

The Queen of Spades premièred in 1890 at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg

PYOTR TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Libretto by the Tchaikovsky brothers et al, after the Pushkin novel

Running time: 176 minutes

Performed by the Kirov Opera at the Mariinsky Theatre in 1992

Herman, Officer	<i>Gegam Grigorian</i>	Tenor
Count Tomsy, Officer (also Zlatogor/Plutus)	<i>Sergei Leiferkus</i>	Baritone
Chekalinsky, Officer	<i>Vladimir Solodovnikov</i>	Tenor
Surin, Officer	<i>Sergei Alexashin</i>	Bass
Prince Yeletsky	<i>Alexander Gergalov</i>	Baritone
The Countess	<i>Ludmila Filatova</i>	Mezzo
Liza, her granddaughter	<i>Maria Gulegina</i>	Soprano
Pauline, Liza's companion (also Milovzor/Daphnis)	<i>Olga Borodina</i>	Contralto
Masha, Liza's maid	<i>Tatiana Filimonova</i>	Soprano
Governess	<i>Evgenia Perlasova</i>	Mezzo
Master of Ceremonies	<i>Nikolai Gassiev</i>	Tenor
Prilepa/Chlöe (Heroine of a Pastoral Interlude)	<i>Elena Mirtova</i>	Soprano
Chaplitsky, Gambler	<i>Evgeni Boitsov</i>	Tenor
Narumoff, Gambler	<i>Gennadi Bezzubenkov</i>	Bass
Conductor	<i>Valery Gergiev</i>	
Stage Director	<i>Yuri Temirkanov</i>	

Traditional Russian scene numbers [indicated in square brackets below] appear on the film, but don't take account of the division of the opera into three acts

Synopsis

Set in St Petersburg in the late 18th Century

ACT 1 TABLEAU 1 [SCENE 1] While others stroll and children play at soldiers, Chekalinsky and Surin discuss Herman in the Summer Garden. The latter obsessively watches others gamble, but won't join in. Herman confesses to Count Tomsy that he's in love, though he doesn't know the lady's name. Prince Yeletsky is congratulated by Chekalinsky and Surin on his engagement. He points out his fiancée Liza, who's just entered with her grandmother the Countess.

Herman is in despair, as Liza is his own secret beloved. Tomsy tells how the Countess had lost heavily at cards during her Parisian youth. To restore her fortune St Germain had given her the secret of three cards that would always win, in return for a "rendez vous". She had confided the secret to two men, but then a ghost had told her that she would die at the hand of a third man, who would visit as a lover to wring it from her. Herman rejects the temptation this offers, but vows that Yeletsky will never have Liza.

ACT 1 TABLEAU 2 [SCENE 2] Liza and her friend Pauline are entertaining other girls in her room one evening, while Liza is very preoccupied. The others try to raise her spirits, but the governess comes in to reprove them for unseemly merriment. Left alone, Liza reflects on a secret obsession. Suddenly her obsession stands before her: Herman has entered through the open door from the balcony. Liza is confused, but Herman begins to plead with her. He's interrupted when the Countess is heard outside. While he's hidden, the Countess asks why Liza hasn't yet gone to bed: she leaves after ordering Liza to sleep. Herman emerges, muttering the ghost's words, before resuming his declaration of love. Liza finally yields.

ACT 2 TABLEAU 1 [SCENE 3] A masked ball is being held in a great hall. While the room is prepared for a staged entertainment, Prince Yeletsky reaffirms his love for Liza, and asks why she's out of spirits. Herman enters carrying a letter from Liza: he is going to meet her after the pastoral interlude.

The ball guests are invited to watch the classical story of Prilepa {Chlöe} and her rival lovers the poor Milovzor {Daphnis} and the wealthy Zlatogor {Plutus}. When this interlude is over Liza slips Herman a key: next day he is to come to her room where everything will be settled. But Herman insists he will come that night. The Master of Ceremonies suddenly announces that the Empress herself approaches. All line up to receive her.

[Interval]

ACT 2 TABLEAU 2 [SCENE 4] Herman surveys the Countess's empty bedroom while midnight is striking. He hides when he hears footsteps. The countess is led by maids into her dressing room, and Liza passes on to her own room. When prepared for bed, the Countess muses to herself in a chair, before dismissing her maids. Herman then emerges and tries to persuade the Countess to reveal her secret. When he draws a pistol and threatens her, the Countess dies of fright. Liza now returns from her room, and realises that Herman has been using her.

Desperately hurt and enraged, she dismisses him.

ACT 3 TABLEAU 1 [SCENE 5] To the distant sounds of trumpet calls and a church choir, Herman recalls with horror how – while viewing the Countess's body in an open coffin – the corpse had winked at him. Suddenly there's a noise outside, and the Countess's ghost enters. She's come to give him the secret of the three cards: 'Three ... Seven ... Ace!'

ACT 3 TABLEAU 2 [SCENE 6] Liza, still in love with Herman, has begged him to meet her beside the Winter Canal at midnight. Finally he appears and they sing of their mutual love. When she asks him to leave with her, he only wants to go to the gaming table. She realises that he no longer recognises her, and throws herself into the canal.



ACT 3 TABLEAU 3 [SCENE 7] Prince Yeletsky has joined the others in a gaming house. Tomsy entertains them with a song. As play resumes, Herman appears and announces that he wants to play for very high stakes. Selecting *Three* he wins, then stakes his winnings. Playing on *Seven*, he wins again. When he insists on playing a third time, Yeletsky demands to play against him. Herman stakes on *Ace*, but when he picks up his card it's the *Queen of Spades* ... next the Countess's ghost passes across the stage smiling. Herman stabs himself, and begs Yeletsky's forgiveness. The male chorus prays for his soul.

The Queen of Spades by Tchaikovsky

Modest Tchaikovsky, the composer's brother, turned Pushkin's short novel into a romantic melodrama with more realistic characters. This transformation grabbed the composer's attention. Pyotr Tchaikovsky himself invented the Winter Canal scene, arguing that the audience needed to know what happened to Liza. He identified with the central character Herman, and wept while composing his death scene.

He was pleased by his friends' enthusiasm for the music, and particularly delighted when St.Petersburg's favourite tenor, Nikolay Figner, agreed to create the role of Herman. The première was highly successful, though the initial critical reaction was less approving. *The Queen of Spades* was produced in Kyiv only 12 days later. During the next two years it was also produced in Moscow, Odessa, Saratov and Prague.

Instead of focusing on Liza the young doomed woman, Tchaikovsky was drawn more strongly to the less sympathetic Countess who looms as a victim and an agent of fate. Even more than *Eugene Onegin*, the more intimate scenes make this opera memorable, especially the scene in the Countess's bedroom. Evolving dramatic and psychological changes during this bedroom scene are portrayed with consummate mastery. Only the dungeon scene in *Mazeppa* can match this for harrowing intensity.

The opera is also unusual for its stylistic dichotomy, incorporating a very large element of rococo pastiche. This includes two substantial quotations from other composers. Kozłowski's 1791 polonaise at the end of the ballroom scene contrasts savagely with the dark, mysterious, sometimes sinister music that illuminates the tragic destiny of the three main characters.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Although only two of his operas are often performed outside Russia, Tchaikovsky composed operas at every stage of his career. He concentrated on Opera more than any other musical genre, so Opera charts his development as a composer to a greater extent than Ballet. The composer was exceptionally attached to his mother, and her death was profoundly traumatic for him as a fourteen year old. Relations with women – focused on one love affair, one disastrous 1877 marriage, plus a curious epistolary friendship with a patroness he never met – were to be problematical for the rest of his life. Correspondence reveals plenty of self-reproach and homosexual guilt. His cause of death can't be conclusively established, but suicide is a strong possibility.

Tchaikovsky's student years under Anton Rubinstein at the St Petersburg Conservatory didn't prepare him adequately for operatic composition, and few native models were available during the 1860s. Not too surprisingly the composer's first experiment was unsuccessful, and his second *Undine* was rejected outright by the Imperial Theatres and subsequently destroyed. Tchaikovsky had a good dramatic instinct, and could achieve greatness when his personal sympathies were fully engaged. By 1870 he had greatly developed his skill as an instrumental composer, and he revealed a highly personal style in his *Romeo and Juliet* fantasy overture.

Tchaikovsky's third opera *The Oprichnik* was a notable achievement, and a great audience success in 1874. [The *Oprichniki* were a special royal guard and secret police force created by Ivan the Terrible.] Nevertheless Tchaikovsky came to dislike this opera even more than its predecessors. Its individuality was reinforced by a strongly Russian style, and the OLD BOYARINA became the first memorable 'suffering woman' character in his operatic output.

Selected Tchaikovsky Operas

<i>Title</i>	<i>Première</i>	<i>Literary Source</i>
Vakula the Smith	1876 Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg	<i>Christmas Eve</i> by Gogol
Eugene Onegin	1879 Conservatory Theatre, Moscow	Verse Novel by Pushkin
The Maid of Orleans	1881 Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg	Tragedy by Schiller
Mazeppa	1884 Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow	Epic Poem by Pushkin
The Queen of Spades	1890 Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg	Novel by Pushkin

Tchaikovsky was now being drawn towards his nationalist contemporaries (led by Balakirev). His 'Little Russian' Second Symphony revealed a radical shift, which was confirmed in his fourth opera *Vakula the Smith*: four identifiable folksongs are supplemented by passages of folksong

pastiche. Tchaikovsky's nationalist phase came to an abrupt end at this point. The First Piano Concerto signalled a return towards his earlier manner, while the heightened turbulence and pathos of his symphonic fantasy *Francesca da Rimini* (1876) seems to presage the disastrous events that were to materialise the following year.

Eugene Onegin is inextricably entangled with his traumatic marriage: its Pushkin plot had uncanny parallels with the composer's personal life. It's undoubtedly his most popular and characteristic opera, both in its content and its musico-dramatic technique. Influenced by Bizet's *Carmen* which he adored, Tchaikovsky's handling of Pushkin's ironic tale also captures Bizet's concept of domestic harmony and social virtue undermined by inexorable personal tragedy.

Three of Tchaikovsky's last six operas – and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* – are all Pushkin-based. A characteristically Russian episodic structure becomes more explicit in these libretti. As all educated Russians were already familiar with Pushkin's oeuvre, the libretti could be more selective, and rely on the listener's knowledge to fill any gaps in the plot. Each scene dwells on a crucial element of the story, giving the composer time to explore the psychological states of his characters in depth. Tatyana's letter monologue in *Eugene Onegin* has been described as the finest scene in all his operas.



The Maid of Orleans – derived from Schiller's Joan of Arc tragedy – suffered from Tchaikovsky's determination to compose a grandiose Meyerbeer-like work that would appeal to the tastes of audiences in West Europe. As well as the distraction of this commercial objective, his creative individuality had also been stunted by the suicide attempt reported in 1877. During the next seven years *Mazeppa* is one of only two works that can be classed as outstanding.

In his 1885 *Manfred* Symphony Tchaikovsky rediscovered his full, most individual powers. Nevertheless his next opera *The Enchantress* – despite undeniable fluency and stretches of excellent music – is crippled by an implausibly melodramatic subject. The Fifth Symphony and the great *Sleeping Beauty* ballet are on a completely different stylistic level.

Conversely the most striking feature of *The Queen of Spades* is the fundamental contrast between intermittently menacing music prompted by Herman's remorseless obsession, and the bright cheerful music of the elegant society within which these events are set. The sombre darker scenes and passages anticipate the tragic pessimism of his Sixth Symphony.

Tchaikovsky's last opera *Iolanta* is little more than a charming, though at times very affecting piece.

Premières at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg

Between 1935 and 1992 this famous venue was known as the Kirov Theatre. Before 1896 St Petersburg also had a Bolshoi Kamenny Theatre where Glinka premières took place. The St Petersburg Conservatory also hosted some operatic premières.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Work (and Genre)</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Work (and Genre)</i>
1873	Rimsky-Korsakov <i>The Maid of Pskov</i>	1890	Tchaikovsky <i>The Queen of Spades</i>
1874	Musorgsky <i>Boris Godunov</i> opera	1892	Rimsky-Korsakov <i>Mlada</i> opera
1874	Tchaikovsky <i>The Oprichnik</i> opera	1892	Tchaikovsky <i>Iolanta</i> opera
1876	Tchaikovsky <i>Vakula the Smith</i> opera	1892	Tchaikovsky <i>Nutcracker</i> ballet
1880	Rimsky-Korsakov <i>May Night</i> opera	1895	Rimsky-Korsakov <i>Christmas Eve</i>
1881	Tchaikovsky <i>The Maid of Orleans</i> opera	1895	Tchaikovsky <i>Swan Lake</i> ballet
1882	Rimsky-Korsakov <i>The Snow Maiden</i> opera	1902	Rimsky-Korsakov <i>Servilia</i> opera
1887	Tchaikovsky <i>The Enchantress</i> opera	1907	Rimsky-Korsakov <i>Kitezh</i> opera
1889	Tchaikovsky <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> ballet	1956	Khachaturian <i>Spartacus</i> ballet
1890	Borodin <i>Prince Igor</i> opera		

Selected Musical Biography

PAULINE: OLGA BORODINA (born 1963) is a leading mezzo-soprano, known for Russian roles in her St Petersburg birthplace, as well as a performing and recording career elsewhere. Her signature role over the years has been that of Dalila in Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*. Borodina hasn't been afraid to make her views known. Although her Russian heritage is important, she observed in 2005 that "life in St Petersburg is becoming tougher by the day and the Russian spirit, the spirituality that was part and parcel of Russian culture, is almost not there any more".

CONDUCTOR: In 1992 VALERY GERGIEV, penniless head of the Mariinsky Theatre, was in desperate need of a friend in power. His subsequent alliance with Putin has been fruitful. Gergiev (born in 1953) has become richer than oligarchs now that he also controls the Bolshoi. War in Ukraine is his only drawback. Gergiev has lost his international career, probably for decades if not forever.