

Synopsis

The action takes place at the end of the XVIII century in Spain, in a prison near Seville. As the curtain opens, Florestan, thrown into prison by the governor Don Pizarro whose illegal manoeuvres he denounced, has been languishing for two years in a dungeon cell and is now at death's door. His wife Leonore, disguised as a boy known by the name of Fidelio, has managed to get to know the jailer Rocco in order to gain his confidence and so succeed in freeing Florestan.

ACT I

Jaquino, the prison porter, is paying court to Marzeline, Rocco's daughter. He would like to marry her but Marzeline makes him understand that his efforts are in vain. Left on her own, the young girl reveals that her heart belongs to another: Fidelio, whose real identity she is unaware of. She dreams of being married to him and can already see herself in the tranquillity of their home. Rocco arrives, followed shortly afterwards by Leonore who carries provisions. The jailer compliments her on her zeal and efficiency. He also believes that Fidelio would make a good match for his daughter whose feelings he can sense. Each of the four protagonists separately expresses his/her own feelings: hope for Marzeline, benevolence for Rocco, suffering for Jaquino and embarrassment for Leonore who is only too aware of the misunderstanding. Rocco promises that Marzeline and Fidelio can marry as soon as Don Pizarro, who is expected at any moment, has left. Then he sings an aria, partly sententious and partly comic, on the importance of gold for marital bliss. Leonore then lets him understand that she could help him in his work with the prisoners. Rocco gives an encouraging reply while Marzeline is worried about the afflictions to which Fidelio's nerves would be subjected. However, in order to take on Fidelio as an assistant, the Governor's permission is needed, and Rocco promises to ask for it. A march announces the arrival of Don Pizarro. Don Pizarro makes his entrance accompanied by a detachment of officers whom he addresses with domineering arrogance. He reads a dispatch announcing the imminent arrival of the Minister who, having been informed of the high number of illegal detentions in the prison, is about to come and carry out an inspection. Pizarro is worried because this could lead to the discovery of Florestan whom the Minister believes to have died some time before. Therefore he decides to hasten events and to complete his vendetta by killing Florestan. He foretastes that moment, then orders his men to tell him when the Minister arrives. He tries to enlist Rocco to kill Florestan. Rocco refuses. Pizarro then promises to do it himself: Rocco need only dig a grave in the dungeons. Pizarro goes off for a moment. Leonore gives full vent to her indignation, declaring more than ever her determination to save her husband. Marzeline and Jaquino arrive: Rocco's daughter unequivocally tells her suitor that he can hold no hope since she loves only Fidelio. Rocco takes his daughter's part. Leonore and Marzeline then ask him to let the prisoners leave their cells so that they can take advantage of a beautiful sunny day. After a slight hesitation, Rocco agrees. The prisoners (with the exception of Florestan who is still chained in his cell) come out, striking up a song of gratitude to light and to life. Then they disperse into the garden. Rocco tells Leonore that Pizarro has given him permission to take her on as an assistant... and as a son-in-law! However he also reveals that Florestan will be murdered that same day. Leonore confirms her intention of going with him down into the dungeons. At that very moment Marzeline and Jaquino rush in, frightened, announcing that Pizarro is returning and is furious because the prisoners have been let out without his permission. Pizarro lets fly at Rocco who manages to calm him by reminding him that it will be Florestan who will pay for

everyone. The prisoners return to their cells and Pizarro urges Leonore and Rocco to dig the grave for Florestan.

ACT II

In Florestan's cell, Leonore's husband, still in chains, meditates on his present situation and about his previous life. He does not regret his actions since he knows full well that he did his duty. He trusts in God's will and, in a moment of visionary elation, thinks he sees Leonore appear beside him before he loses consciousness. Leonore and Rocco, carrying tools, go down into the cell. They note that the prisoner is still alive. Leonore finds it difficult to hide her emotion. A dialogue starts between Florestan and Rocco who agrees to give him a little wine. Florestan expresses his gratitude. In turn Leonore offers him some bread. Florestan does not recognize her in her disguise, but her humane attitude brings back hope. Then Pizarro arrives; in an aside he declares his intention of also getting rid of Leonore and Rocco so as not to leave any witnesses. He gets ready to stab Florestan after having reminded him of the reasons for his hatred, but Leonore intervenes: «First kill his wife». Then, amidst the astonishment of the three men, she reveals her true identity and threatens Pizarro with a pistol. At that moment a blare of trumpets sounds outside, announcing the arrival of the Minister. Florestan and Leonore are safe, Pizarro is desperate and Rocco is relieved. Florestan and Leonore indulge their happiness on being reunited. Rocco returns announcing that all the prisoners are to be freed on the orders of the Minister.

In the castle courtyard, the chorus of the Prisoners and the People celebrate the joy of liberation. Don Fernando, the Minister, announces that he comes as a liberator on the orders of the King. Florestan, whom Fernando thought was dead, is brought before the latter by Rocco. The Minister orders the Guards to take away Pizarro who, one can guess, is destined to take Florestan's place in a prison cell. Leonore frees Florestan of his chains and everyone proclaims the glory of faithful love and the greatness of the wife who has saved her own husband.