Synopsis

Act I

St. Petersburg, Russia, at the close of the 18th century. In the Summer Park, Sourin and Tchekalinsky discuss the strange behavior of their fellow officer Hermann. He seems obsessed with gambling, watching his friends play all night, though he never plays himself. Hermann appears with Count Tomsky and admits to him that he is in love with a girl whose name he doesn't know. When Prince Yeletsky enters, followed by his fiancée, Lisa, and her grandmother, the old countess, Hermann is shocked to realize that Lisa is his unknown girl. After Yeletsky and the women have left, Tomsky tells the others the story of the countess. Decades ago in Paris, she won a fortune at the gambling table with the help of the "three cards," a mysterious winning combination. She only ever shared this secret with two other people, and there is a prophecy that she will die at the hands of a third person who will force the secret from her. The men laugh at the story except for Hermann, who is deeply affected by it and decides to learn the countess's secret.

In her room, Lisa thinks about her ambivalent feelings for her fiancé and the impression Hermann has made on her. To her shock, he suddenly appears on the balcony. He declares his love and begs her to have pity on him. Lisa gives in to her feelings and confesses that she loves him too.

Act II

Yeletsky has noticed a change in Lisa's behavior. During a ball, he assures her of his love. Hermann, who is also among the guests, has received a note from Lisa, asking him to meet her. Sourin and Tchekalinsky tease him with remarks about the "three cards." Lisa slips Hermann the key to a garden door that will lead him to her room and through the countess's bedroom. She says that the old lady will not be there the next day, but Hermann insists on coming that very night, thinking that fate is handing him the chance to learn the countess's secret.

In the countess's bedroom, Hermann looks fascinated at a portrait of her as a young woman. He hides as the woman returns from the ball and, reminiscing about her youth, falls asleep in an armchair. She awakens when Hermann suddenly steps before her and demands to know the secret of the cards. The countess refuses to talk to him, and when Hermann, growing desperate, threatens her with a pistol, she dies of fright. Lisa rushes in. Horrified at the sight of her dead grandmother, she realizes that Hermann was only interested in the countess's secret.

Act III

Hermann is descending into obsession. In his quarters, he reads a letter from Lisa asking him to meet her at midnight. He recalls the countess's funeral, and suddenly, her ghost appears, telling him that he must save Lisa and marry her. The ghost says that his lucky cards will be three, seven, and the ace.

Lisa waits for Hermann by the Winter Canal, wondering if he still loves her. When he at last appears, she says that they should leave the city together. Hermann refuses, replying that he has learned the secret of the cards and is on his way to the gambling house. Lisa realizes that she has lost him and drowns herself in the canal.

At a gambling house, the officers are playing cards, joined by Yeletsky, who has broken off his engagement to Lisa. Hermann enters, distracted, and immediately bets 40,000 rubles. He wins on his first two cards, a three and a seven. Upsetting the others with his maniacal expression, he declares that life is a game. For the final round, he bets on the ace but loses when his card is revealed as the queen of spades. Horrified and imagining the countess's face staring at him from the card, Hermann stabs himself, asking for Yeletsky and Lisa's forgiveness.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

The Queen of Spades

Premiere: Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, 1890

A work of extreme moods and colors, *The Queen of Spades* explores life's frivolities as well as the darkest impulses of obsession, addiction, madness, and self-destruction. The story tells of a young officer in love with the granddaughter of an aged countess with a mysterious past. The countess is rumored to hold the secret of winning at cards, a secret that the officer, Hermann, becomes obsessed with discovering. With his downward spiral into addiction and eventual insanity, Hermann is an example of the tortured, anti-social, misunderstood young man familiar from literature and cinema. The plot is set against the vast elegance and macabre allure of St. Petersburg, which functions almost as a character in itself. Based on a short story by Alexander Pushkin, the opera retains the darkness of its source. The composer's lyric mastery is equally apparent throughout the whole of this remarkable score, which moves deftly from the most refined to the most harrowing situations.

The Creators

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) enjoyed tremendous fame during his lifetime as a composer of symphonic music and ballets. Today, his operas also enjoy growing popularity. The composer's brother Modest (1850–1916) adapted much of the libretto for *The Queen of Spades*, though the composer himself also created a number of passages, from a short story by Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837). Pushkin's position in Russian literature can be compared only to that of Shakespeare in English. His body of work is marked by a wide range of tone and style, and his writings have been the source of many other operas (such as Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel*, and Tchaikovsky's own *Eugene Onegin*).

The Setting

The story unfolds in St. Petersburg, the imperial capital of Russia, during the later years of the Empress Catherine the Great, who reigned from 1762 to 1796. For Pushkin, the beautiful city of rivers and canals was both a mystical place where elements of fantasy could burst forth at any moment (as in his hallucinatory story *The Bronze Horseman*, in which an equestrian statue of Peter the Great seems to chase an insane man through the flooded streets) and a very real, modern city that provides an opportunity to satirize contemporary society (as in his verse novel *Eugene Onegin*). Both the fantastic and the gritty aspects of the city are vitally present in *The Queen of Spades*.

The Music

Tchaikovsky's skills as a great symphonist and undisputed master of the ballet are apparent in the many superb orchestral touches throughout this opera's score. The opera's great vocal solos, most of them considered concert standards in Russia, are excellent surprises for American audiences, and notable for their diversity. Prince Yeletsky's Act II aria is a prime example of a lyrical love song, while Lisa's dramatic aria in Act III, Scene 2 is an arresting psychological narrative that deepens the character beyond what Pushkin wrote. Polina's Russian Song in Act I and Count Tomsky's playful solo provide striking, charming contrasts. Ensembles punctuate the work at key moments of interaction—most notably in the first scene's quintet, in which each of the drama's lead characters expresses fear of another character. Tchaikovsky's nods to other composers of the past and near-present are another remarkable aspect of this alluring score. The children's chorus toward the beginning of the opera is widely considered a homage to Bizet's *Carmen*, which Tchaikovsky greatly admired. The extended Pastorale in Act II, a sort of miniature opera-within-the-opera, is written in the style of Mozart. This rococo nostalgia is a trait also practiced in some of the composer's other works (the *Mozartiana Suite* and the *Variations on a Rococo Theme* among them), which reflects a fondness for 18th-century styles prevalent in his day. Even more overt are Tchaikovsky's actual quotations of earlier composers. The countess sings (or, rather, mutters to herself) snippets of an aria from André Grétry's 1784 *Richard Coeur-de-Lion*, an allusion that perfectly captures her old-fashioned sensibility. While in the ballroom scene, Tchaikovsky quotes from a polonaise by composer Jósef Koslowski written in 1791.

Met History

The U.S. premiere of this opera was given at the Met in German in 1910, with Gustav Mahler conducting Emmy Destinn and famed Wagnerian tenor Leo Slezak. It then disappeared from the repertoire until 1965, when Thomas Schippers led a new production with a remarkable cast including Jon Vickers, Teresa Stratas, and Regina Resnik as the countess. A 1972 revival featuring Raina Kabaivanska, Nicolai Gedda, and Resnik marked the first time that a Russian opera was given at the Met in its original language. The current production premiered in 1995, with Valery Gergiev conducting Ben Heppner, Karita Mattila, Leonie Rysanek, and Dmitri Hvorostovsky in his Met debut. The last performance of the run was memorable as Rysanek's farewell to opera in America. Other notable singers who have appeared in this production include Galina Gorchakova, Olga Borodina, Maria Guleghina, Birgitta Svendén, Plácido Domingo, Dame Felicity Palmer, Dolora Zajick, and Peter Mattei.

Program Note

It was Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the director of the Imperial Theatres, who set in motion in 1885 the project that would—several years later—give the world Tchaikovsky's opera *The Queen of Spades*. Vsevolozhsky's original choice of composer was a former pupil of Tchaikovsky's, Nikolay Klenovsky, who was a conductor at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, but his search for a suitable libretto was unsuccessful. Finally, in September 1887, Vsevolozhsky told Klenovsky to approach Modest Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Ilyich's brother, about supplying a libretto based on Pushkin's short story.

When Klenovsky ultimately withdrew from the *Queen of Spades* project, Modest tried to tempt his brother to take it on. Tchaikovsky, having recently suffered the unsuccessful premiere of his opera *The Enchantress* at the Mariinsky in St. Petersburg, was not interested, replying:

> I am very sorry that you have spent so much time on the libretto for Klenovsky. Forgive me, Modya, but I have no regrets that I will not be writing *The Queen of Spades*. After the failure of *The Enchantress*, I wanted to turn around my fortunes and was ready to grab any plot, and at the time, I was jealous that somebody else was writing it. Right now, though, that's all in the past, and first of all in the summer, *I will certainly be writing a symphony*. I will be writing an opera only if a subject becomes available that can deeply warm my heart. Such a plot as *The Queen of Spades* does not excite me, and I would be able to complete only a mediocre writing.

Tchaikovsky did, indeed, spend the summer of 1888 writing his Fifth Symphony. By the time of its first performance that November, he had begun work on his ballet *The Sleeping Beauty*, which he finished in September 1889. In November, he was approached again with the idea of writing *The Queen of Spades*, this time by Vsevolozhsky, who really wanted the opera for his star tenor Nikolay Figner. At that point, Tchaikovsky was more receptive. In December, a meeting was held at the Imperial Theatre offices, where Modest read his scenario to Vsevolozhsky and various department heads. It was decided to change the setting of the opera from the time of Alexander I to the end of the reign of Catherine II, which meant changes to the ball scene. Tchaikovsky insisted on adding the scene by the Winter Canal with Lisa's suicide—"otherwise the entire third act will have no women in it, and that would be boring. Besides, the audience must know what has happened to Lisa."

Vsevolozhsky wanted to give the opera the following year, which meant Tchaikovsky had to work quickly. He wrote his patron Nadezhda von Meck on January 7, 1890, "I am longing to work, and if I can contrive to find some comfortable corner abroad, I think I shall cope with my task and will deliver

the vocal score to the directorate by May and score it during the summer." The following week, he attended the premiere of his *Sleeping Beauty,* and on January 26, he left St. Petersburg—his ultimate destination still unclear. Two days later, he was in Berlin, where he, apparently on a whim, bought a ticket for Florence, arriving on January 30. He only had the libretto for the first two scenes, and Modest had to work hard to keep up with his brother's rapid composing. The whole opera was written between January 31 and March 15, 1890, in Florence. Tchaikovsky wrote his brother, "Modi, either I am greatly mistaken, or *The Queen of Spades* is a masterpiece." He completed the orchestration by mid-June, by which point he was back in Russia.

The opera has been severely criticized for the numerous liberties it takes with Pushkin's story, which Dostoyevsky called a masterpiece of cold fury. Pushkin, who was a heavy gambler, wrote *The Queen of Spades* in 1833, four years before his death in a duel. It is a model of concise storytelling—spare, ironic, and ultimately chilling, the devastating ending all the more effective for the dispassionate, almost clinical tone of the prose. The opera, on the other hand, takes a leisurely approach to the drama, opening it up by adding scenes not in the story (though charming in their own right), and drawing out the heavily embellished love story between Lisa and Hermann. But this fleshing out of the characters is undoubtedly what attracted Tchaikovsky to the libretto in the first place.

In Pushkin, Lisa is not engaged, and she and Hermann speak to each other only once, when he enters her room after the countess's death. Until then, they have only exchanged glances and letters. In the opera, when we meet Hermann, he is desperately in love with an unknown woman (Lisa). In Pushkin, he is unaware of Lisa until one day, as he stands outside the house of the old countess, wondering how he can learn her secret, he notices the face of a young woman at a window and realizes that he may be able to use the young woman to get to the countess. Several of the opera's scenes are not found in Pushkin's story: the opening scene in the summer garden, the scene between Lisa and Pauline, the grand ball that opens Act II, and the Act III scene at the Winter Canal. In Pushkin, the countess's ghost tells him he must play only one card per day and then never play again. In the opera, for obvious dramatic reasons, the three days are compressed into one scene. Pushkin also has a very different ending. Hermann goes insane and is confined to a hospital. Lisa marries "a very pleasant young man," a civil servant who has his own fortune and is the son of the old countess's former steward.

The changes all add up to a thoroughly enjoyable opera, but one definitely at odds with the strongest points of Pushkin's story. While some have characterized the Tchaikovsky version as a romantic melodrama, musicologist Richard Taruskin has quite a different idea: "What critics have been slow to recognize is precisely what the composer meant when he wrote with such uncharacteristic confidence about his originality. Tchaikovsky's penultimate opera is the first and possibly the

greatest masterpiece of musical surrealism." He cites the "network of sinister doubles that haunt the opera at every level," including musical motifs that at first hearing seem benign but end up being sinister.

Two of the main themes Tchaikovsky uses throughout the opera appear in the orchestral introduction. The first is heard in measure 23, when the brass play a three-note phrase (F-sharp–E–A) "heavily and accented," followed by a second, similar phrase, (G–F-sharp–C). That motif of three notes, the second pitch just below the first, the third a leap upward, is the calling card of the supernatural or fate, always heard in connection with the countess's three cards. The second theme has to do with the love between Hermann and Lisa. It appears about a minute after the introduction of the supernatural theme, played softly and expressively by the violins, its lyricism immediately capturing our hearts—never more poignantly than when it returns as the dying Hermann asks Lisa (whom only he can see) for her forgiveness.

Throughout the opera, Tchaikovsky juxtaposes rococo pastiche and the malevolent supernatural, using the 18th-century–style music as a momentary distraction from the darker world. The lighter music is usually heard in public moments, such as at the ball, but Tchaikovsky also uses a tune from 1784 in the most gripping scene of the opera. As the old countess is falling asleep in her bedroom, she sings to herself a bit of *Richard Coeur-de-Lion*, an opéra comique by André Grétry. It's a masterstroke, not only recalling the days when she was a desired beauty but also the time she was given the secret of the cards.

The Queen of Spades affected Tchaikovsky profoundly, largely because he identified strongly with his hero. In March 1890, he wrote to his brother:

> When I came to Hermann's death and the final chorus, I was suddenly overcome by such intense pity for Hermann that I burst out crying. Afterward, I discovered the reason for my tears (for I was never before so deeply moved by the sorrows of my hero, and I tried to explain to myself why it should be so now). I came to the conclusion that Hermann was to me not merely a pretext for writing this or that kind of music but had been all the while an actual, living, sympathetic being. … I have certainly written with love. How I cried yesterday when they sang over my poor Hermann.

Hermann is an outsider, a German living among Russians—a guest, but not really accepted fully, who was destroyed by an obsession he could not control. It is difficult not to draw a parallel between Tchaikovsky's intense identification with Hermann and his own secret that set him apart from society, the fact of his homosexuality. Three years after the very successful premiere of *The Queen of Spades* in St. Petersburg, Tchaikovsky was dead, many believe as the result of suicide in order to keep his secret from becoming public. (David Brown goes

into considerable detail on the subject in his superb biography of the composer.) Perhaps it was the accumulating weight of Tchaikovsky's secret life that added to his dark mood when he wrote to Alexander Glazunov shortly after arriving in Florence to write *The Queen of Spades*: "I am passing through a very enigmatic stage on my road to the grave. Something strange, which I cannot understand, is going on within me. A kind of life-weariness has come over me. Sometimes I feel an insane anguish, but not that kind of anguish which is the herald of a new tide of love for life: rather something hopeless, final, and—like every *finale*—a little commonplace. Simultaneously a passionate desire to create. The devil knows what it is!" But out of this despair, Tchaikovsky used (in Taruskin's words) his "mastery of the grotesque, and its chilling correlation with aberrant psychology" to create a uniquely haunting masterpiece.

—Paul Thomason

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Reading the Cards

Faro, the card game that figures prominently in Pushkin's and Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, was one of the most popular forms of gambling throughout Europe and the United States in the 19th century. Part of its appeal was the simplicity of the game, which involves the player placing a bet on a rank of card (nine, ten, jack, etc.). The dealer then turns over two cards from the top of the deck—one for himself and one for the player. The player wins if the rank of his card matches the rank he bet on, and loses if the dealer's card matches it. If neither card matches, the next pair of cards is revealed.

The Queen of Spades is one of several operas and literary works to incorporate reference to faro. In Massenet's *Manon*, the heroine and her lover attempt to recover their fortunes at the faro table, and in Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*, there is a memorable accusation of cheating at the game in the Act I saloon scene. Other examples include Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, London's *White Fang*, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.