

Mazeppa premiered 1884

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Libretto from the epic poem *Poltava* by Pushkin

Running time: 2 hours 54 minutes

Kirov Opera and Ballet at the Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg in 1996

Mazeppa, Cossack ruler of Ukraine	<i>Nikolai Putilin</i>	Baritone
Kochubei, wealthy Ukrainian landowner	<i>Sergei Aleksashkin</i>	Bass
Lyubov, his wife	<i>Larissa Diadkova</i>	Mezzo
Mariya, their daughter	<i>Irina Loskutova</i>	Soprano
Andrei, a young Cossack	<i>Viktor Lutsiuk</i>	Tenor
Orlik, Mazeppa's henchman	<i>Viacheslav Luhanin</i>	Bass
Iskra, Kochubei's friend	<i>Vladimir Zhivopistsev</i>	Tenor
Stage Producer	<i>Irina Molostova</i>	
Conductor	<i>Valery Gergiev</i>	



Synopsis

ACT 1 SCENE 1: Kochubei's garden overlooking the River Dnieper.

Kochubei's daughter Mariya is in love with Mazeppa, and she gently rejects Andrei's advances. Meanwhile Kochubei is entertaining Mazeppa, who asks for Mariya's hand. Kochubei is horrified by the difference in age, but Mazeppa pleads his love, and a conviction that Mariya shares his feelings. A quarrel grows, and Mariya agonises over the choice she will have to make between her parents and her beloved. When Mazeppa finally demands that she should choose, Mariya departs with him in terrible agitation.

ACT 1 SCENE 2: A room in Kochubei's house. Mariya's mother Lyubov exhorts her husband to take direct action against Mazeppa, but Kochubei has a different plan. He knows that Mazeppa wants to further the cause of Ukrainian independence by joining forces with the Swedish king

against Tsar Peter the Great. Kochubei will now make sure that the tsar is warned. Despite all the risks, Andrei begs to be sent as messenger. All express hatred for Mazeppa.

ACT 2 SCENE 1: A dungeon beneath Mazeppa's castle, where Kochubei is chained to the wall. The tsar hasn't believed his accusations, so Kochubei and his friend Iskra have been delivered into Mazeppa's hands for execution. The ruler's henchman Orlik enters to interrogate him further, as he hasn't disclosed where his secret treasure is. Kochubei bitterly tells Orlik to ask Mariya who will show him everything. Orlik summons the torturer nevertheless.

INTERVAL

ACT 2 SCENE 2: Mazeppa's castle at night. Mazeppa compares the calm outside with his internal turmoil. Kochubei must die, but how will Mariya react when she finds out what has happened? Orlik tells him that Kochubei will not give in, so Mazeppa confirms the execution.

Mariya appears and reproaches him for being so preoccupied. Pressed by her, he reveals his plans for a free Ukraine, saying that he could soon occupy a throne. Mariya is excited by the prospect, and vows that she will die with him if necessary. He then asks how she would act if she had to choose between her husband and father. Ignorant of her father's plight she chooses Mazeppa, who leaves deeply troubled.

Mariya's mother Lyubov slips in quietly. Realising that her daughter has no idea what's happened, she starts to disclose her own husband's predicament. As Mariya realises the full implications, a march is heard offstage as the execution is already being prepared. The two women rush out to try to prevent it.

ACT 2 SCENE 3: The place of execution. A crowd has gathered, and a drunken Cossack is reproofed for untimely merriment. The execution procession enters. Kochubei and Iskra kneel to pray before mounting the scaffold. The people crowd round, and the axes fall as Mariya and Lyubov rush in.

ACT 3: A symphonic tableau depicts the Battle of Poltava (the defeat of Swedish and Ukrainian forces by Peter the Great). Andrei enters the ruined garden of Kochubei's house. He had been searching for Mazeppa. Now he painfully recognises where he is. Mazeppa and Orlik enter as fugitives. When Andrei confronts Mazeppa, he's fatally wounded. Mariya – now demented – emerges into the moonlight, and a mad scene ensues. Orlik finally persuades Mazeppa to leave without her. When Mariya sees the dying Andrei, she thinks that he is a child. Cradling his head in her lap, she sings him to sleep, staring blankly in front of her.



Mazeppa: Operatic Context

This plot is based on the life of the Cossack rebel Ivan Stepanovich Mazeppa, who was born on his family estate in north Ukraine around 1640. After proving himself an able soldier in the tsar's Cossack army, he was appointed chief ruler of Ukraine in 1687 by Peter the Great. In 1708 however he backed a Swedish invasion against Peter. When the tsar defeated the Swedish army at Poltava, Mazeppa fled in disgrace. He died on the Turkish border later the same year.

Over time Mazeppa's story achieved increasing romantic significance. One colourful addition to this saga, was the tale that – after his affair with a Polish countess had been discovered – he was tied naked to the back of a wild horse, which was let loose on the steppes. For the Romantics this image came to symbolise the artist as a tortured outcast, which inspired the following ...

- Victor Hugo: *Mazeppa*, poem
- Byron: *Mazeppa*, narrative poem
- Liszt: *Mazeppa*, symphonic poem inspired by Hugo.
- Delacroix: *Mazeppa on the Dying Horse*, inspired by Byron



Tchaikovsky also depicts this wild ride in the overture of his opera. Nationalist and anti-tsarist readings of the story came to suggest that his actions against Peter were motivated by a desire to liberate his Ukrainian homeland, rather than by a thirst for personal power.

In *Poltava*, Pushkin – possibly making a sycophantic gesture towards Tsar Nicholas I – portrays Mazeppa as a traitor to the tsar, and towards his own people. He focuses on the brief love affair between the elderly Mazeppa and his young goddaughter Mariya, a true story which had only been publicised seven years before.

Tchaikovsky made slow progress with the score, and its orchestration. The Imperial Theatres in Moscow and St Petersburg competed to stage it. Eventually the first St Petersburg performance was just three days after the Moscow première. Despite a warm initial reception, it failed to gain a firm place in the international repertoire.

Although uneven and unashamedly melodramatic, *Mazeppa* is one of Tchaikovsky's best operas. As in the Pushkin-based *Eugene Onegin*, its finest passages are those which focus on

the predicaments and feelings of one or two characters. Mariya and Mazeppa are seen as victims of fate. As in *Onegin*, it is the young tragic heroine who most engaged Tchaikovsky's creative sympathies, while Mazeppa fades in interest. Andrei and Mariya receive what one critic describes as 'two of the strangest love duets in all opera, one at cross purposes and one delusional'.

Selected Tchaikovsky Operas

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

Valery Gergiev: Conductor

Norman Lebrecht pertinently in *Slippedisc* today ...

Valery Gergiev turns 70 on 2 May 2023 and Vladimir Putin never forgets a birthday.

The pair have been close since 1992 when KGB man Putin was deputy mayor of St Petersburg and Gergiev, penniless head of the Mariinsky Theatre, was in desperate need of a friend in power.

The alliance has worked well. Putin knows that Gergiev will never refuse a request, whether it's to rescue the Tchaikovsky Competition or celebrate his military adventures in Chechnya, Syria and Ukraine. Gergiev has become richer than oligarchs and can do whatever he likes with the cream of Russia's musical resources now that he is also in control of the Bolshoi. No musician has ever wielded such clout in any of the Russian empires.

His only drawback is the war. Gergiev has lost his international career, probably for decades if not forever. He used to relish acclaim in London, Munich, Rotterdam, Carnegie Hall and the Musikverein. All gone. He used to enjoy genuine friendships abroad. No more.

His 70th birthday will be toasted in Russia, ignored elsewhere.

As one who was counted among his friends for twenty years, I regret his isolation and feel a twinge of human pity for a complex man who has done much human good behind the scenes. But Gergiev has made his choices and, at 70, he must now live with the consequences.

Happy birthday, Valery. Whatever you do today, don't forget to answer the phone.