

Photo Credit: Russ Rowland, Performer soprano Kelly Griffin

Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio*

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THE BROAD STAGE AT THE SANTA MONICA COLLEGE PERFORMING ARTS CENTER
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Photo Credit: Russ Rowland;
Performers soprano Kelly Griffin and bass-baritone Derrell Acon

“We can unlock tremendous power in the music and the text that gets obscured in a more traditional or heavily decorated version.”

– Ethan Heard, Artistic Director, Heartbeat Opera

Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio*

The New York-based Heartbeat Opera is an emerging chamber opera company that seeks to re-envision opera, making their adaptations of the classics relevant to seasoned opera lovers or those fresh on the opera scene. They work to expand the boundaries of what opera has been in the past and to propel it toward an inclusive future.

Heartbeat Opera's *Fidelio* is an adaptation of Beethoven's only opera, which the composer wrote in the 1800s, during and after the French Revolution when **rescue operas** were popular in Europe. In the libretto, the opera's heroine, Leonore, disguises herself as a prison guard called "Fidelio," in order to save her husband Florestan from death in a political prison. In this version of *Fidelio*, Florestan is an unjustly incarcerated Black Lives Matter activist. This contemporary version of the opera features a primarily Black cast while focusing on the humanity of incarcerated individuals. The voices of more than 100 incarcerated singers from six prison choirs are incorporated into this production, reinterpreting a traditional part of the *Fidelio* opera, the *Prisoners' Chorus*.

This opera company is committed to eliminating racism within the arts as they have articulated by signing on to the Black Opera Alliance's **Pledge for Racial Equity and Systemic Change in Opera**.

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“[The Black artists before me] have made it possible for me to say, ‘I will sing French opera,’ or, ‘I will sing German opera,’ instead of being told, ‘You will sing *Porgy and Bess*’.”

–Jessye Norman,

opera singer (1945–2019), speaking about the historical artists who inspired her. *New York Times*, 1983

OPERA AND INCLUSION

Opera is an Italian word that literally means “a piece of work” and eventually came to refer to an important and highly skilled theater art form. Opera emerged in Italy over 400 years ago during the Renaissance period (1300s–1600s). During this time, artists, writers and musicians gathered to discuss literature, science and the arts. They were inspired by the ancient Greek dramatic styles of comedy, satire and tragedy. Eventually, by combining theater, poetry, dance and music, they created opera, which uses a **libretto** as the text to guide the story as the actors sing the drama with musical accompaniment. The earliest operas were **commissioned** artworks created specifically for an elite royal or wealthy audience and usually for specific celebrations or occasions. Then, in 1637, the Teatro San Cassiano opened in Venice, Italy as the first public opera house, giving greater access to general audiences.

Access to opera in the United States had also been restricted based on affluence and a historical racial divide. Then, in the early 1900s, the Theodore Drury Opera company in New York presented its first opera performance of Georges Bizet’s *Carmen*, in which the entire cast and creative team were Black. Although opera companies such as this one attempted to provide greater inclusion for audiences and for Black artists, their efforts would require much more time to see results. Caterina Jarboro, of African American and Native American parents, first debuted as an opera singer in Italy in 1930, before becoming the first female Black opera singer to perform with a major company in the United States in 1933. On Broadway in 1935, DuBose Heyward’s novel, *Porgy*, about the lives of impoverished Black communities in Charleston, was created by an all white production team into what its composer George Gershwin called a “folk opera.” While *Porgy and Bess* provided much needed opportunities for Black singers, it also became the only option available to classically trained Black

singers for decades. It was not until 1955 that contralto Marian Anderson debuted with The Metropolitan Opera, making her the first Black person to do so. Almost a century after her debut, conversations about race, inequality and opera are emerging from the field of opera itself to address the historical racism and **cultural appropriation** that exists within it. Heartbeat Opera and other contemporary opera companies work to create intentional and deeply conscious productions that contribute to the national dialogue about equity and justice with the hope to inspire change and make discussions such as these irrelevant and outdated.

WHAT IS JUSTICE?

When we think of justice, thoughts of fairness easily come to mind. It is one of the most fundamental social, ethical and moral principles of every society. How each of us thinks about or perceives justice will affect how we think our society should work. The application of justice will depend on the perception of what justice is and is not, varying across cultures and communities, and affecting the creation of laws and governance around the world.

Justice is implemented based on what each society perceives as the appropriate role for the rule of law, establishing their culture of law, or legal tradition. For example, when the goal of justice is to be punitive, then the offender will receive punishment for the offense. This is known as retributive justice. When the goal of justice is to provide healing and reintegration of offenders into their communities then the process involves restorative justice. In other words, the goals of justice in a given society will determine what systems are supported, championed or implemented.

Movement toward **social justice**, restorative justice, environmental justice, and **transitional justice**, all identify the work of change and an intention to make our human experience more equitable.

WHAT IS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE?

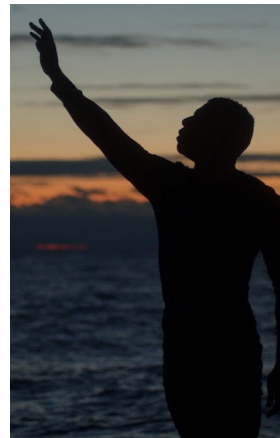
Restorative Justice is an inclusive approach to justice that emphasizes accountability, making amends, and facilitates communication between victims and offenders as a means of healing and rehabilitation. This approach aims to restore relationships and identify changes that would support and prevent future re-offending.

The foundation of restorative justice is rooted in the traditional practices of First Nations and Indigenous peoples around the world. Traditional or cultural philosophies and teachings that value interconnectedness and the collective process of reconciliation are at the center of what is now referred to as restorative justice.

The Diné (Navajo) Nation's concept of K'é, for example, is the system of kinship, or relationships, that is based on connectedness to others and solidarity as a social structure. This system is based on compassion, kindness, generosity and peacefulness, having as a goal the restoration of these relationships in the event of any disruption. Equitable communication and dialogue are supported by the use of the talking circle and a talking stick, which are shared practices by many Indigenous cultures and have been incorporated into the Restorative Justice process.

In the United States, the Restorative Justice movement was formalized in the 1970s, but received greater recognition as an alternative form of administering justice in the latter part of the 20th century. This was a response to and calling out of the punitive judicial system and the establishment of the **prison industrial complex**. The high increase of incarcerated populations during that period, mainly Black and Latino, led to a search for alternative ways to implement justice, resulting in a greater use of restorative justice.

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. We spend more resources on prisons than on education with a growing juvenile incarceration rate, resulting in a **school to prison pipeline** reality. Restorative Justice offers a new outlook toward prison reform, seeking to heal the harm to both victims and offenders, ultimately reintegrating the offender back into their families and communities.



HEARTBEAT OPERA'S *BREATHING FREE* A VISUAL ALBUM

Breathing Free is a film created by Heartbeat Opera in response to George Floyd's murder in 2020 and the worldwide pandemic that ravaged our prison population. They took excerpts from their *Fidelio* to make a "visual album" blending opera, Negro spirituals and dance.

This year was also the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, the original composer of *Fidelio*. Heartbeat Opera made a conscious choice to highlight the voices of Black artists, both onstage and behind the scenes, by creating *Breathing Free*. This is Heartbeat Opera's move to expand their definition of the traditional **canon** of opera by adding the work of Black composers and lyricists, such as Florence Price and Anthony Davis. *Breathing Free* was created as a celebration of Black Empowerment in the arts.

Visit Heartbeat Opera's website at www.heartbeatopera.org for more information or locations to view *Breathing Free*.

Photo Credit: Heartbeat Opera's *Breathing Free*; filmmaker Anais Cisco; performer Curtis Banister

“We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation.”

– *Equal Justice Initiative Founder Bryan Stevenson, author of Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption.*



Photo Credit: Heartbeat Opera's *Breathing Free*, filmmaker Analis Cisco; performer Derrell Acon

VOCABULARY

CANON: A group or body of related works that are generally accepted as representing the field.

COMMISSIONED:

When an artist is hired to create a work of art.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION: The use of objects or elements of a non-dominant culture in a way that does not respect their original meaning, give credit to their source, or reinforces stereotypes or contributes to oppression.

LIBRETTO:

The text of an opera or other long vocal work.

PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: A set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on mass incarceration, regardless of the actual need.

RESCUE OPERA: A genre of opera in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in France and Germany that deals with the rescue of a main character, usually a political prisoner, and has a happy ending. The most famous rescue opera was Beethoven's *Fidelio*, which was based on a real-life incident.

SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE: A disturbing national trend in which children are pushed out of the public schools and into the juvenile justice system. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect.

SOCIAL JUSTICE: Fairness in terms of distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. The principles of social justice are human rights, access, participation and equity.

SYSTEMIC: Fundamental to a predominant social, economic, or political practice.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE: Rooted in accountability and redress for victims, this is how countries emerging from periods of conflict and repression address large-scale or systematic human rights violations so numerous and so serious that the normal justice system will not be able to provide an adequate response.

TRY THIS

SING TO LEARN HOW TO BREATHE!

When you sing, it is important to breathe properly so that you do not hurt your voice. Sometimes we breathe from the chest, but singing requires that we breathe from the diaphragm. The diaphragm is a dome shaped muscle between your chest and your belly that controls how much air you inhale and exhale when you breathe. "Singing from your diaphragm" describes the proper way to breathe in and out while singing. To learn how to breathe with your diaphragm, lie down on the floor and place your hand on your belly just under your ribs. Now, as you breathe in through your nose, your belly should expand and push your hand up. When you exhale through your mouth, your belly should deflate and your hand should sink into your belly. Your chest should remain still while you are breathing with your diaphragm. Try this standing up to continue practicing. Now you know how to breathe like a singer!

TONGUE TWISTERS TO UNTWIST YOUR TONGUE!

When you sing, the clarity and the pronunciation of your words, or diction, are very important. You can improve your diction by practicing tongue twisters! Start slowly and work up to a faster speed repeating each tongue twister several times.

TRY THESE FOR STARTERS:

1. She sells seashells by the seashore.
2. Red leather, yellow leather.
3. Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.
4. Mommy made me mash my M&Ms.
5. She sees cheese.
6. The blue bluebird blinks.
7. If a dog chews shoes, whose shoes does he choose?

FUN FACTS

Ludwig van Beethoven worked on his only opera, *Fidelio*, for more than a decade. Completed and premiered in 1805 in Vienna, the performances received lukewarm reviews. Just a week earlier, Napoleon's troops had occupied Vienna, and the city's residents were probably not in the mood for theatrical entertainment. Many people had fled, so the audience predominantly consisted of French soldiers. With the libretto written in German, Beethoven's message of liberation was for the most part lost. Beethoven reworked his opera for years and in 1814, the new version premiered in Vienna, finally achieving an enthusiastic reception.

The California Arts Council supports arts programming that serves all 35 state adult correctional institutions. The Arts in Corrections program, funded by the Division of Rehabilitative Programs at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, has grown to an \$8 million annual commitment. This provides a full spectrum of art disciplines including traditional arts. Various organizations and independent artists offer instruction in theater, music, dance, creative writing, and traditional cultural art forms that affirm cultural identity and a sense of belonging.

TAKE IT FURTHER

Check out our **Resources** page with website links and relevant state standards to use for the classroom.

SUGGESTED CA STATE STANDARDS:

NINTH THROUGH TWELFTH GRADE STANDARDS

CA VAPA MUSIC GRADE NINE THROUGH TWELVE: 1.4 Analyze and describe the use of musical elements and expressive devices (e.g., articulation, dynamic markings) in aural examples in a varied repertoire of music representing diverse genres, styles, and cultures.

CA VAPA MUSIC GRADE NINE THROUGH TWELVE: 3.1 Identify the sources of musical genres of the United States, trace the evolution of those genres, and cite well-known musicians associated with them.

CA VAPA MUSIC GRADE NINE THROUGH TWELVE: 4.4 Describe the means used to create images or evoke feelings and emotions in musical works from various cultures.

CA VAPA THEATRE NINE THROUGH TWELVE: 2.3 Create characters, environments, and actions that exhibit tension and suspense.

CA VAPA THEATRE NINE THROUGH TWELVE: 4.2 Explain how cultural influences affect the content or meaning of works of theatre.

CA VAPA THEATRE NINE THROUGH TWELVE: 5.1 Use theatrical skills to communicate concepts or ideas from other curriculum areas, such as creating a musical based on a piece of literature.

CA HSS 11.10 1 Explain how demands of African Americans helped produce a stimulus for civil rights, including President Roosevelt's ban on racial discrimination in defense industries in 1941, and how African Americans' service in World War II produced a stimulus for President Truman's decision to end segregation in the armed forces in 1948.

CA HSS 11.10 2 Examine and analyze the key events, policies, and court cases in the evolution of civil rights, including Dred Scott v. Sandford, Plessy v. Ferguson, Brown v. Board of Education, Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, and California Proposition 209.

CA HSS 11.10 4 Examine the roles of civil rights advocates (e.g., A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Thurgood Marshall, J. Edgar Hoover, Rosa Parks), including the significance of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and "I Have a Dream" speech.

CA HSS 11.11 7 Explain how the federal, state, and local governments have responded to demographic and social changes such as population shifts to the suburbs, racial concentrations in the cities, Frostbelt-to-Sunbelt migration, international migration, decline of family farms, increases in out-of-wedlock births, and drug abuse.

CA HSS 12.5 Principles of American Democracy. Explain the controversies that have resulted over changing interpretations of civil rights, including Plessy v. Ferguson, Brown v. Board of Education, Miranda v. Arizona, Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña, and United States v. Virginia (VMI).

CA HSS 12.10 Students formulate questions about and defend their analyses of tensions within our constitutional democracy and the importance of maintaining a balance between the following concepts: majority rule and individual rights; liberty and equality; state and national authority in a federal system; civil disobedience and the rule of law; freedom of the press and the right to a fair trial; the relationship of religion and government.

CCSS LITERACY WHST 9-12 2 Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes.

SOCIAL JUSTICE STANDARDS

DI.9-12.8 I respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way.

JU.9-12.12 I can recognize, describe and distinguish unfairness and injustice at different levels of society.

JU.9-12.14 I am aware of the advantages and disadvantages I have in society because of my membership in different identity groups, and I know how this has affected my life.

AC.9-12.17 I take responsibility for standing up to exclusion, prejudice and injustice.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

Social Awareness: Perspective-taking, Empathy

Responsible Decision-Making: Identifying problems, Analyzing situations

Relationship Skills: Communication, Social engagement, Teamwork

WEBSITE AND RESEARCH LINKS:

BEETHOVEN'S 'FIDELIO' - SYNOPSIS

OVERVIEW OF CLASSICAL OPERA

THE COMPLEX HISTORY AND UNEASY PRESENT OF 'PORGY AND BESS'

WHAT IS JUSTICE?

JUSTICE-ETHICS DEFINED

WHAT THE HECK IS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE?

WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

HANDBOOK ON RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROGRAMMES -UNITED NATIONS

A JOURNEY IN ABORIGINAL RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

EDUCATION VS PRISON COSTS

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN LAUSD

THE PRISON-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX



Photo Credit: Heartbeat Opera's *Breathing Free*;
filmmaker Anails Cisco; performer Derrell Acon

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