June 2020: PELLEAS ET MELISANDE
It was good to see so many at the Zoom meeting on Debussy's opera Pelleas et Melisande. Here is a copy of the presentation, which includes both a brief summary of the plot as well as a more detailed synopsis. I hope you will find this useful when you come to watch the opera on YouTube at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbsYlvxDyfs&t=7583s

Brief Synopsis
Pelléas et Mélisande is set in the fictitious kingdom of Allemonde, ruled by the aging King Arkel. His grandson, Prince Golaud, discovers the lost and frightened Mélisande while hunting in the forest. Without learning anything about this mysterious young woman, he decides to make her his wife, and takes Mélisande back to his family’s castle. Here, she meets Golaud’s half-brother, Pelléas.

Pelléas and Mélisande develop a special bond that causes Golaud to become increasingly jealous and suspicious. When the pair finally confess their love for one another, Golaud suddenly arrives and kills Pelléas with his sword.

Soon after, Mélisande is struck with an unknown illness. Filled with remorse, Golaud begs his wife to tell him “the truth” about her affair with Pelléas, but Mélisande’s responses are meaningless, and she dies without answering him.

Background to the composition and first performance
For years, Debussy had searched for the perfect text to set for his first opera. In 1899, he described his ideal librettist as “a poet who deals in hints”, and his ideal characters as those “whose story belongs to no time or place, who submit to life and fate, and who do not argue”. In Maurice Maeterlinck’s Symbolist play Pelléas et Mélisande he found his ideal libretto. The play was published in May 1892 and first performed at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens on 17 May 1893. Debussy attended this first performance but he had already read the play, as he later recounted in an article ‘Pourquoi j’ai écrit Pelléas’ (Why I wrote Pelléas), where he also explained his attraction to the play and its symbolism:

To quote from Debussy’s article:
‘The drama of Pelléas which, despite its dream-like atmosphere, contains far more humanity than those so-called ‘real-life documents’, seemed to suit my intentions admirably. In it there is an evocative language whose sensitivity could be extended into music and the orchestral backcloth’. - (I think in his reference to ‘real-life documents’ he may he having a sly dig at the verismo movement, which was prevalent at the time)

Debussy had obtained Maeterlinck’s permission to use the play in August 1893. Rather than engaging a librettist to adapt the original play for him (as was customary), Debussy chose to set the text directly. Maeterlinck’s play was in prose rather than verse. Russian composers, notably Mussorgsky (whom Debussy admired), had experimented with setting prose opera libretti in the 1860s, but this was highly unusual in France (or Italy or Germany). Debussy's example influenced many later composers who edited their own libretti from existing prose plays, e.g. Richard Strauss’ Salome based on a play by Oscar Wilde, Alban Berg’s Wozzeck based on Georg Buchner’s play Woyzeck. A month after obtaining Maeterlinck’s permission, as soon as he had completed Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune and one or two smaller works, Debussy began work on the opera. Curiously, he started with the climactic love scene between Pelléas and Mélisande in Act 4 scene iv and it took him 2 years to complete the short score. It was probably relatively early on that Debussy decided to cut four scenes from the play and these cuts were endorsed by Maeterlinck. For example, at the opening of the play, serving women open the door of the castle and try to wash away an indelible stain from the entrance. For all its symbolism, it is difficult to imagine this as the opening scene of an opera, so it was cut. The other cut scenes cause some detail to be lost but do not affect the essence of the drama.

As was his usual method of working, Debussy wrote the initial text in short score, with ideas for orchestration indicated in coloured inks. It was not until the opera was accepted by the Opéra-
Comique in 1898 that he was spurred on to produce the vocal score necessary for rehearsal purposes and then to complete the full score.

In setting Maeterlinck's play, Debussy went far further than simply rejecting the conventional aria and recitative forms. The rhythm and pitch of the vocal parts are aligned as closely as possible to Maeterlinck's original French prose, leaving little room for the singers to interpret them with their own emotional inflections. There are only two reasonably lengthy passages for soloists: Geneviève's reading of the letter in Act One and Mélisande's song from the tower in Act 3. Debussy set these passages one note to a syllable in a continuous, fluid melody, somewhere between chant and recitative.

The result is a quintessentially French work that is impossible to translate accurately into any other language. For example, an eloquent English translation of Mélisande's opening phrase "Ne me touchez pas ou je me jette à l'eau" is "Don't touch me or I'll throw myself into the water", but this would not fit the rhythm and intonation of Debussy's musical line.

In G. Schirmer's 1902 English translation, Mélisande's opening phrase is translated as "No, no touch me not or I shall throw me in", which is both awkward and disrupts the plain, child-like speech patterns that characterise the entire opera. Pelléas and Mélisande was scheduled to premiere at the Opéra-Comique in Paris in April 1902. But there were several problems which threatened to jeopardize the first performance. Maeterlinck wanted the role of Mélisande to go to his longtime companion Georgette Leblanc, who later claimed that Debussy had had several rehearsals with her and was "thrilled with my interpretation". However, she was persona non grata with Albert Carré, the director of the Opéra-Comique and privately Debussy told a friend: "not only does she sing out of tune, she speaks out of tune".

Carré appointed a new Scottish singer, Mary Garden, to take on the role of Mélisande. Garden had captivated the Parisian public when she had taken over the lead role in Gustave Charpentier's opera Louise shortly after its premiere in 1900. Maeterlinck claimed that he only learned of Garden's casting when it was announced in the press at the end of December 1901. He was furious and took legal action to prevent the opera from going ahead. When this failed—as it was bound to do, since he had given Debussy his written authorisation to stage the opera as he saw fit in 1895 - he went to Debussy's home, where he threatened the composer. Madame Debussy intervened while the composer calmly remained seated. On 13 April 1902, about two weeks before the premiere, the newspaper Le Figaro published a letter from Maeterlinck in which he dissociated himself the opera, describing it as "a work that is strange and hostile to me [...] I can only wish for its immediate and decided failure." Not surprisingly, Maeterlinck boycotted the production and only finally saw the opera in 1920, two years after Debussy's death. He later confessed: "In this affair I was entirely wrong and he was a thousand times right".

Another problem emerged during rehearsals, where it became apparent that several of the orchestral interludes were too short to allow sufficient time for the stage to be reorganised between scenes. Reluctantly, Debussy was forced to hastily extend the interludes by composing new music.

After a disastrous public dress rehearsal, during which loyal Opéra-Comique subscribers expressed their distaste for the work, Pelléas and Mélisande enjoyed a lukewarm reception on opening night, which was 2 days later, on 30 April 1902. Critical reaction was mixed. Some accused the music of being "sickly and practically lifeless" and of sounding "like the noise of a squeaky door or a piece of furniture being moved about, or a child crying in the distance." Camille Saint-Saëns, a fierce opponent of Debussy's music, claimed he had abandoned his customary summer holidays so he could stay in Paris and "say nasty things about Pelléas." But the more perceptive critics were highly enthusiastic. The composer Paul Dukas (of The Sorcerer's Apprentice fame) found that 'each bar exactly corresponded to the scene it portrayed and to the feelings it expressed' and another famous composer of the time, Vincent d'Indy, echoed Debussy's own comments on his work, finding in it 'simply felt and expressed human
feelings and human suffering in human terms, despite the outward appearance the characters give of living in a mysterious dream'

A Symbolist score

The score of Pelléas calls for a large orchestra with an extended array of instruments, but in his orchestration, Debussy opts for colouring and atmospheric shading rather than sheer volume, and hardly ever directs the ensemble to play in unison.

Debussy weaves fleeting contributions from across the orchestra to create a subtle and allusive body of sound to mirror the suggestive hints and gestures of the original Symbolist text. He never asks the orchestra to accompany the singers in the traditional sense. He envisioned that the orchestra would “take over what the voices are powerless to express”, and instead of just providing an accompaniment to the singers, he asks the instrumentalists to evoke the eerie, dream-like character of the Kingdom of Allemonde.

The singing is not of the heroic kind familiar from the operas of Meyerbeer, Verdi or Wagner nor of the more lyrical type perfected by Gounod or Massenet; it is closer to subdued speech, with no syllables extended or repeated, no overlap of voices, no ensembles and no chorus.

Debussy, Wagner and French tradition

Debussy had a deeply ambivalent attitude to the works of the German composer Richard Wagner and this had a big impact on the composition of Pelléas. Wagner had revolutionised 19th-century opera by his insistence on making his stage works more dramatic, by his increased use of the orchestra, his abolition of the traditional distinction between aria and recitative in favour of what he termed "endless melody", and by his use of leitmotifs, recurring musical themes associated with characters or ideas. Wagner was a highly controversial figure in France. Despised by the conservative musical establishment, he was a cult figure in "avant-garde" circles, particularly among literary groups such as the Symbolists, who saw parallels between Wagner's concept of the leitmotif and their use of the symbol. The young Debussy joined in this enthusiasm for Wagner's music, making a pilgrimage to the Bayreuth Festival in 1888 to see Parsifal and Die Meistersinger and returning in 1889 to see Parsifal and Die Meistersinger again, as well as Tristan und Isolde. Yet that same year he confessed to his friend Ernest Guiraud that he needed to escape Wagner's influence.

Debussy said that Pelléas was “an opera after Wagner, not inspired by Wagner” and he was well aware of the dangers of imitating Wagner too closely. Several French composers had tried to write their own Wagnerian music dramas, including Emmanuel Chabrier (Gwendoline) and Ernest Chausson (Le roi Arthus). Debussy was far from impressed by the results: "We are bound to admit that nothing was ever more dreary than the neo-Wagnerian school in which the French genius had lost its way among the sham Wotans in Hessian boots and the Tristans in velvet jackets." Debossy strove to avoid excessive Wagnerian influence on Pelléas from the start. The love scene was the first music he composed but he scrapped his early drafts for being too conventional and because "worst of all, the ghost of old Klingsor, alias R.Wagner, kept appearing."

However, Debussy did take several features from Wagner, including the use of leitmotifs. Debussy disparagingly referred to Wagner's leitmotifs as a "box of tricks" (boîte à trucs) and claimed there was "no guiding thread in Pelléas" as "the characters are not subjected to the slavery of the leitmotif." Yet, as Debussy admitted privately, there are themes associated with each of the three main characters Golaud, Mélisande and Pelléas.

The continuous use of the orchestra is another feature of Wagnerian music drama, yet the way Debussy writes for the orchestra is completely different from Tristan, for example. The emphasis is on quietness, subtlety and allowing the words to be heard. Debussy's use of declamation is un-Wagnerian and he felt that Wagnerian melody was unsuited to the French language. Instead, he stays close to the rhythms of natural speech, making Pelléas part of a tradition which goes back to the French Baroque tragédies en musique of Rameau and Lully. But the harmonic language of Pelléas definitely owes a debt to Tristan and even more to Parsifal, Wagner's last opera.
Like Tristan the subject of Pelléas is a love triangle set in a vaguely Medieval world. Unlike the protagonists of Tristan, the characters rarely seem to understand or be able to articulate their own feelings. The deliberate vagueness of the story is paralleled by the elusiveness of Debussy’s music.

Performance History

Pelléas was revived by the Opéra-Comique almost every year up to 1914 and soon developed a cult following. In an interview in 1908, Debussy reflected on the subject matter and the length of the opera and explained why it remained his only completed work in this genre:

I am not quite sure that people want any more long works … In view of modern intellectual processes, operas in five acts are tedious. I don’t mind owning that I think my own Pelléas and Mélisande far too long. In which act? Oh, it is generally too diffuse. But that is the fault of the story.

Subsequent opera projects

As we’ve just seen, Pelléas was to be Debussy's only completed opera. This was not for want of trying on Debussy's part, and he worked hard to create a successor. Details of several opera projects survive. The most substantial surviving musical sketches are for two works based on short stories by Edgar Allan Poe: Le diable dans le beffroi (The Devil in the Belfry) and La chute de la maison Usher (The Fall of the House of Usher)

Debussy also planned a version of Shakespeare’s As You Like It with a libretto by Paul-Jean Toulet, but the poet's opium addiction meant he was too lazy to write the text. Two other projects suggest that Debussy intended to challenge German composers on their own ground. In 1909, he had plans to write an opera called Orphée-Roi (King Orpheus) based on the same mythological story as Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice and the same year he also planned an opera based on the Tristan legend. However, nothing came of either of these schemes, partly because the rectal cancer which afflicted Debussy from 1909 meant that he found it increasingly hard to concentrate on sustained creative work.

Other works inspired by Maeterlinck’s Pelléas et Mélisande:

Gabriel Faure wrote incidental music for the play's London premiere in 1898

Sibelius wrote incidental music for a performance at the Swedish Theater in Helsinki in 1905 (which became famous when the BBC used the movement ‘At the Castle Gate’ as the theme music for the long-running astronomy programme The Sky at Night!)

Early Symphonic Poem by Arnold Schoenberg (1903)

Detailed Synopsis

Act 1

Scene 1: A forest

Prince Golaud, grandson of King Arkel of Allemonde, has become lost while hunting in the forest. He discovers a frightened, weeping girl sitting by a spring in which a crown is visible. She reveals her name is Mélisande but nothing else about her origins and refuses to let Golaud retrieve her crown from the water. Golaud persuades her to come with him before the forest gets dark.

Scene 2: A room in the castle

Six months have passed. Geneviève, the mother of the princes Golaud and Pelléas, reads a letter to the aged and nearly blind King Arkel. It was sent by Golaud to his brother Pelléas. In it Golaud reveals that he has married Mélisande, although he knows no more about her than on the day they first met. Golaud fears that Arkel will be angry with him and tells Pelléas to find how he reacts to the news. If the old man is favourable then Pelléas should light a lamp from the tower facing the sea on the third day; if Golaud does not see the lamp shining, he will sail on
and never return home. Arkel had planned to marry the widowed Golaud to Princess Ursule in order to put an end to "long wars and ancient hatreds", but he bows to fate and accepts Golaud's marriage to Mélisande. Pelléas enters, weeping. He has received a letter from his friend Marcellus, who is on his deathbed, and wants to travel to say goodbye to him. Arkel thinks Pelléas should wait for the return of Golaud, and also reminds Pelléas of his own father, lying sick in bed in the castle. Geneviève tells Pelléas not to forget to light the lamp for Golaud.

**Scene 3: Before the castle**

Geneviève and Mélisande walk in the castle grounds. Mélisande remarks how dark the surrounding gardens and forest are. Pelléas arrives. They look out to sea and notice a large ship departing and a lighthouse shining, Mélisande foretells that it will sink. Night falls. Geneviève goes off to look after Yniold, Golaud's young son by his previous marriage. Pelléas attempts to take Melisande's hand to help her down the steep path but she refuses saying that she is holding flowers. He tells her he might have to go away tomorrow. Mélisande asks him why.

**Act 2**

**Scene 1: A well in the park**

It is a hot summer day. Pelléas has led Mélisande to one of his favourite spots, the "Blind Men's Well". People used to believe it possessed miraculous powers to cure blindness but since the old king's eyesight started to fail, they no longer come there. Mélisande lies down on the marble rim of the well and tries to see to the bottom. Her hair loosens and falls into the water. Pelléas notices how extraordinarily long it is. He remembers that Golaud first met Mélisande beside a spring and asks if he tried to kiss her at that time but she does not answer. Mélisande plays with the ring Golaud gave her, throwing it up into the air until it slips from her fingers into the well. Pelléas tells her not to be concerned but she is not reassured. He also notes that the clock was striking twelve as the ring dropped into the well. Mélisande asks him what she should tell Golaud. He replies, "the truth."

**Scene 2: A room in the castle**

Golaud is lying in bed with Mélisande at the bedside. He is wounded, having fallen from his horse while hunting. The horse suddenly bolted for no reason as the clock struck twelve. Mélisande bursts into tears and says she feels ill and unhappy in the castle. She wants to go away with Golaud. He asks her the reason for her unhappiness but she refuses to say. When he asks her if the problem is Pelléas, she replies that he is not the cause but she does not think he likes her. Golaud tells her not to worry: Pelléas can behave oddly and he is still very young. Mélisande complains about the gloominess of the castle, today was the first time she saw the sky. Golaud says that she is too old to be crying for such reasons and takes her hands to comfort her and notices the wedding ring is missing. Golaud becomes furious, Mélisande claims she dropped it in a cave by the sea where she went to collect shells with little Yniold. Golaud orders her to go and search for it at once before the tide comes in, even though night has fallen. When Mélisande replies that she is afraid to go alone, Golaud tells her to take Pelléas along with her.

**Scene 3: Before a cave**

Pelléas and Mélisande make their way down to the cave in pitch darkness. Mélisande is frightened to enter, but Pelléas tells her she will need to describe the place to Golaud to prove she has been there. The moon comes out lighting the cave and reveals three beggars sleeping in the cave. Pelléas explains there is a famine in the land. He decides they should come back another day.

**Act 3**

**Scene 1: One of the towers of the castle**

Mélisande is at the tower window, singing a song (Mes longs cheveux) as she combs her hair. Pelléas appears and asks her to lean out so he can kiss her hand as he is going away the next day. He cannot reach her hand but her long hair tumbles down from the window and he kisses
and caresses it instead. Pelléas playfully ties Mélisande's hair to a willow tree in spite of her protests that someone might see them. A flock of doves takes flight. Mélisande panics when she hears Golaud's footsteps approaching. Golaud dismisses Pelléas and Mélisande as nothing but a pair of children and leads Pelléas away.

Scene 2: The vaults of the castle

Golaud leads Pelléas down to the castle vaults, which contain the dungeons and a stagnant pool which has "the scent of death". He tells Pelléas to lean over and look into the chasm while he holds him safely. Pelléas finds the atmosphere stifling and they leave.

Scene 3: A terrace at the entrance of the vaults

Pelléas is relieved to breathe fresh air again. It is noon. He sees Geneviève and Mélisande at a window in the tower. Golaud tells Pelléas that there must be no repeat of the "childish game" between him and Mélisande last night. Mélisande is pregnant and the least shock might disturb her health. It is not the first time he has noticed there might be something between Pelléas and Mélisande but Pelléas should avoid her as much as possible without making this look too obvious.

Scene 4: Before the castle

Golaud sits with his little son, Yniold, in the darkness before dawn and questions him about Pelléas and Mélisande. The boy reveals little that Golaud wants to know since he is too innocent to understand what he is asking. He says that Pelléas and Mélisande often quarrel about the door and that they have told Yniold he will one day be as big as his father. Golaud is puzzled when learning that they (Pelléas and Mélisande) never send Yniold away because they are afraid when he is not there and keep on crying in the dark. He admits that he once saw Pelléas and Mélisande kiss "when it was raining". Golaud lifts his son on his shoulders to spy on Pelléas and Mélisande through the window but Yniold says that they are doing nothing other than looking at the light. He threatens to scream unless Golaud lets him down again. Golaud leads him away.

Act 4

Scene 1: A room in the castle

Pelléas tells Mélisande that his father is getting better and has asked him to leave on his travels. He arranges a last meeting with Mélisande by the Blind Men's Well in the park.

Scene 2: The same

Arkel tells Mélisande how he felt sorry for her when she first came to the castle "with the strange, bewildered look of someone constantly awaiting a calamity". But now that is going to change and Mélisande will "open the door to a new era that I foresee". He asks her to kiss him. Golaud bursts in with blood on his forehead — he claims it was caused by a thorn hedge. When Mélisande tries to wipe the blood away, he angrily orders her not to touch him and demands his sword. He says that another peasant has died of starvation. Golaud notices Mélisande is trembling and tells her he is not going to kill her with the sword. He mocks the "great innocence" Arkel says he sees in Mélisande's eyes. He commands her to close them or "I will shut them for a long time." He tells Mélisande that she disgusts him and drags her around the room by her hair. When Golaud leaves, Arkel asks if he is drunk. Mélisande simply replies that he does not love her any more. Arkel comments: "If I were God, I would have pity on the hearts of men".

Scene 3: A well in the park

Yniold tries to lift a boulder to free his golden ball, which is trapped between it and some rocks. As darkness falls, he hears a flock of sheep suddenly stop bleating. A shepherd explains that they have turned onto a path that doesn't lead back to the sheepfold, but does not answer when Yniold asks where they will sleep. Yniold goes off to find someone to talk to.

Scene 4: The same

Pelléas arrives alone at the well. He is worried that he has become deeply involved with Mélisande and fears the consequences. He knows he must leave but first, he wants to see
Mélisande one last time and tell her things he has kept to himself. Mélisande arrives. She was able to slip out without Golaud’s noticing. At first she is distant but when Pelléas tells her he is going away she becomes more affectionate. After admitting his love for her, Mélisande confesses that she has loved him since she first saw him. Pelléas hears the servants shutting the castle gates for the night. Now they are locked out, but Mélisande says that it is for the better. Pelléas is also resigned to fate. After the two kiss, Mélisande hears something moving in the shadows. It is Golaud, who has been watching the couple from behind a tree. Golaud strikes down a defenseless Pelléas with his sword and kills him. Mélisande is also wounded but she flees into the woods saying to a dying Pelléas that she does not have courage.

Act 5

A bedroom in the castle

Mélisande sleeps in a sick bed after giving birth to her child. The doctor assures Golaud that despite her wound, her condition is not serious. Overcome with guilt, Golaud claims he has killed for no reason. Pelléas and Mélisande merely kissed “like a brother and sister”. Mélisande wakes and asks for a window to be opened so she can see the sunset. Golaud asks the doctor and Arkel to leave the room so he can speak with Mélisande alone. He blames himself for everything and begs Mélisande’s forgiveness. Golaud presses Mélisande to confess her forbidden love for Pelléas. She maintains her innocence in spite of Golaud’s increasingly desperate pleas to her to tell the truth. Arkel and the doctor return. Arkel tells Golaud to stop before he kills Mélisande, but he replies "I have already killed her". Arkel hands Mélisande her newborn baby girl but she is too weak to lift the child in her arms and remarks that the baby does not cry and that she will live a sad existence. The room fills with serving women, although no one can tell who has summoned them. Mélisande quietly dies. At the moment of death, the serving women fall to their knees. Arkel comforts the sobbing Golaud.[52]

Well, that concludes my presentation on Pelléas et Mélisande. I hope you enjoy the opera, which is on Operavision in a production from the Komische Oper Berlin directed by Barrie Kosky. There are also interesting short interviews with Barrie Kosky and the conductor Jordan de Souza, which are well worth watching as an introduction to the opera.

Colin Jones

June 2020: THE QUEEN OF SPADES

Introduction

The Queen of Spades, Op. 68 (Russian: Пиковая дама, Pikovaya dama) is an opera in three acts (seven scenes), lasting about 2hr 45 mins, by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

It was the tenth of eleven operas that Tchaikovsky completed.

The opera is also known as Pique Dame, and while this name is derived from French, it had its origin in German-speaking countries and is now also used in England and America. It is popularly assumed to be the French title, but the actual French title is Dame de Pique.

While Eugene Onegin is Tchaikovsky’s most popular opera, it could be argued that The Queen of Spades is his best. It is a gripping drama, and it contains some of Tchaikovsky’s most powerful but also richly melodic music.

The Libretto

The opera sets a Russian libretto by the composer’s brother Modest Tchaikovsky, based on the 1834 novella of the same name by Alexander Pushkin, but with a dramatically altered plot. Modest had actually started to write a libretto based on The Queen of Spades for another composer, Nikolai Semyonovich Klenovsky, who had received a commission to write an opera from Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the Director of the Imperial Theatres in Russia. Pyotr Tchaikovsky had
already expressed an interest in Pushkin’s famous story as early as 1885, but once a lesser composer had been offered Modest’s libretto he had to wait until Klenovsky backed out of the project before he could tackle it himself. So, in late 1889, while he was in St Petersburg for rehearsals of his ballet The Sleeping Beauty, Pyotr took the opportunity to discuss Modest’s unfinished libretto with Vsevolozhsky, who was very keen that Pyotr should write the opera, particularly as it would provide leading roles for the Mariinsky Theatre’s popular tenor Nikolai Figner and his wife Medea.

But Modest’s libretto still required a lot of work to get it into shape. It needed to be cut and other alterations were necessary. Pyotr made some of these changes himself. The basic plot of Modest’s libretto is concerned with the subjects of love and gambling. Hermann loves Lisa, who returns his love but is betrothed to another. Hermann, who is fascinated by gambling, learns that Lisa’s guardian, the old Countess, knows the secret of an infallible winning sequence of three cards. He goes to the Countess’s bedroom, tries to extract the secret of the three cards from her and frightens her literally to death in the attempt. In a later scene, her ghost appears and tells Hermann the secret: ‘Three, Seven, Ace’. When it becomes clear to Lisa, after a rendezvous with Hermann by the canal opposite the Winter Palace, that his mania for cards is more powerful than his love, she throws herself into the canal. The final scene of the opera is set in a gambling club where Hermann wins twice with the three and the seven but loses everything in the third game, when the Queen of Spades is dealt instead of the ace. Hermann, having lost both his lover and a colossal fortune, pauses to sing a soft melodramatic aria, heard above the Countess’s descending whole-tone scale theme, before thrusting a dagger into his own heart. Thus the suicidal hero and heroine never get to consummate their love and the old Countess, the Queen of Spades herself, takes her revenge.

But the ending is very different in the original Pushkin novella. Neither of the two principal characters die, by their own hand or anybody else’s. Instead, Hermann ends up in a lunatic asylum, rapidly and endlessly repeating the words ‘Three, seven, ace! Three, seven, queen’ and Lisa marries a respectable young man, the son of the Countess’s former steward. This ending would not have done for Tchaikovsky, who far preferred the idea of an evil old woman who personifies ‘Fate’ and is responsible for the ruin of a love-affair and the subsequent suicide of both lovers.

Composition
Because it was hoped to produce The Queen of Spades during the following season, in January 1890, after the premiere of The Sleeping Beauty, Tchaikovsky left St. Petersburg for Florence, where he could work on the opera undisturbed.

Once settled in Florence, he started work on the sketches on 31 January 1890 and completed them remarkably quickly on 14 March, in just 44 days of frenzied composition. This was despite delays caused by Modest, who was still completing the libretto back in Russia. By mid-June, the orchestration was complete and the opera had been submitted to the Mariinsky theatre and to Tchaikovsky’s publisher. For lesser composers, this incredible speed of composition may have led to a hastily cobbled-together work of poor quality, but Tchaikovsky managed to write a work of unusually tight construction and with a quality of imagination unmatched in the whole of Russian opera. The composer’s many letters to his brother are full of expressions of amazement at his own powers of invention (and I quote): ‘Either I am horribly mistaken, Modya, or the opera is a masterpiece’, so you see, he was not ‘modest’ like his brother!! But Pyotr’s views on his achievement were subsequently endorsed by the international operatic audience.

Premiere and Performance History
The world premiere took place on 19 December 1890 in St. Petersburg at the Mariinsky Theatre, also known as the Kirov Theatre during the Soviet era. Herman was sung by the tenor Nikola Figner and Lisa by his wife Medea. The composer himself took part in the preparation of premiere. Critics gave rave reviews. Tchaikovsky later wrote, “Figner and the Saint Petersburg orchestra... have made true miracles.” The premiere’s success was tremendous but as Medea was pregnant, the opera was suspended from the St. Petersburg repertoire after two months. The opera was just as successful at the Kiev premiere on 31 December 1890, twelve days after
the world premiere. The Moscow premiere took place at the Bolshoi Theatre in November the following year. Tchaikovsky was extremely pleased with his success.

The first performance outside Russia was in October 1892 in Prague, where it was sung in a Czech translation. Further notable performances include the Vienna premiere in 1902 conducted by Gustav Mahler, and the first American performance (in German) at the New York Met in 1910, also conducted by Mahler.

Synopsis
The opera is set in St. Petersburg near the end of the 18th century, during the reign of Catherine the Great.

Act 1

Scene 1 Spring, a square in the Summer Garden
At the beginning of the scene, children are playing pretending to be soldiers. Two officers—Surin and Chekalinsky—enter, the former complaining about his bad luck at gambling. They remark that another officer, Herman, seems obsessed with the gaming table but never gambles himself. Herman appears with Tomsky, who remarks that his friend doesn’t seem like his old self: is anything bothering him? Herman admits he is in love with a girl above his station whose name he does not even know. When Prince Yeletsky, an officer, strolls into the park, Chekalinsky congratulates him on his recent engagement. Yeletsky declares his happiness while Herman, aside, curses him enviously. Yeletsky points out his fiancée, Lisa, who has just appeared with her grandmother, the old Countess. Catching sight of Herman, the two women note they have seen him before, staring at them with frightening intensity. Herman realizes that Lisa is his unknown beloved. When Yeletsky and the women leave, Herman is lost in thought as the other officers discuss the Countess, known as the Queen of Spades and formerly the whole of Paris knew her as the Moscow Venus, due to her great beauty. Tomsky relates the story of how, in her youth, the Countess had lost all her money gambling and seeing her distress, the Count St. Germain offered to give her the secret of three winning cards in return for an amorous rendezvous. Initially horrified at his proposal, she nevertheless returned to the gambling table the next day and succeeded in winning back her fortune by playing the three cards. Tomsky says only two men, her husband and, later on, her young lover, ever learned the secret of playing three special cards, because she was warned by an apparition to beware of a “third suitor” who would kill her trying to force it from her. Musing on the winning sequence of three cards, the others lightly suggest that this might be the way for Herman to win without risking any money. Threatened by approaching thunder, all leave except Herman, who vows to learn the Countess’s secret.

Scene 2 Lisa’s room, with a door to a balcony overlooking the garden
At home, Lisa plays the harpsichord as she and her friend Pauline sing a duet about evening in the countryside. Their girlfriends ask to hear more, so Pauline launches into a sad ballad, followed by a dancelike song. As the merriment increases, Lisa remains pensively apart. A Governess chides the girls for indulging in unbecoming folk dancing and asks the visitors to leave. Pauline, the last to go, urges Lisa to cheer up; Lisa replies that after a storm there is a beautiful night and asks the maid, Masha, not to close the French windows to the balcony. Alone, Lisa voices her unhappiness with her engagement; she has been stirred by the romantic look of the young man in the park. To her shock, Herman appears on the balcony. Claiming he is about to shoot himself over her betrothal to another, he begs her to take pity on him. When the Countess is heard knocking, Lisa hides Herman and opens the door to the old woman, who tells her to shut the windows and go to bed. After the Countess retires, Lisa asks Herman to leave but her true feelings quickly become apparent when she declares that she is his and falls into his embrace.

Act 2

Scene 1 A masked ball in a rich house
The scene opens with a chorus, which is the first of several 'neo-classical' pieces in this scene. The Master of Ceremonies invites the guests outdoors to see a fireworks display. Left alone, Yeletsky sings to Lisa an aria with words by the composer, ‘I love you beyond measure’.
Herman enters reading a note from Lisa, asking him to meet her later. Surin and Chekalinsky sneak up behind him with the intent of playing a joke on him, muttering he is the “third suitor” who will learn the Countess's secret, then melt into the crowd as Herman wonders whether he is hearing things. The master of ceremonies announces a pastoral play called ‘The Faithful Shepherdess’, which is an extended divertissement or entertainment in the style of Mozart on the story of Daphnis and Chloë. Lisa tells Herman how to reach the Countess’s bedroom, which is on the way to hers, and she slips him the key, saying the old woman will not be there the next day. But Herman insists on coming that very night. Thinking fate is handing him the Countess’s secret, he leaves. The guests’ attention turns to the imminent arrival of Catherine the Great, for which a polonaise is played and sung in greeting.

Scene 2
Herman slips into the Countess’s room and looks in fascination at her portrait as the “Moscow Venus”; musing how their fates, he feels, are linked: one of them will die because of the other. He lingers too long before he can go to Lisa’s room, as he hears the Countess and her attendants approaching. He conceals himself as the old lady enters. The Countess deplores the manners of the day and reminisces about the better times of her youth.. She sings herself to sleep to the anachronistic strains of a tune Je crains de lui parler la nuit” (“I fear to talk with him at night”), which Tchaikovsky copied out from Grétry’s opéra-comique Richard Cœur-de-Lion. As she dozes, Herman stands before her. She awakens in horror as he pleads with her to tell him her secret. When she remains speechless, he grows desperate and threatens her with a pistol—at which she dies of fright. Lisa rushes in, only to learn that the lover to whom she gave her heart was more interested in the Countess’s secret. She orders him out and falls sobbing.

Act 3
Scene 1 Herman’s barracks room, late at night.
As the winter wind howls, Herman reads a letter from Lisa, who wants him to meet her at midnight by the Winter Canal. He imagines he hears the chorus chanting at the old Countess’s funeral, then is startled by a knock at the window. The old woman’s ghost appears, announcing that against her will, she must tell him the secret so that he can marry and save Lisa. Dazed, Herman repeats the three cards she tells him—three, seven, ace.

Scene 2 By the Winter Canal
Lisa waits for Herman: it is already near midnight, and though she clings to a forlorn hope that he still loves her, she sees her youth and happiness swallowed in darkness. At last he appears, but after uttering words of reassurance, he starts to babble wildly about the Countess and her secret. No longer even recognizing Lisa, he rushes away. Realizing that he is now insane and that all is lost, she jumps off the embankment and drowns herself.

Scene 3
At a gambling house, Herman's fellow officers are finishing supper and getting ready to play faro. Yeletsky, who has not gambled before, joins the group because his engagement has been broken: "unlucky in love, lucky at cards". Tomsky entertains the others with a song. Then Chekalinsky leads a traditional gamblers’ song. Settling down to play, they are surprised when Herman arrives, wild and distracted. Yeletsky senses a confrontation and asks Tomsky to be his second if a duel should result. Herman, intent only on betting, starts with a huge bet of 40,000 rubles. He bets the three and wins, upsetting the others with his maniacal expression. Next he bets the seven and wins again. At this he takes a wine glass and declares that life is but a game. Yeletsky accepts his challenge to bet on the next round. Herman bets everything he has on the ace but when he shows his card he is told he is holding the queen of spades. Seeing the Countess's ghost laughing at her vengeance, Herman stabs himself, and with his dying breaths asks for Yeletsky's and Lisa's forgiveness. The others pray for his tormented soul.

Colin Jones
Eugene Onegin (Russian: Yevgény Onégin) Op. 24, was described by the composer as ‘Lyrical scenes in 3 acts’. The libretto is by the composer and Konstantin Shilovsky based on Alexander Pushkin’s novel in verse of 1833. Tchaikovsky would later base two further operas on works by Pushkin: Mazeppa and The Queen of Spades, which we discussed in our meeting 4 weeks ago. Tchaikovsky was not the first composer to base operas on works by Pushkin. Glinka, known as the father of Russian opera, based his Ruslan and Lyudmila on Pushkin’s poem of the same name. And Mussorgsky used scenes from Pushkin’s play Boris Godunov as the basis of his only completed opera. Later, Rimsky-Korsakov set works by Pushkin in his operas The Tale of Tsar Saltan, Mozart and Salieri and The Golden Cockerel and Rachmaninov did likewise for his operas Aleko and The Miserly Knight. So, Eugene Onegin belongs to a long tradition of transferring Pushkin to the operatic stage.

Introduction

I’ll start by saying a few words about Tchaikovsky’s operas, because, although only two are regularly performed outside Russia, these being Eugene Onegin and The Queen of Spades, Tchaikovsky occupied himself more with opera than with any other musical genre. He wrote operas at every stage of his career. He studied music under Anton Rubinstein at the St. Petersburg Conservatory from 1862 to 1865 but this did not prepare him for operatic composition and the Russian repertoire of the 1860s offered few models by native composers. So it was not surprising that Tchaikovsky’s first opera, The Voyevoda (1867–1868) was unsuccessful when it was premiered at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. His second opera Undine (1869) was rejected outright by the Imperial Theatre and Tchaikovsky subsequently destroyed it. But by the time he started work on his third opera, The Oprichnik, in 1870 he had already developed his own personal style, which we know from, for example, his fantasy overture Romeo and Juliet, written the previous year.

In fact, The Oprichnik was a great audience success, partially due to its strong Russianness. Tchaikovsky was becoming drawn towards the group of nationalist composers led by Balakirev (the so-called ‘Mighty Handful’ that Paul mentioned in his talk on Rimsky-Korsakov’s Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh) and this had a big influence on his 2nd Symphony (the Little Russian) and his fourth opera, Vakula the Smith (1874), which quotes 4 Russian folksongs and includes passages of folksong pastiche. But with Vakula, Tchaikovsky’s nationalist phase came to an abrupt end. Instead, he turned to a more cosmopolitan style, inspired in part by Bizet’s Carmen, which he had seen in Paris in 1876 and adored (far more, in fact, than the premiere of Wagner’s Ring cycle, which he also saw in Bayreuth in the same year!).

It was under the influence of Carmen that Tchaikovsky composed his next opera, Eugene Onegin. He went on to compose 6 more operas, including The Queen of Spades in 1890 and his last opera Iolanta from 1892, the year before his death.

Composition History

Eugene Onegin was composed in 1877-1878 when Tchaikovsky was 38 years old and is the fifth of his 11 completed operas. The story concerns a selfish hero (Onegin) who lives to regret his blasé rejection of a young woman’s love (Tatyana) and his careless provocation of a fatal duel with his best friend (Lensky).

Pushkin’s novel Eugene Onegin was one of the most loved and admired works of 19th century Russian literature. The idea of transferring it to the operatic stage was not Tchaikovsky’s to begin with. It was proposed to him on 25 May 1877 (old style calendar) by the contralto Yelizaveta Lavrovskaya and at first it struck the composer as a ‘wild’ idea (to quote a letter he wrote to his brother Modest). The drawbacks were obvious to Tchaikovsky: Pushkin’s novel was loved for the telling, not for the tale. In other words, the plot was slender and banal, but the book was loved for its language: the wry social commentary, the perfectly accurate descriptions, the subtle characterizations and the sheer quality of the writing. But Tchaikovsky soon realised that he was uniquely equipped to write the sort of music which could complement Pushkin’s narrative. The result was a masterpiece of stylized operatic realism, the Russian counterpart to
La Traviata or Manon, except that it stands higher in its national tradition than either in theirs (and that’s quite something!).

Tchaikovsky spent a sleepless night after his visit to Lavrovskaya’s, at the end of which he had completed a scenario that differs only slightly from that of the finished opera. On 27 May (i.e. just 2 days after Lavrovskaya’s proposal) he visited his friend Konstantin Shilovsky, who had been pestering him with ideas for biblical and historical grand operas and persuaded him to focus on Onegin. Together they worked out a text that preserves a maximum of Pushkin’s original verses. Shilovsky’s major contributions to the libretto were Monsieur Triquet’s couplets in Act 2 scene 1; the composer was responsible for the text of Lensky’s arioso in Act 1 scene 1 and Prince Gremin’s in Act 3 scene 1.

He began composing straight away, with Tatyana’s famous letter scene (Act 1 scene 2), using Pushkin’s text unaltered. In this letter, Tatyana declares her love for Eugene Onegin, whom she has only just met. This self-contained passage, which all educated Russians know by heart, was something Tchaikovsky had already planned to set before he had even thought of writing the opera.

While composing the letter scene, he wrote about strongly identifying with Tatyana and having little sympathy with Onegin, who seemed to him a cold and heartless character. By coincidence, while working on this letter scene, Tchaikovsky unexpectedly found himself the recipient of a similar love letter from a forgotten former pupil named Antonina Milyukova. His determination not to follow in the steps of Onegin was so strong, that he took the disastrous decision to embark on a loveless marriage, hopefully countering rumours of his homosexuality in the process. He quickly regretted his decision and was lucky to escape with nothing worse than a severe nervous breakdown before his doctors insisted that the marriage come to an end a few weeks later.

Tchaikovsky returned to work on Onegin during an extended recuperative stay in Western Europe, and only after starting work on his Fourth Symphony, which would compete for his time for the rest of 1877. Anyway, to cut a long story short, the whole work was completed on 20 January 1878. Even with the distractions of his personal disaster and the composition of the Fourth Symphony, it had taken him only 8 months to write.

**The Premiere and subsequent performances**

It was Tchaikovsky’s express wish that conservatory students should give the first performance of his ‘lyrical scenes’, as he feared that the work’s special qualities would be smothered by the routine of professional opera houses. He therefore asked his friend Nikolay Rubinstein, the head of the Moscow Conservatory, to arrange for students to perform the first four scenes, which were presented in December 1878. Three months later, on 29 March 1879, the complete opera was given its premiere at the Conservatory. It received its professional premiere at the Moscow Bolshoi Theatre on 23 January 1881. Though a minority immediately appreciated the work’s special qualities, it was not until the Imperial Opera produced it in St. Petersburg in 1884 that it suddenly began to enjoy the success that has made it the most popular of all Russian operas.

**Synopsis**

**Time:** The 1820s

**Place:** St Petersburg and surrounding countryside

**Act 1**

**Scene 1: The garden of the Larin country estate**

Madame Larina and the nurse Filippyevna are sitting outside in the garden. They can hear Madame Larina’s two daughters, Tatyana and her younger sister Olga, singing a love song. Madame Larina begins to reminisce about her own courtship and marriage. A group of peasants enter and celebrate the harvest with songs and dances. Tatyana and Olga watch. Tatyana has been reading a romantic novel and is absorbed by the story; her carefree sister, on the other hand, wants to join in the celebrations. Madame Larina tells Tatyana that real life is quite different from her novels. Filippyevna announces that visitors have arrived: Olga’s fiancé
Lensky, a young poet, and his friend Eugene Onegin, visiting the area from St Petersburg. The pair are shown in and Lensky introduces Onegin to the Larin family. Onegin is initially surprised that Lensky has chosen the extrovert Olga rather than her more subtle elder sister as his fiancée. Onegin puts on airs of 'world-weariness', like a hero in a poem by Byron. Tatyana for her part is immediately and strongly attracted to Onegin. Lensky expresses his delight at seeing Olga and she responds flirtatiously. Onegin tells Tatyana of his boredom in the country and describes the death of his uncle and his subsequent inheritance of a nearby estate. Filippyevna recognizes that Onegin has had a profound effect on Tatyana.

**Scene 2: Tatyana’s room**

Tatyana is dressed for bed. Restless and unable to sleep, she asks her nurse Filippyevna to tell her about her youth and early marriage. Tatyana confesses that she is in love. Left alone, Tatyana pours out her feelings in a letter to Onegin. She tells him that she loves him and believes that she will never feel this way about anyone else, and begs him to understand and help her. She finishes writing the letter at dawn. A shepherd's pipe is heard in the distance. Filippyevna enters the room to wake Tatyana. Tatyana persuades her to send her grandson to deliver the letter to Onegin.

Let's hear the letter scene now, in a production from the New York Met

**PLAY LETTER SCENE** "Let me die, but first in blinding hope I summon dark bliss, I will know the raptures of life!"

**Scene 3: Another part of the estate**

Servant girls pick fruit and sing as they work. Tatyana waits anxiously for Onegin's arrival. Onegin enters to see Tatyana and give her his answer to her letter. His behaviour towards her is cool and distant. He explains, not unkindly, that he is not a man who loves easily and is unsuited to marriage. He is unworthy of her love and can only offer her brotherly affection. He warns Tatyana to be less emotionally open in the future. The voices of the servant girls singing are heard again. Tatyana is crushed and unable to reply.

**Act 2**

**Scene 1: The ballroom of the Larin house**

A ball is being given in honour of Tatyana, whose name day it is. Onegin is dancing with her. He grows irritated with a group of neighbours who gossip about him and Tatyana, and with Lensky for persuading him to come to the ball. He decides to take revenge on Lensky by dancing and flirting with Olga. Lensky is astounded and becomes extremely jealous. He confronts Olga but she cannot see that she has done anything wrong and tells Lensky not to be ridiculous. Onegin asks Olga to dance with him again and she agrees, as "punishment" for Lensky's jealousy. The elderly French tutor Monsieur Triquet sings some couplets in honour of Tatyana, after which the quarrel between Lensky and Onegin becomes more intense. Lensky renounces his friendship with Onegin in front of all the guests, and challenges Onegin to a duel, which the latter is forced, with many misgivings, to accept. Tatyana collapses and the ball ends in confusion.

**Scene 2: A wintry scene on the banks of a wooded stream, early morning**

Lensky is waiting for Onegin with his second Zaretsky. Lensky reflects on his life, his fear of death and his love for Olga.

**PLAY Lensky’s Aria** “Where have you gone, O golden days of my spring”

Onegin arrives with his manservant Guillot. Both Lensky and Onegin are reluctant to go ahead with the duel, reflecting on the senselessness of their sudden enmity. But it is too late; neither man has the courage to stop the duel. Zaretsky gives them the signal and Onegin shoots Lensky dead.

**Act 3**

**Scene 1: The house of a rich nobleman in St Petersburg**

Five years have passed, during which Onegin has travelled extensively around Europe. Standing alone at a ball, he reflects on the emptiness of his life and his remorse over the death of Lensky. Prince Gremin enters with Tatyana, his wife, now a grand, aristocratic beauty. She is greeted by many of the guests with great deference. Onegin is taken aback when he sees
Tatyana, and deeply impressed by her beauty and noble bearing. Tatyana, in turn, is
overwhelmed with emotion when she recognizes him, but tries to suppress it. Gremin tells
Onegin about his great happiness and love for Tatyana, and introduces Onegin to his wife.
Onegin, suddenly injected with new life, realizes that he is in love with Tatyana. He determines
to write to her and arrange a meeting.

**Scene 2: A room in Prince Gremin’s house**
Tatyana has received Onegin's letter, which has stirred up the passion she felt for him as a young girl and disturbed her. Onegin enters. Tatyana recalls her earlier feelings and asks why
Onegin is pursuing her now. Is it because of her social position? Onegin denies any cynical
motivation: his passion is real and overwhelming. Tatyana, moved to tears, reflects how near
they once were to happiness but nevertheless asks him to leave. He asks her to have pity.
Tatyana admits she still loves Onegin, but asserts that their union can never be realized, as she
is now married, and determined to remain faithful to her husband despite her true feelings.
Onegin implores her to relent, but she bids him farewell forever, leaving him alone and in
despair.  

**Dramatic Conception of the Opera**
As already mentioned, Tchaikovsky gave his opera the subtitle ‘lyrical scenes’. By doing so, he
wanted to prevent any expectations of a ‘grand opera’ and this subtitle was also meant to
emphasise that Eugene Onegin had hardly any dramatic climaxes or even much of a plot. The
composer Sergei Taneyev praised the music in a letter to Tchaikovsky, but at the same time
criticised the dramatic conception – (and I quote) “very little plot; the entire first scene shows
nothing more than the fact that the Larin family receives visitors, and that’s all. Beyond that, it
seems very unlikely to me that Tatyana should fall in love with Onegin at first sight, before he
even says anything.” Tchaikovsky defended his concept by saying, “It could very well be true
that my opera is not effective on stage. My answer is that I couldn’t care less about stage
effects”. After a few jabs at Verdi’s Aida and Mussorgsky’s Boris Godunov, he goes on to say “I
have no knowledge of the emotions of an Egyptian princess, a Pharaoh, a mad murderer… I
don’t need any Tsars, Tsarinas or revolution. I am looking for an intimate, yet powerful drama,
with conflicts that I myself have seen or experienced that have the power to move me deeply.”
In response to the criticism of Tatyana’s sudden infatuation with Onegin, Tchaikovsky replied
“She doesn’t fall in love with Onegin on his own merits; she needn’t even meet him in order to
fall in love. Before he even appears, she is already in love with some unspecified hero in her
novels. Onegin needed only to appear and immediately she took him for the personification of
her ideal”

The opera is unconventional in 3 ways:

- in its subtle depiction of the inner emotions of the main characters;
- the composer’s avoidance of any showy dramatic effects;
- the structure of the drama, with its 3 climaxes, in effect 3 little dramas:

In the first act, Tatyana’s drama unfolds – the peasant girls’ happy songs about love contrast
with Tatyana’s disappointment in being rejected by Onegin

Act 2 is Lensky’s act, depicting the growing tension with his former friend Onegin, which leads
to his death in the duel

The character of Onegin is reflected indirectly in these two acts. He is shown as a somewhat
aloof person who unintentionally wreaks havoc in the lives of others but also as a man
condemned to a life of loneliness because he frivolously squanders love and friendship.
It is only in the third act that Onegin finally admits he loves Tatyana but the tragedy is that it is
now too late and Tatyana turns her back on him forever.
Introduction

Today, I’m going to change the format of my presentation again. I’ll start with a few basic facts about the opera. Then I’ll give a very brief synopsis before we look at some of the main musical themes, as I hope this will help us all to appreciate the excerpts which I’ll play in the appropriate places as we go through the plot in more detail.

Death in Venice is an opera in two acts by Benjamin Britten, his opus 88 and the last of his 10 operas. It consists of 17 short scenes, 7 in the first act and 10 in the second, which run continuously within each act. The opera is based on the novella *Death in Venice (Der Tod in Venedig)* by the German novelist Thomas Mann, which was written in 1912. Myfanwy Piper wrote the English libretto. It was first performed at Snape Maltings, near Aldeburgh, on 16 June 1973.

The basic plot concerns a famous German novelist, Gustav von Aschenbach, who is suffering from writer’s block. He decides to go to Venice to seek inspiration. On the first evening at the hotel, he notices among the other guests a young Polish boy, Tadzio, who is on holiday with his mother and two sisters. Aschenbach is immediately struck by the boy’s unnatural beauty. The Polish family are portrayed by dancers, they never sing and Aschenbach never speaks to them. Instead, he gradually becomes more and more obsessed with the boy until he finally admits to himself that he loves him.

Later on, Aschenbach learns that there is a Cholera plague in Venice. He initially wants to warn Tadzio’s mother to leave immediately, but decides against it for fear of never seeing Tadzio again. As the hotel guests prepare to leave, Aschenbach goes to the beach one last time and dies there, watching Tadzio walking out to sea.

Besides Aschenbach, there is just one other main singing role, that of the Bass-Baritone, who sings 7 different parts, which keep the action going. These 7 parts are: the Traveller, the Elderly Fop, the Old Gondolier, the Hotel Manager, the Hotel Barber, the Leader of the Players and the Voice of Dionysus. Each of these characters has their own musical theme and in addition, there are themes associated with the plague, with Venice and with the View.

Before we look at the plot in more detail, I thought it would be interesting to watch part of a conversation between the broadcaster David Nice and Steuart Bedford, the conductor of the first performance of Death in Venice. This talk was given before an audience as an introduction to a performance of the opera at Garsington and if you get chance, it is well worth watching it all on You Tube. In the excerpt I am going to show you now, which lasts about 6 minutes, Steuart Bedford describes the main musical themes I’ve just mentioned.

Play Steuart Bedford video

So now, I’ll give you a more detailed synopsis of the plot and I’ll be using clips from the 1990 Glyndebourne production starring Robert Tear as Aschenbach and Alan Opie in the 7 Bass-Baritone parts. Although this production is available on YouTube, the quality is quite poor and the picture aspect is wrong (everybody looks very wide!), so I decided to create my own clips from DVD, so I hope you appreciate all the extra effort I went to to increase your enjoyment! As the scenes merge into one another, a bit like in a film, I decided to show just two fairly lengthy excerpts rather than try to show you a lot of individual scenes.
The opera takes place in 1911

Act 1

Scene 1: Munich

Aschenbach, a famous German novelist and now a widower, is weary and complaining about the fading of his inspiration. As he walks through the suburbs of Munich, he stops before the entrance to a cemetery. He catches sight of a traveller (“from beyond the Alps by his looks”) and, musing on the strange and exotic nature of foreign lands, decides impulsively to travel south in the hope of refreshing his artistic imagination.

Scene 2: On the Boat to Venice

He takes a boat to Venice, sharing his passage with a group of youths and their leader, the Elderly Fop. The youths sing of ‘Serenissima’, Italian for ‘most serene’, which was the name given to the old Republic of Venice and this 5-note theme Se-re-ni-si-ma becomes a leitmotif which haunts the rest of the opera. Aschenbach discovers that the fop is not young, but old and made-up and this repulses him. He arrives in Venice in a bad mood. This scene leads into the brief:

Overture: This is a sound-picture of Venice, based on the ‘Serenissima’ theme and incorporating the sounds of the city’s church bells

Scene 3: The Journey to the Lido

Aschenbach contemplates his arrival by gondola into the city (“What lies in wait for me here, Ambiguous Venice, Where water is married to stone, And passion confuses the senses?”). He intends to go to the Schiavone (a promenade in Venice), but is instead taken towards the Lido by the Old Gondolier, who mutters that “Nobody shall bid me; I go where I choose; I go my own way”. A brief argument as to their destination ensues, but Aschenbach soon gives in and is taken to the Lido.

Scene 4: The First Evening at the Hotel

He is greeted by the Hotel Manager, who shows him his room. As the other guests assemble for dinner, Aschenbach watches them pass. He notices a young Polish boy, Tadzio, in whom he sees unnatural beauty (“Surely the soul of Greece lies in that bright perfection”). Aschenbach is aware of the fatuousness of his thoughts but allows himself to indulge in his speculations.

Scene 5: On the Beach

While reading, Aschenbach observes Tadzio playing on the sands. He obtains a wry satisfaction from the discovery that Tadzio has flaws: as a Pole, the boy hates the Russian guests (“He is human after all. There is a dark side even to perfection. I like that.”).

Play Overture + Scenes 3, 4 and the first part of Scene 5

Scene 6: The Foiled Departure

Walking the streets of Venice, Aschenbach is accosted at every turn by beggars, street sellers and others demanding his custom. Seeing rubbish on the streets and smelling the foul water of the canals, he feels nauseated and claustrophobic, and decides that he must leave Venice. Back at the hotel, the Manager expresses his regret over Aschenbach’s departure. When Tadzio returns Aschenbach’s glances, Aschenbach himself also feels regret that he is leaving
so soon. On arriving at the railway station, Aschenbach is angry when he finds that his luggage has been sent on the wrong train, but is secretly glad to be forced to return to the hotel. On seeing Tadzio again, he realises that it was the boy that made it hard for him to leave.

**Scene 7: The Games of Apollo**

Aschenbach sits in his chair on the Lido beach, watching Tadzio and his friends play. Aschenbach's thoughts (voiced by the chorus) are of the gods Phaedra, Apollo and Hyacinthus, their actions mirroring those of Tadzio. The boys compete in a variety of sports: running, long jump, discus, javelin and wrestling. Tadzio wins conclusively, and Aschenbach is inspired artistically by the boy's beauty. He wants to congratulate Tadzio on his victory, but when the opportunity arises, he cannot bring himself to speak. Almost choking on the words, Aschenbach realises the truth and whispers: "I – love you."

**Act 2**

Sitting with a book but distracted by his own thoughts, Aschenbach decides to accept his feeling for the boy as it is, ("ridiculous, but sacred too and no, not dishonourable, even in these circumstances.")

**Scene 8: The Hotel Barber's Shop (i)**

Aschenbach visits the Hotel Barber, who lets slip a mention of a sickness in Venice. Aschenbach questions urgently, but the barber denies that the sickness is of any importance.

**Scene 9: The Pursuit**

As Aschenbach crosses the waters to Venice, he detects the smell of disinfectant. On his arrival, he finds citizens reading public notices warning them to take precautions against infection. The citizens too deny that there is any cause for worry, but Aschenbach finds a graver warning in a German newspaper: "We doubt the good faith of the Venetian city fathers in their refusal to admit to the cases of cholera in the city. German citizens should return as soon as possible". The Polish family appears and Aschenbach determines that they must not find out about the cholera outbreak for fear that they will leave. Aschenbach follows the family to a café, where the mother notices him and moves herself in between Aschenbach and her son. The family moves onward to St Mark's, with Aschenbach still following at a distance. In due course, the family leaves and takes a gondola back to the hotel, with Aschenbach in pursuit and in a state of some excitement ("Tadzio, Eros, charmer, see I am past all fear, blind to danger, drunken, powerless, sunk in the bliss of madness").

**Scene 10: The Strolling Players**

On the hotel terrace after dinner, the guests assemble to watch the players. Aschenbach questions the Leader of the Players about the rumours of plague, but the actor dismisses his suggestions. Aschenbach notices that Tadzio, like himself, is not laughing at the players, and wonders "Does your innocence keep you aloof, or do you look to me for guidance? Do you look to me?"

**Scene 11: The Travel Bureau**

A young English clerk is dealing with a crowd of hotel guests, all urgently trying to leave Venice. As the clerk closes the bureau, Aschenbach asks him about the plague and is told that the city is in the grip of Asiatic cholera. He advises Aschenbach to leave immediately before a blockade is imposed.

**Scene 12: The Lady of the Pearls**
Aschenbach decides to warn Tadzio's mother of the danger posed to them by the plague, but cannot bring himself to do it. He initially chastises himself for having failed to "make everything decent and above board", but then decides that he was right not to speak out, and idly wonders "What if all were dead, and only we two left alive?"

Scene 13: The Dream

Aschenbach dreams of the gods Apollo and Dionysus, who argue their respective viewpoints of reason and beauty versus chaos and ecstasy. Apollo is overwhelmed and leaves Dionysus to a wild dance. Aschenbach wakes and realises how little of his former intellectual rigour and detachment remains. He is resigned to the change: "Let the gods do what they will with me".

Scene 14: The Empty Beach

Aschenbach watches as Tadzio and his friends play a desultory game on the beach; they soon leave.

Scene 15: The Hotel Barber's Shop (ii)

Aschenbach declares "Do what you will with me!", and the barber works at beautifying him with make-up and hair dye, while extolling the virtues of youthful appearance.

Scene 16: The Last Visit to Venice

Aschenbach boards a gondola for Venice and sings of its beauty. He realises and mocks his own resemblance to the Elderly Fop. Upon seeing the Polish family ahead of him, Aschenbach follows distractedly. Tadzio detaches himself from the family and waits for Aschenbach, who turns away when the boy looks directly at him. Aschenbach is pleased to notice that Tadzio does not betray his follower's presence to his mother. Alone again, Aschenbach buys strawberries from a street seller, but finds them musty and over-ripe. He sits down, tired and ill, and bitterly mocks himself. He recites a paraphrase of Plato's dialogue between the old philosopher Socrates and the boy Phaedrus, speaking the parts of both man and boy. The subject of the dialogue is the dangerous relationship between the artist and his subject.

Scene 17: The Departure

The Hotel Manager and a porter are organising the departure of the last guests, the Polish family among them. Aschenbach inquires as to their time of departure, then leaves to sit on the deserted beach where Tadzio and another boy, Jaschiu, are playing. The game becomes rougher and Jaschiu dominates, pushing Tadzio's face into the sand. In an attempt to assist, Aschenbach tries to get up but is too weak. Jaschiu and the other children run away, leaving Tadzio on the beach alone with Aschenbach. Tadzio beckons the author, but he slumps dead in his chair. Tadzio continues walking far out to sea.

Play Scene 17

Composition history

Britten had been contemplating basing an opera on Thomas Mann’s novella for many years and began work in September 1970 with approaches to Myfanwy Piper and to Golo Mann, the son of the author. Because of agreements between Warner Brothers and the estate of Thomas Mann for the production of Luchino Visconti’s 1971 film, Britten was advised by his lawyers not to see the film to avoid any chances of being accused of plagiarism. According to Colin Graham, the director of the first production of the opera, some colleagues of the composer who did see the film found the relationship between Tadzio and Aschenbach "too sentimental and
salacious”. This contributed to the decision by the composer and librettist that Tadzio and his family and friends would be portrayed by non-speaking dancers.

Britten started work on the music in the spring of 1971 and completed the short score just before Christmas 1972. For most of this time Britten was very ill and in the autumn of 1972 his doctors told him he needed an operation to replace a deficient heart valve. He made a bargain with them – he would have the operation provided they allowed him to finish Death in Venice first. The full score was finished in March 1973. The opera had become an obsession. He was passionately involved with the subject matter and he also wanted to complete it as a tribute to his life-long partner Peter Pears, for whom the part of Aschenbach was written. He dedicated the opera ‘To Peter’.

During the heart operation in May 1973, Britten had a slight stroke which permanently affected his right hand. He was not well enough to supervise rehearsals of the opera, conducted by Steuart Bedford, nor to attend the first performance at Snape Maltings on 16 June 1973. Britten first saw the opera at a special semi-private performance on 12 September and later attended the first London performance at Covent Garden on 18 October. Although still very ill, he attended the recording sessions in spring 1974 and saw the opera again at the 1975 Aldeburgh Festival and at Covent Garden on 7 July 1975. In June 1976, Britten accepted a life peerage, the first composer to receive such an honour, and became Baron Britten of Aldeburgh, but he died of congestive heart failure just 6 months later on 4 December 1976.

The Music of Death in Venice

In Steuart Bedford’s talk we heard some of the main musical themes of the opera, but I’d like to say a bit more about the music in general. The role of Aschenbach combines Monteverdi-like recitative with Schoenbergian techniques such the 12 tone system and Sprechstimme (where the voice declaims in a manner half way between speech and singing) as well as Mahlerian melody. It is a very long and demanding role, as Aschenbach is on stage for most of the opera. But Britten sensitively ensured that, even in a large theatre, the voice should always be clearly audible.

The atmosphere of decay and decadence is uncannily evoked, as well as the sounds of Venice itself. Britten’s score uses three different layers of sound:

1) sparse piano accompaniment for Aschenbach’s recitatives, where he expresses his inner feelings in a series of soliloquies. These recitatives provide continuity between the many short scenes of the opera;
2) gamelan percussion representing Tadzio, his family and friends;
3) and the full orchestra is used for the other characters and also to represent Venice.

I’ve already mentioned that apart from Aschenbach, there is just one other main singing role, that of the Bass-Baritone, who sings the parts of the Traveller, the Elderly Fop, the Old Gondolier, the Hotel Manager, the Hotel Barber, the Leader of the Players and the Voice of Dionysus. In addition, for the Voice of Apollo, Britten uses a counter-tenor, as he did for the role of Oberon in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The numerous minor roles are often sung by soloists from the chorus.

I’ve also already mentioned that apart from Aschenbach, there is just one other main singing role, that of the Bass-Baritone, who sings the parts of the Traveller, the Elderly Fop, the Old Gondolier, the Hotel Manager, the Hotel Barber, the Leader of the Players and the Voice of Dionysus. In addition, for the Voice of Apollo, Britten uses a counter-tenor, as he did for the role of Oberon in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The numerous minor roles are often sung by soloists from the chorus.

I’ve also already mentioned that Britten wrote the role of Aschenbach for Peter Pears, his life-long partner. In fact, Britten had written the tenor roles in all his operas with Pears’s voice in mind, and Pears sang in all the premieres, starting with Peter Grimes in 1945, followed by the role of the Male Chorus in the Rape of Lucretia (1946), the title role in the comic opera Albert Herring (1947), Captain Vere in Billy Budd (1951), Essex in Gloriana (written for Queen Elizabeth’s Coronation in 1953), Quint in The Turn of the Screw (1954), Flute in A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1960), the General in the Television Opera Owen Wingrave and culminating in Aschenbach, his last, greatest, and most moving tribute to the vocal and interpretive qualities of his friend. The role of Aschenbach crowned Pears’s career. After the premiere at the Aldeburgh Festival and the London performances, the production transferred to the New York Metropolitan Opera, where Pears made his triumphant debut at the age of 64.
The opera and Myfanwy Piper’s libretto closely follow the plot of Thomas Mann’s novella and for a greater appreciation of the opera, it is useful to know a little about Mann’s possible sources of inspiration and the background to the book.

The novella is full of allusions to Greek antiquity and to German works of literature, art and music.

So, now for the intellectual bit! (and please don’t ask me any questions about any of what I about to mention, as it is well outside my field of knowledge. But it may be of interest to the philosophers amongst you!)

The novella is intertextual, meaning that there are interconnections with other literary works which influence the reader’s interpretation of the text, depending on their prior knowledge and understanding. Two of the chief allusions in Death in Venice are, firstly the connection of erotic love to philosophical wisdom as described in Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, and secondly the Nietzschean contrast between Apollo, the god of reason and self-discipline, and Dionysus, the god of excess and passion. The convention of placing classical deities in contemporary settings was popular at the time when Mann was writing *Death in Venice*. Also, Aschenbach displays both Appollonian and Dionysian characteristics during the course of the opera.

Aschenbach's surname may be an allusion to Wolfram von Eschenbach, the author of the Middle High German medieval romance *Parzival*. Thomas Mann was obsessed with the works of Richard Wagner, who adapted and transformed von Eschenbach's *Parzival* into his opera *Parsifal*, and it has been suggested that Mann was paying homage to Wagner's opera by referencing the author of the work which had inspired the composer, but this is pure speculation.

The novella's physical description of Aschenbach was based on a photograph of the composer Gustav Mahler. Mahler had made a strong personal impression on Thomas Mann when they met in Munich, and Mann was shocked by the news of Mahler's death in Vienna in 1911. Mann gave Mahler's first name and facial appearance to Aschenbach, but did not talk about it in public. (Incidentally, the soundtrack of the Visconti's 1971 film based on the novella made use of Mahler's music, particularly the "Adagietto" 4th movement from the *Symphony No. 5*).

Thomas Mann's wife Katia recalls in a book she wrote in 1974 that the idea for the story of Death in Venice came during an actual holiday in Venice, which she and Thomas took in the summer of 1911, staying at the Grand Hôtel des Bains on the Lido, where the action of the novella takes place:

All the details of the story, beginning with the man at the cemetery, are taken from experience… In the dining-room, on the very first day, we saw the Polish family, which looked exactly the way my husband described them: the girls were dressed rather stiffly and severely, and the very charming, beautiful boy of about 13 was wearing a sailor suit with an open collar and very pretty lacings. He caught my husband's attention immediately. This boy was tremendously attractive, and my husband was always watching him with his companions on the beach. He didn't pursue him through all of Venice—that he didn't do—but the boy did fascinate him, and he thought of him often… I still remember that my uncle, Privy Counsellor Friedberg, a famous professor of law in Leipzig, was outraged: "What a story! And a married man with a family!"

The boy who inspired "Tadzio" was Baron Władysław Moes, whose first name was usually shortened as Władzio or just Adzio. This story was uncovered by Thomas Mann's translator, Andrzej Dołęgowski, around 1964, and was published in the German press in 1965. Some sources report that Moes himself did not learn of the connection until he saw the 1971 film version of the novel.
Władysław Moes was born on November 17, 1900. He was just 10 years old when he was in Venice, significantly younger than Tadzio in the novella. He died on December 17, 1986 in Warsaw and was the subject of a biography, *The Real Tadzio* (Short Books, 2001) by Gilbert Adair.

Colin Jones

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**September 2020: STANISŁAW MONIUSZKO – HALKA**

Today, I am going to be talking about an opera by a composer who may be unfamiliar to most of us. So I will start my talk today with a short biography of Stanisław Moniuszko, then I'll introduce one of his best known operas, Halka. But before that, just to give you an idea of the style of his music, I'd like to play you his best-known song, *Prząśniczka* (The Spinner). I'll share my screen for this, so please have a look at the picture accompanying the music.

Play *Prząśniczka* (1m 20s)

There are literally dozens of versions of this simple, folk-inspired song available on YouTube, but I chose this one, because it shows a 100,000 Złoty bank note from 1990 with a portrait of Moniuszko on the front. This is a sign of how highly esteemed he still is in Poland.

**Biography**

![Stanisław Moniuszko](image)

Stanisław Moniuszko was undoubtedly the greatest composer of operas in 19th century Poland. He is regarded as the true creator of Polish national opera and his role in Polish opera is like that of Weber, Glinka, Smetana and Ferenc Erkel in German, Russian, Czech and Hungarian opera, respectively.

He was born in 1819 to a family of Polish landowners settled in Ubiel, near Minsk (now Belarus), and his interest in music became evident from early childhood. Moniuszko learnt the rudiments of music by taking private piano lessons, but his formal music education began in Berlin in 1837, where he studied composition and choral conducting under Carl Friedrich Rungenhagen, whose conservatism influenced his own musical language, which remained deeply rooted in early romanticism.

After his studies in Berlin, in 1840 Moniuszko moved to Vilnius (now capital of Lithuania) where he obtained posts as a church organist and choir conductor, and conductor of the theatre orchestra. During this time, he became acquainted with leading Polish novelists and
playwrights, which stimulated his interest in dramatic music and he began to compose stage works, as well as sacred music and secular cantatas.

At about this time he also commenced work on the collection of songs entitled Śpiewnik Domowy [Songbook for Home Use]. The first volume was published in 1843 and met with much interest among both the public and the music critics. Over the years the collection grew to 12 volumes and included 267 songs with piano accompaniment. Although many of the songs are simple, they show the composer’s originality and melodic inventiveness with Polish folklore often being the source and inspiration for Moniuszko’s rhythmic patterns and melodies.

During his lifetime Moniuszko travelled numerous times to St. Petersburg where his concerts were very well received. He befriended many of his prominent Russian contemporaries, including Glinka, Balakirev, and Mussorgsky. He dedicated one of his major orchestral works, the overture Bajka [Fairytale] to Dargomyzhsky, with whom he became close friends. In 1858 Moniuszko journeyed to Paris and Berlin, and paid visits to Smetana in Prague and to Liszt in Weimar.

But his visit to Warsaw in 1846 was to be most influential on his career as a composer of operas, as there he met Włodzimierz Wolski, a 22-year-old poet who had just written a poem called Halka, which tells the story of a young peasant girl who loves a nobleman and is expecting his child, but drowns herself in despair when her lover deceives her by marrying somebody of his own social status. Moniuszko asked Wolski to prepare a draft libretto based on his poem, which in turn formed the basis of his best-known opera, Halka. Following the great success of the premiere in 1858 at the Great Theatre in Warsaw, Moniuszko was appointed as first conductor at the Great Theatre. From then on, he wrote mainly for the stage, and all his new operas were premiered in Warsaw. From 1864 he also taught harmony and counterpoint at the Warsaw Musical Institute.

Halka was followed by several other major operas, the most famous being Straszny dwór [The Haunted Manor], which was my introduction to Moniuszko, as I was lucky enough to see it in Dresden, then still part of the German Democratic Republic, when the Great Theatre of Warsaw was on tour. Many years later I saw The Haunted Manor again in Krakow. It is generally agreed to be Moniuszko’s masterpiece. His major operas all have librettos which depict Polish nobility as well as characters of common origins who share and are faithful to Polish customs and patriotic feelings. As I will come back to later, Poland’s loss of statehood throughout the 19th century was an important background against which Moniuszko’s operas had rallied the national spirit. Moniuszko’s music is largely representative of early 19th century opera, given the extensive use of arias, recitatives and ensembles. But his music incorporates many national motifs with frequent appearances of Polish dances popular among the upper classes such as the Polonaise or the Mazurka, alongside folk dances such as the kujawiak and krakowiak.

Besides 9 completed operas, Moniuszko also wrote operettas, ballets, orchestral, instrumental and choral music as well as more than 300 songs. He died in Warsaw in 1872, aged just 53.

Halka

Halka is an opera in 4 acts by Stanisław Moniuszko to a libretto by Włodzimierz Wolski, based on a story by Kazimierz Władysław Wójcicki. In its original 2 act version, it was given a private concert performance in Vilnius on 1 January 1848, but was rejected by Poland’s main opera house, the Great Theatre in Warsaw. In 1856, Moniuszko made various changes to the opera and when the Great Theatre finally agreed in 1857 to stage the opera, he enlarged it to the 4 act version we know today. This version was premiered on 1 January 1858 (so 10 years after the first version). To set it in context with other contemporary operas, Wagner’s Tannhäuser was premiered in 1845, 3 years before the first version of Halka, and Lohengrin followed in 1850, Verdi’s La Traviata premiered in 1853 and Gounod’s Faust in 1859.
It was Moniuszko's first opera and the first Polish opera to be through-composed (i.e. the entire libretto is set to music and there is no spoken dialogue). It is also the most popular Polish opera ever written, receiving 36 performances in the first year, the 500<sup>th</sup> performance in 1900 and its 1000<sup>th</sup> in 1935. It is still frequently performed in Poland. As the first national opera of Poland, it occupies a similar position to Weber's Der Freischütz in Germany, Smetana's Dalibor, Libuse and The Bartered Bride in the Czech Republic. Glinka's A Life for the Tsar and Ruslan and Lyudmila in Russia and Erkel's Hunyadi László and Bánsk in Hungary.

**Roles – 6 main characters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Voice type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halka, a mountain-girl</td>
<td>soprano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jontek, a young man of the mountains</td>
<td>tenor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janusz, a young nobleman</td>
<td>baritone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stolnik, a landowner</td>
<td>bass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zofia, his daughter</td>
<td>mezzo-soprano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dziemba, Stolnik’s steward</td>
<td>bass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chorus: Nobles, peasants (the highlanders, known as Gorals)**

**Time:** End of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century  
**Place:** the Podhale region, sometimes referred to as the ‘Polish Highlands’, which are in the foothills of the Tatra mountains in Southern Poland

**Synopsis**

As I go through the plot of the opera, I will be playing extracts from a Polish production, which was taken to Kiev as a gesture of friendship and cultural co-operation between Poland and the Ukraine. Besides the production we will be seeing on Operavisio and a few excerpts of poor quality, this is the only other one available on YouTube and I have chosen it because it follows the plot closely, uses traditional costumes and makes clever use of naturalistic film sequences. Unfortunately, the subtitles are only in Polish and the singing and sound quality are not the best, but it should be fairly easy to follow.

**Act 1**

Act 1 takes place at the manor house of the landowner Stolnik. A party is taking place to celebrate the engagement of his daughter Zofia to Janusz, a young nobleman. The guests dance a Polonaise. Janusz asks Stolnik for a blessing on his bride and himself, which the old man gives in a lyrical trio. Stolnik calls Janusz the son he has always wanted. The party is disturbed by plaintive singing from outside. It seems to be a troubled young girl, crying for her lost love. The kind-hearted Zofia asks Janusz to talk to the girl, hoping he will comfort her. Although he recognises the girl’s voice as Halka’s, in public he denies he knows the singer’s identity but he reluctantly agrees to meet her. When Zofia and Stolnik leave, Janusz is torn between love for his fiancée and his guilty passion for Halka and expresses remorse for his betrayal of the orphan girl, who is expecting his child.

Dziemba, the steward of Stolnik's estate, ushers in the wretched girl. She repeats the haunting folk-like melody she sang outside earlier. At first, she doesn’t notice Janusz but when she sees him, she greets him ecstatically, much to the guests’ surprise. It turns out that he himself is her lost love; he promised her marriage while in her village in the mountains but then he disappeared. As soon as Halka looks into Janusz’s eyes, she is convinced that his feelings for her haven’t changed, despite the disquieting rumours she had heard to the contrary. Halka throws her arms around Janusz and he deceives her by saying that he still loves her as he did before. To get rid of Halka, he tells her to meet him after dark at the cross by the river; they will escape together to start a new life somewhere else.
We will now watch Act 1 up to this point, starting with the engagement party in Stolnik’s manor house. The guests sing a choral polonaise, then leave. In the trio that follows, Janusz and Zofia ask for Stolnik’s blessing, then we hear Halka’s sad song from outside, then Janusz, left alone, sings an aria where he expresses his mixed feelings for Halka, then Halka enters and continues her sad song, before embracing Janusz, who asks her to leave and meet him later by the river.

Once Halka has left, the celebrations resume and Janusz, pretending to be happy, returns to the party. Act 1 finishes with a brilliant Mazurka (or at least it should do, but in the production we will be seeing, this is moved to the end of the opera – I will be interested to hear your views on this at our next meeting in a fortnight’s time when you have had chance to see the opera and we come to discuss it!)

Act 2

Halka sings a melancholy song while waiting for Janusz, at the cross by the river. She is disturbed by the appearance, not of Janusz, but of Jontek, a friend from her mountain village. Jontek has been in (unrequited) love with Halka for many years and wants to take her back to her home.

We will now hear Halka’s Recitative and Aria as she waits in vain for Janusz to arrive.

Halka tells Jontek happily that Janusz still loves her, but Jontek insists that she has been betrayed. Jontek can’t convince Halka until he drags her to the scene of the party, where she sees that Janusz has become engaged to Zofia. Halka is devastated and compares herself to a dove who has been ripped to pieces by a falcon. She loses control of her feelings, Jontek tells Janusz of his indignation at the way that Halka has been treated and Janusz disowns Halka and drives her and Jontek away.

Act 3

Act 3 takes place one month later in Halka’s mountain village, which belongs to Janusz’s family estate. The villagers (known as the Gorals) are celebrating Sunday with dancing, although the oppressive burden of their everyday life of drudgery never leaves their minds. They are dismayed by the arrival of Jontek and Halka, who has become almost unrecognisable and completely mad. Jontek describes their inhumane treatment at the manor house and the Gorals express their sympathy with Halka and complain about feudal power and their lack of human rights. Halka is in a world of her own, crushed by grief and fixated on the images of the dove being broken by the falcon. As the wedding procession of Janusz and Zofia is seen in the distance, a black raven passes overhead, boding ill for everyone.

Act 4

Near the village cemetery, Jontek laments the misfortunes of Halka, who would die, he says, if she ever saw Janusz with his bride. The village bagpiper, in the village to play at the wedding of Janusz and Zofia, appears playing a happy tune, Jontek asks him what there is to be so happy about. The piper placates him by playing a haunting mountain song and, in the best known aria in the opera ‘The trees are rustling in the breeze’, Jontek describes his love for Halka and the many wonders of nature she reminds him of.

We will now hear the Prelude to Act 4 leading to Jontek’s Recitative and Aria.

When Janusz and Zofia arrive in the village to celebrate their wedding, the angry villagers have to be convinced to act in a festive manner by Dziemba, the steward, who persuades them to do
so out of respect for the bride. Zofia notices that Halka is terribly upset. She thinks she has seen Halka somewhere before, and even asks her what's wrong. Janusz admits that Halka is the girl who interrupted their engagement party but whisks Zofia into the church before she can ask any more questions. Halka is heartbroken to see that Janusz is going through with the marriage. She has lost her baby and feels completely alone. In a fit of rage, she decides to burn down the church but then the sight of the innocents who would lose their lives makes her change her mind. She still loves Janusz and can no longer seek revenge. Instead she decides to drown herself and dramatically throws herself into the river, leaving Jontek calling to her, while Dziemba rouses the villagers to sing the wedding hymn.

We will now see the last 13 mins of the opera starting with Halka’s Recitative, Cavatina and Cantilena, where she decides to set fire to the church but then changes her mind and throws herself into the river and finally the very end of the opera with Jontek mourning Halka’s death and the wedding party leaving the church.

Political Background

The premiere of Halka on New Year’s Day 1858 was a tremendous success with audience and critics alike. Moniuszko’s opera was acclaimed as ‘a work whose artistic value exceeds everything we have so far possessed in our national music’. Moniuszko was now suddenly regarded as Poland’s most important composer after Chopin, who had died in exile in Paris 9 years earlier.

The success and impact of Halka and Moniuszko’s importance as the first representative of a Polish national opera cannot be fully understood without considering the social and political history of Poland and the country’s situation at that time of the opera’s composition. The once powerful and extensive kingdom of Poland had become so weak during the 18th century that the three neighbouring states of Russia, Prussia and Austria divided it up among themselves step by step in three partitions in 1772, 1793 and 1795. Although after the Napoleonic wars, a sovereign Polish state was created in 1815 by the Congress of Vienna (and hence it was known as ‘Congress Poland’), it was greatly reduced in size and ruled by the Tsar of Russia. This led to an unsuccessful revolt in November 1830, which was put down in September 1831 when Russian troops occupied Warsaw. The state was forcibly integrated into the Russian Empire and remained part of Russia until WW1. The 21-year-old Chopin, who was on his way to Paris at this time, wrote his Revolutionary Etude under the influence of these events, whereas Moniuszko experienced the crushing of the revolt first hand as a 12-year-old boy. He also witnessed the many disturbances which shook the country in the following years, which were directed not only against the occupying forces but also against the often brutally feudalistic way in which the Polish nobility ruled, often in cooperation with the Russians. In January 1846, another uprising in Krakow again incited anger against the oppressors. So Wolski’s story about Halka was very topical at the time, even though it was set ‘around 1700’. It is therefore not surprising that the Great Theatre rejected the original version of the opera, probably because of the underlying theme of class conflict and because it was considered to be politically inflammatory. It was only after Tsar Alexander II decided in 1856 to adopt a more accommodating policy towards the Poles, in order to placate them, that the opera was able to pass the censorship and to be performed.

I would like to end by showing you the mazurka which ends Act 1 in the traditional production, but which ends the opera in the version we will be seeing on Operavision.

Colin Jones
Introduction
Tristan und Isolde is an opera in three acts to a libretto by the composer, based largely on the 12th-century romance Tristan by Gottfried von Strassburg. It was composed between 1857 and 1859 in a period when the composer took a break of 12 years from the composition of his epic Ring cycle. Tristan was premiered at the National Theater in Munich on 10 June 1865 with Hans von Bülow conducting. Wagner referred to the work not as an opera, but as “eine Handlung” (which literally means a plot or an action).

Wagner's composition of Tristan und Isolde was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (particularly his book The World as Will and Representation). This is a vast subject in its own right and I don’t have time to go into it today. Suffice it to say that according to Schopenhauer, man is driven by continued, unachievable desires, and the gulf between these desires and the impossibility of achieving them leads to misery. The only way for man to achieve inner peace is to renounce his desires. In Tristan, the music conveys an almost constant sense of yearning and desire, which is only resolved in the final bars of the opera. But Wagner in his personal life did not follow Schopenhauer’s philosophy, as he was having an affair with Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of a wealthy silk merchant who was giving Wagner financial support at the time he was composing Tristan. There is no doubt that Mathilde helped inspire some of Isolde’s music and he wrote the Wesendonck Lieder, settings of 5 of Mathilde’s poems, 2 of which incorporated musical themes from the opera. Tristan is acknowledged as one of the highest peaks of the operatic repertoire, and is notable for Wagner's unprecedented use of chromaticism, tonal ambiguity and harmonic suspension.

I’d like to illustrate what I mean by this, firstly by playing just the first four bars of the prelude

Prelude – play first four bars – Tristan chord.

Rather than me trying to explain this chord, I’d like to show you a very short video by Antonio Pappano, the chief conductor of the ROH, Covent Garden, who can explain it much better than I can.

Play The Tristan Chord by Pappano 5m 00s

9m 00s

If you are interested, there are several other YouTube videos just on this chord, including one by Stephen Fry, who plays the chord on Wagner’s own piano in Wagner’s house in Bayreuth.

Synopsis
In preparing for this introduction to Tristan und Isolde, I re-read the plot of the opera as given in Kobbé’s Complete Opera Book, The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, The Viking Opera Guide and the booklets that come with the CD recordings in my collection and they all give slightly different versions of the story. This is because of the complex and sometimes ambiguous text of Wagner's libretto, which is open to many different interpretations and explains why directors feel free to create such wildly different productions. I have decided to base my version of the synopsis on that of the Bayreuth-born musicologist and Wagner expert Erich Rapp, as printed in the booklet accompanying the classic recording from the 1966 Bayreuth Festival, featuring Wolfgang Windgassen as Tristan and Birgit Nilsson as Isolde (still, in my opinion, the best available version on CD or LP).

In this opera, it helps if you know the events which took place before the point where the opera begins, as this will help you to follow and understand the sung dialogue, which can be confusing, especially if this is the first time you have seen the opera.

Briefly, Tristan lost his parents while still a child and was brought up at the court of his uncle, Marke, the King of Cornwall. For many years, Ireland had been at war with Cornwall. The Irish King had sent one of his knights, Morold, to Cornwall to claim tribute (or, as we would say today, taxes) from King Marke. Morold was betrothed to Isolde, the daughter of the Irish King. But Tristan resented Morold’s claim and challenged him in mortal combat. Tristan killed Morold and sent his head back to Ireland as the only tribute that King Marke would pay. But Tristan
himself was seriously wounded in the fight and, in despair, he assumed the name of Tantris (an anagram of Tristan) and went to Ireland to ask Isolde to heal him, as she was known to be skilled in magic healing arts. She set herself the task of healing the stranger’s wounds. His noble appearance and pitiful plight soon won Isolde’s heart and Tristan in turn fell in love with her as she nursed him back to health. But one day, as she was sitting by Tristan’s sick-bed, Isolde noticed a curiously shaped notch in Tristan’s sword, which exactly matched a splinter of steel that had been found imbedded in Morold’s skull. She now new Tristan’s true identity, and filled with anger she picked up the sword, intending to kill him in revenge for Morold’s death. But Tristan’s eyes met hers in such a pleading, helpless glance that she felt pity and put the sword down. Although she was now aware that she was nursing the killer of her intended husband, she spared him and continued to tend to his wounds. But Tristan did not dare to speak of love to her again, as he felt that his slaying of Morold would be a barrier between them. So, once he had recovered, Tristan returned to Cornwall. Still conscious of the blood-guilt that would forever stand between them, Tristan decided on a deed of the utmost selflessness: he offered to win Isolde as a bride for King Marke. He therefore returned to Ireland and at the beginning of the opera we are on board Tristan's ship on the return trip, bringing Isolde and her maid Brangäne to Cornwall.

The curtain rises to show a tent-like room on the foredeck of the ship, where Isolde is lying on a couch with her head buried in the cushions while her maid Brangäne is looking out to sea. A young sailor sings a song about the Irish lover he has left behind in the west. Isolde starts up angrily, assuming that the reference to an ‘Irish maid’ is an insult to her. Brangäne tells Isolde that they will soon be landing in Cornwall and Isolde launches into a furious outburst against her own ‘degenerate race’ who have succumbed so easily to the enemy. Brangäne attempts in vain to calm her.

In the second scene, the whole length of the ship becomes visible. In the stern, Tristan stands thoughtfully, accompanied by his servant Kurwenal. Isolde wishes to speak to Tristan and sends Brangäne to order him to appear before her. Tristan, however, evades the confrontation, obeying the custom that requires a certain distance to be maintained between the groom’s representative and the bride. When Brangäne repeats Isolde’s command more forcibly, Kurwenal bluntly refuses, and sings a song mocking Morold, which is taken up in high spirits by the sailors. Brangäne returns to Isolde, who is barely able to control her anger. She now confesses her secret to her maid, telling her about how she nursed the wounded ‘Tantris’ and how she held back from killing him when she discovered his true identity. She now bitterly regrets that she let the sword drop and calls for Tristan’s death, which she will share (“Revenge! Death to us both!). To comfort her, Brangäne reminds her about a little box containing magic potions and advises her to use the love potion to bind Tristan to her. But Isolde firmly chooses the death potion, which Tristan must drink with her as punishment.

When Kurwenal invites the ladies to prepare for disembarkation, Isolde tells him she will not follow Tristan if he refuses to speak to her. This threat finally compels him to appear before her. He has a foreboding of what this meeting will mean for him. Defiantly, he offers her his sword so that she may take her revenge. Scornfully she refuses and points to the ‘sweet draught of atonement’ she has prepared for him. Firmly believing he is now drinking his own death, Tristan seizes the cup. Immediately he has drunk, Isolde snatches the cup from him and drinks her share. But instead of the deadly poison, Brangäne has poured the love potion into the cup. Nevertheless, in the view of the author of this synopsis, it is not the potion itself that transforms them, but the thought that they are about to die together. In the face of what they believe to be their impending death, they are now free to acknowledge their love for each other. When they awake from their ecstatic frenzy, the ship is in the harbour, where King Marke awaits his bride, and that is the end of Act 1.

We will hear the end of Act 1, from the point just a few minutes before Tristan and Isolde drink the love potion. I am using clips from a fairly traditional production recorded at the Bayreuth Festival in 1983, directed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, with René Kollo as Tristan and Johanna Meier as Isolde. Notice how, after they have both drunk the potion, they are seized by a succession of conflicting emotions, all portrayed in the music: rapt wonderment portrayed by the Tristan chord, agitation by tremolando cellos, breathless frenzy by
a short phrase on unison winds and strings and finally yearning for each other by the music from the beginning of the prelude.

Act 2 takes place at night in the garden of King Marke’s castle in Cornwall. Isolde’s chamber is to one side and a burning torch stands at the open door as a warning signal to Tristan. King Marke has gone hunting, as can be heard from the horn calls gradually receding into the distance. Isolde is waiting for Tristan and begs Brangâne to extinguish the torch. Brangâne is uneasy and refuses. She is distressed by the shameful situation in which her lady finds herself since she exchanged the potions. She warns Isolde about Melot, Tristan’s friend, whom she suspects of treachery. But Isolde takes no heed of her warning and herself extinguishes the torch. Tristan soon arrives. In a passionate embrace, both sing the praises of the potion which has united them and the night in which their love can find its fulfilment; in their growing rapture, this night becomes more and more a symbol of “eternal night”. Here the idea of “death in love” (Liebestod) is born and ecstatically acclaimed.

I will now play part of this love scene, where Tristan draws Isolde gently down onto a flowery bank, sinks on his knees before her and lays his head in her arms. The voice of Brangâne can be heard as she keeps watch and warns the lovers to take care. This excerpt lasts approx. 25 mins and contains some of the most exquisitely beautiful love music ever written, so I hope you enjoy it.

But, as you just saw, their dream is suddenly shattered by Kurwenal, who rushes in crying “Save yourself, Tristan!”. Melot has betrayed the lovers. Marke confronts Tristan and asks him to account for what, to Marke, is Tristan’s incomprehensible deceit. Tristan can give him no answer. The world is still to him a dream and an illusion. Tenderly, Tristan asks Isolde if she will follow him into death and she begs him to show her the way. Then Tristan accuses Melot of treachery and challenges him to a duel; but, as Melot strikes at him, Tristan lets his own sword fall and sinks down, wounded and thus ends Act 2.

Act 3 takes place by the sea, outside the castle at Kareol, Brittany.

Kurwenal has brought the badly wounded Tristan back to the castle of his fathers in Brittany. He is lying unconscious, guarded by Kurwenal. A shepherd is heard playing a mournful melody on his pipe. Softly, he asks Kurwenal what ails his master. But Kurwenal evades the question and tells him to watch out for a ship coming. When the shepherd has gone away, Tristan awakes. Already close to death, he has been called back to life by the thought of Isolde. Kurwenal tells him that he has sent for Isolde and that her ship must already be under way. This throws Tristan into a state of feverish excitement. He imagines he can see the ship bearing his salvation, but the shepherd’s pipe is heard again playing a sad tune and Kurwenal sadly shakes his head, saying “No ship is in sight yet”.

In the depths of despair, Tristan muses over his past life. He recalls his earlier journey to Ireland, when he lay, mortally wounded in the boat. At that time, Isolde had healed him; but the meeting of their eyes had opened a fresh wound in him. Later, she had given him the cup with the love potion, which had caused him to suffer the torments of love and which he now curses in his despair. He falls back, unconscious again. When he awakes, he thinks again that he can see the longed-for ship bearing Isolde, come to bring him atonement and peace. This time, his fevered imaginings become reality. A joyous melody from the shepherd’s pipe announces the arrival of the ship.

While Kurwenal rushes down to the harbour, Tristan in delirium tears the bandage from his wound so that he may meet Isolde on the point of death. With a last look at her, he dies in her arms. After a despairing lament for the (and I quote) “all too brief last earthly joy” which Tristan has given her, she sinks down, unconscious, beside his body. The Shepherd now announces the arrival of a second ship. Kurwenal recognizes Marke and Melot, with men-at-arms. Thinking that they have come in pursuit of Isolde, he rushes at them with his sword in hand, stabs Melot, and is himself struck down. But Marke has not pursued Isolde with any warlike intent. Brangâne has told him the secret of the exchanged potions, and he has come to unite the couple. Finding that Tristan has just died, Marke sinks into deepest mourning. Isolde, enraptured and oblivious to everything going on around her, gazes on Tristan, who, she believes, is awakening to a new
life, sings the famous ‘Liebestod’ (or Love-Death) and unites herself with him in death in the certainty that their love is immortal. She sinks lifeless onto Tristan’s body. All stand in deep emotion and exaltation as Marke blesses the bodies and the opera ends.

November 2020: WEBER: EURYANTHE
By way of introduction, rather than trying to give you a biography of the composer of today’s opera in just 10 minutes, I decided to focus on

10 Interesting facts about Weber:

1) Carl Maria von Weber was born in Eutin about 20 miles north of Lübeck, Northern Germany on 18 November 1786.
2) His father, Franz Anton von Weber, who had ambitions of turning his son Carl Maria into a child prodigy like Mozart, added the ‘von’ to his own name, even though he was not actually an aristocrat, and this sign of nobility was passed on to his son.
3) The family moved to Salzburg in 1797, where the 11-year-old Carl Maria studied with Michael Haydn, the younger brother of Joseph Haydn, who agreed to teach the boy free of charge.
4) In 1798, still only 11 years old, Weber wrote his first opera, Die Macht der Liebe und des Weins (The Power of Love and Wine), which is now lost. Shame, as it sounds as if it could have been quite an interesting opera!
5) By the time he was 16, he had already had his second opera The Forest Maiden and his third opera Peter Schmoll and His Neighbours performed on stage professionally.
6) After becoming director of the Opera Houses in Breslau at the age of 17 and in Prague at the age of 27, in 1817, he became director of the prestigious Opera House in Dresden, where he established a German opera tradition, in reaction to the Italian opera which had dominated the European music scene since the 18th century.
7) With the premiere of his 7th opera, Der Freischütz, in Berlin on 18 June 1821, Weber had his greatest success, which led to performances all over Europe. Der Freischütz is now recognised as the first great German Romantic Opera.
8) In 1824, Weber received an invitation from The Royal Opera in London, to compose and produce Oberon, based on Christoph Wieland’s poem of the same name. Weber accepted the invitation, and in 1826 he travelled to England, to prepare for the premiere on 12 April. Oberon was to be the last opera that Weber completed. He was already suffering from tuberculosis when he visited London. He conducted the premiere and twelve sold-out performances during April and May but died in his sleep during the night on 5 June 1826 at the home of his good friend Sir George Smart; he was just 39 years old. He was buried in the Catholic Chapel in Moorfields, London.
9) Weber’s operas, especially the last 3, Der Freischütz, Euryanthe and Oberon greatly influenced the development of Romantic opera in Germany. They had a major influence on the work of later opera composers such as Marschner, Meyerbeer and especially Wagner.
10) Eighteen years after Weber’s death, in December 1844, Richard Wagner arranged for his remains to be transferred to the family burial plot in the Old Catholic Cemetery in Dresden where he was re-buried at the side of his youngest son Alexander, who had died at the age of 19 of measles, just seven weeks before. Wagner composed music for the funeral procession from the railway station to the cemetery and for the burial ceremony the next day. I will be playing some of this funeral music, which uses themes from Euryanthe, at the next meeting of the Classical Music Group next Monday, where my subject will be ‘The Lighter Side of Wagner’. I hope you will be able to join me, as I
have a very varied and entertaining programme, and I won’t be including even a single note from Wagner’s great music dramas!

11) An added bonus fact! Weber left an unfinished comic opera Die drei Pintos (The Three Pintos) the score of which was originally given by his widow to Giacomo Meyerbeer for him to complete; it was eventually completed by Gustav Mahler, who conducted the first performance in Leipzig on 20 January 1888.

Weber described Euryanthe as a great heroic-romantic opera in 3 Acts. It was first performed at the Theater am Kärntnertor in Vienna on 25 October 1823. It is acknowledged as one of Weber’s most important operas, but is rarely staged nowadays. This lack of performances is usually blamed on the weak libretto by Helmina von Chézy (who, incidentally, was also the author of the failed play Rosamunde, for which Franz Schubert wrote incidental music). But Euryanthe departs from the German Singspiel tradition, as it is Weber’s only through-composed opera, that is, without the interruption of spoken dialogue which is a characteristic of earlier German language operas such as Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte, Beethoven’s Fidelio, and Weber’s own Der Freischütz. Euryanthe is based on a 13th-century French romance L’Histoire du très-noble et chevalereux prince Gérard, comte de Nevers et la très-virtueuse et très chaste princesse Euriant de Savoye, sa mye. (please pardon my French!)

I will be using clips from the only commercially available DVD of Euryanthe, a performance recorded in 2002 at the Teatro Lirico di Cagliari, Italy. As you will see, it is a very traditional production, with medieval costumes and sets, and the action actually follows the plot (for a change!). This performance is available on YouTube, but only without subtitles, so I have specially recorded clips from my own DVD, so you can follow the sung text.

5 main roles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Voice type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King Louis VI of France</td>
<td>bass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euryanthe of Savoy</td>
<td>soprano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eglantine von Puiset</td>
<td>soprano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolar, Count of Nevers</td>
<td>tenor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lysiart, Count of Forest</td>
<td>baritone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudolf, a knight</td>
<td>tenor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bertha, a country girl</td>
<td>soprano</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Ladies, knights, soldiers, hunters, pages, heralds, peasants*

Synopsis

**Time:** 1110  
**Place:** Prémery and Nevers, France

**Act 1**

**Scene 1**

In a hall of the palace of King Louis VI of France in Prémery, the chorus of ladies, nobles and knights sings of the joys of peace after victory and of love. After a solemn dance, the King asks Adolar, the count of Nevers, why he is sad. Adolar’s thoughts are with his betrothed, Euryanthe, who is in Nevers. The King offers to send for her and invites Adolar to sing her praises. Adolar obliges with a romance about their pledging of love by the Loire ‘Under the blossoming almond trees’. He is crowned with a garland and the chorus echoes his praise of Euryanthe’s
fidelity – all but Lysiart, who now casts doubt on women’s faithfulness. Adolar is taunted into challenging Lysiart to a duel, but Lysiart instead issues a public challenge to a trial of Euryanthe’s constancy and asserts that he can win her should he care to try. In defiance of the King’s advice, Adolar wagers his lands and fortune on Euryanthe’s faithfulness and demands that Lysiart produce some proof of his victory should he win one.

We will hear Adolar’s Romance ‘Under the blossoming almond trees’ followed by the chorus praising Euryanthe’s faithfulness, Lysiart’s taunting of Adolar and his acceptance of the wager through to the end of this scene. 13m 04s

Scene 2 is set in Euryanthe’s castle at Nevers. She is alone, finding only sadness in the peaceful sound of bells in the valley, as she is missing her beloved Adolar. Eglantine von Puiset enters. Euryanthe has befriended Eglantine, whose family had been outlawed. But Eglantine is also in love with Adolar, and under the pretence of friendship for her benefactor, she secretly determines to bring about Euryanthe’s downfall and break her attachment to Adolar. Euryanthe tells Eglantine how Adolar abducted her from a convent and having taken her to Nevers has now gone off to war. Eglantine tries to discover Euryanthe’s mysterious secret, as she has seen Euryanthe acting strangely at night. Eglantine protests that banishment would be preferable to Euryanthe’s lack of trust. Euryanthe confides the secret which only she and Adolar know about. Adolar’s sister Emma had lost her lover Udo in battle and had killed herself by drinking poison from a ring (the ‘ghost’ music from the overture is heard). Her soul can find no rest until the ring, which is lying in her tomb, should be moistened with the tears of an innocent maiden in extreme despair. Euryanthe, who has been praying each night at Emma's tomb, is now horrified at having betrayed the secret which she had promised Adolar to keep, but is calmed by Eglantine’s false assurances of good faith.

We will hear Scene 2 up to this point, starting with Euryanthe’s Cavatina where she sings sadly of her love for Adolar, then the conversation between Eglantine and Euryanthe which ends up with Euryanthe revealing the secret about Adolar’s sister Emma. Play Act 1 Scene 2 15m 05s

When Euryanthe leaves, Eglantine gives vent to her jealous hatred; she plans to search Emma’s tomb to find the ring which will act as proof to Adolar of Euryanthe’s betrayal. She is interrupted by the sounds of Lysiart’s trumpets as his retinue approaches. Bertha (a country girl), Rudolf (a knight) and the countryfolk lead in Lysiart and his knights. Lysiart has been asked by the King to accompany Euryanthe to Prémery, leaving the following day. In the Finale to Act 1, the knights praise Euryanthe, who welcomes them and begs Lysiart to stay in her castle; he is filled with love for her, while Euryant he looks forward to seeing Adolar again and Eglantine dreams of getting her revenge by bringing about Euryanthe’s downfall, all this accompanied by the countryfolk singing a joyful chorus.

Act 2

Scene 1 takes place in the garden of the Castle of Nevers during a stormy night. Lysiart is alone and, feeling guilty, considers abandoning his evil plan to win Euryanthe, but he cannot bear to give her up to his rival Adolar, whom he once more resolves to destroy. Eglantine comes out of Emma’s tomb, where she has just stolen the ring from the corpse’s hand. Lysiart, taking her by surprise, suggests they join in a hellish pact of vengeance. He offers his help, his hand in marriage and the possession of Adolar’s lands in return for an alliance. They pledge their union and invoke the dark powers of the night to swear vengeance.

In Scene 2, we are in the King’s Hall at the Royal Castle in Prémery, which is illuminated for a feast. Adolar reveals his anxiety while still longing for his bride, who then arrives. They reaffirm their love. The King and his nobles enter and welcome Euryanthe. But then Lysiart steps forward and claims Adolar’s estates, producing Emma’s ring as a token of Euryanthe’s love for him. Adolar is incredulous, but when Lysiart reveals he knows the secret of Emma, Euryanthe has to admit that she broke her oath of silence. The court is stunned at what they take to be a
complete betrayal of Adolar, and Lysiart is awarded Adolar’s estates under the terms of the wager. Adolar departs to wander far away, where nobody knows him, taking the anguished Euryanthe with him.

Act 3

Scene 1 is set in a rocky gorge. Adolar appears, dressed in black armour, followed by the half-fainting Euryanthe. He intends to kill her and then kill himself. She begs for a kindly word from him before he kills her, but he reproaches her for her betrayal and the mockery she has made of their love, ignoring her protestations of innocence and faithfulness. Suddenly, she sees a huge serpent wriggling towards them and begs him to flee while she sacrifices herself by acting as a decoy. But Adolar attacks the serpent and Euryanthe invokes heaven’s aid to defend him. Adolar is duly victorious and in recompense for her self-sacrifice decides not to kill her, but instead to abandon her to Heaven’s protection.

Alone, she prays for death and hopes that if Adolar ever returns and finds her grave, he will know that she has been true to him. To the sound of horns, huntsmen enter, praising the fresh morning and the joys of the chase. The King sees the dead serpent and an unknown woman. They are all astonished when they recognise Euryanthe. She asks only for death and when the King asks her to expiate her guilt, she assures him that she has none. He is delighted and when he learns of Eglantine’s part in the plot, he promises full restitution. Euryanthe sings of her hope of seeing Adolar again. She collapses and the huntsmen bear her away.

Scene 2 takes place in an open space in front of the Castle of Nevers. In the foreground is Bertha’s vine-covered cottage, which the peasants are decorating with garlands while they and Bertha sing a May Song. After a peasants’ dance, Adolar enters with his visor down. He is very unhappy and wishes that his home may be his tomb. The chorus of peasants recognise him and assure him of Euryanthe’s faithfulness. Bertha tells Adolar how Lysiart is right now enthroning the treacherous Eglantine in Adolar’s Castle. He is stunned. The peasants implore Adolar to overthrow the traitors and they swear their loyal support.

A bridal march heralds the arrival of Lysiart and the pale Eglantine, who is troubled by visions of Emma’s ghost, her terror turning to near madness. Finally, the penny drops for Adolar and he intervenes in the wedding procession. Lysiart orders the stranger to be thrown into the tower, but when Adolar lifts his visor and is recognised, Lysiart’s vassals greet Adolar with joy. Lysiart is left fuming, cursing his own men. The vassals now threaten Lysiart, and Adolar challenges Lysiart to a duel (for a second time). But the King intervenes and commands them both to put down their swords. He tells Adolar that Euryanthe’s heart is broken. Eglantine bursts out into a rage of triumph over Euryanthe. Eglantine then tells Adolar that Euryanthe was innocent all along and that she, herself, had stolen Emma’s ring and given it to Lysiart, which provokes Lysiart to stab her to death. The King orders Lysiart to be killed but Adolar tries to intercede on his behalf, claiming that he himself is Euryanthe’s murderer. He sinks down in despair as Eglantine’s body is borne away and Lysiart is led off. But then, the huntsmen are heard offstage, rejoicing that Euryanthe has regained consciousness, they bring her in and the lovers are reunited. Adolar declares that since Euryanthe’s innocent tears have been shed on the ring, Emma’s troubled ghost may now find rest and she is now eternally united with Udo. All ends happily with a joyful chorus celebrating Adolar and Euryanthe, who have vanquished night and death, and asking Heaven to protect their union.

We will now hear most of this final scene, from where Bertha and the peasants sing their May song right through to the happy ending of the opera. This clip lasts 21 minutes.