marback, 'The Rhetorical', 8.

61 MacGonagle, 'History and Memory', 55.

pastness. As a result, the democratic imaginary deriving from the production was defined primarily in terms of its negative precedent, namely a lack of freedom.

Through its physical setting, *Fidelio on Robben Island* rooted its democratic agenda in local struggle. However, the opera's paratexts ultimately projected a political vision that was at its core universal. I have already rehearsed extensively various commentators' references to the parallels between Florestan's story, the circumstances of the French Revolution, and South Africa's liberation narrative. One further document reveals the impact of these parallels on the notion of democracy contained in *Fidelio on Robben Island*. The production programme contains an extended section titled 'Notes on Beethoven's *Fidelio*'. Rather than the background information and 'moments to listen out for' usually found in programme notes, however, 'Notes on Beethoven's *Fidelio*' is almost exclusively preoccupied with the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (1789) and with Napoleon's dismantling of its tenets. Indeed, 'Notes on Beethoven's *Fidelio*' reads more like a pamphlet on Napoleonic tyranny than a guide to Beethoven's opera.

In its final paragraphs, the essay draws a connection between Beethoven's opera, the *Declaration*, and the pursuit of 'universal' democratic values:

The scene of the prisoners emerging from their dungeon into the blazing sunlight is no longer operatic or theatrical but is the universal cry of humanity for freedom from oppression. The prisoners are humanity and their chorus anticipates the great cries for universal suffrage that we find in the *Choral Symphony* and the *Missa Solemnis*.

The extraordinary thing about the Declaration of the Rights of Man [*sic*] is that in the long run it imposed its ideas on the world, not just in France, and it did not spread by efforts of the French alone. Today it has become expanded into a concern for 'human rights', and as yet it can be clearly seen not to have been applied throughout the universe. Men, women and children still cry out.⁶²

These programme notes, which engage only tangentially with their intended subject, may well be a product of poor or inexperienced authorship. A more generous reading, however, could argue that the notes embody an intentional effort to integrate *Fidelio on Robben Island's* liberation narrative with an internationalist agenda. This production, the essay suggests, is not just about a local history of emancipation, but about the pursuit of democratic values that are universally sought and celebrated. *Fidelio's* democracy is rooted in the principles of '*liberté, égalité, et fraternité*' (tellingly cited in the programme note in French, rather than English), not in Tutu's ideals of *Ubuntu* and rainbow nationalism.⁶³ Here, ultimately, the tension between *Fidelio on Robben Island's* local and international agendas is laid bare: the opera's stakeholders sought to represent a local struggle for liberation, while simultaneously laying claim to a universalized democratic spirit.

Linking South Africa's transition explicitly with the French Revolution and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, *Fidelio on Robben Island* portrayed South Africa's new

62 Michael Tuffin, 'Notes on Beethoven's *Fidelio*', Programme for *Fidelio on Robben Island*, Cape Town, 27 March 2004.

63 Tuffin, 'Notes on Beethoven's *Fidelio*'.

democracy as founded on universal, rather than local, principles of freedom, equality, and fellowship. South African democracy, in this portrayal, was not Africanist, but global, recognizable for its prioritization of Enlightenment values. If this separated *Fidelio's* democratic agenda from Mbeki's prioritization of local epistemologies, it did obtain for his regime the international legitimacy it sought. At once proudly South African and ambitiously global, *Fidelio on Robben Island* performed competing versions of democracy, which slipped awkwardly between liberation, reconciliation, and aspiration.

Conclusion

In a review of *Fidelio on Robben Island*, South African-born British critic John Allison remarked that the production had renewed his faith in South Africa's democratic transition:

The new South Africa, stricken with Aids, poverty and crime, still has a long way to go . . . But every time I return it feels just a little better, and it is a measure of how South Africa has progressed that Beethoven's utopian ending seemed absolutely right. This *Fidelio* made me proud to be South African, something which seemed impossible not so long ago.⁶⁴

Allison's comment drew attention to the persistent challenges faced by South Africans after a decade of democracy. Despite these problems, however, the critic argued that CTO's production proved the success of the country's political transformation. In Allison's view, *Fidelio on Robben Island* showed that South Africa's democracy works.

As an exercise in political legitimacy, the production certainly found its mark. Robben Island itself, MacGonagle argues, is a symbol of the legitimacy of the post-apartheid state.⁶⁵ Having held the 'prisoners-turned-leaders' who subsequently guided the country through its post-apartheid transition, the island serves as a reminder that those at the helm of South Africa's democracy were prepared to pay the ultimate price for the empowerment of their fellow citizens.⁶⁶ The national government appropriated this connotation: by supporting the bid to locate an important event in South Africa's decade-of-democracy celebrations on Robben Island, the state grasped an opportunity to make the former prison's struggle history its own – a strategic exercise that was warranted, in part, by the fact that many senior government officers had themselves been incarcerated during apartheid. *Fidelio on Robben Island* reiterated the fact that the prison-to-freedom narrative is also the narrative of the South African state. By extension, the production confirmed that if anybody was equipped to steer the country, it was this set of leaders, who had already proven their absolute dedication to national interests. Moreover, they already had ten prosperous years of democracy behind them, and as the triumph of the opera showed, their leadership was a success. The rhetorical space of Beethoven's opera hence merged with that of Robben Island to validate South Africa's democratic dispensation and those elected to front it.

64 Allison, 'The Song Road'.

65 MacGonagle, 'History and Memory', 59.

66 The term 'prisoner-turned-leader' is MacGonagle's.

But *Fidelio on Robben Island* fulfilled a second legitimating purpose as well. Situated at one of South Africa's most revered historical sites, endorsed by national government, and commandeered to celebrate the country's democratic transition, the performance claimed legitimacy for opera as a cultural form for the new South Africa. Just as the Robben Island setting confirmed the legitimacy of the state, it also conveyed the legitimacy of the art form. Opera is both 'elevated' – bringing the solemnity Albie Sachs required from struggle commemorations – and popular, making it a suitable musical genre to represent South Africa's voices united in song. It belongs on Robben Island, and it belongs in democratic South Africa. *Fidelio on Robben Island* recuperated opera from its chequered history in the country, and proved the art form's appropriateness for representing South Africa's sacred democracy.

In later years, the structural problems of operatic democracy would gain greater attention. The cost of maintaining active companies and of paying singers fairly would lead to strikes and public disputes. Lack of access and representation for Black citizens, especially at managerial level, would undermine institutions' claims of transformation. And the art form's apparent incompatibility with the basic needs of South Africans, who still struggle to obtain access to basic human rights, would reignite debates about the role of the arts in developing societies. But at this point in 2004, as South Africa looked hopefully on its liberated future, *Fidelio on Robben Island* turned the operatic stage into a meeting point for the country's diverse and contested democratic dreams.

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