



PIQUE DAME (THE QUEEN OF SPADES)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

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Opera in 3 acts

Sung in Russian

Libretto by Modest Tchaikovsky, after a short story by Alexander Pushkin

Dutch National Opera, Amsterdam

Recorded in 2016

Running Time: 03:01:15h

Running Time by Act: Part 1 (Acts 1 & 2): 00:00:00 – 01:43:29 | Optional Intermission (curtains & applause): 01:43:30 - 01:44:43 | Part 2 (Act 3): 01:44:43 – 02:53:30 | Curtains and Credits: 02:53:31 – 03:01:15

CREATIVE TEAM

Conductor

Mariss Jansons

Stage Director

Stefan Herheim

Decor and costumes

Philipp Fürhofer

Dramaturgy

Alexander Meier-Dörzenbach

Lighting

Bernd Purkrabek

Chorus Masters

Ching-Lien Wu, Caro Kindt

Orchestra

Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Chorus

Chorus of Dutch National Opera

ARTISTIC TEAM

Herman Misha

Didyk

Count Tomsky/Plutus

Alexey Markov

Prince Yeletsky

Vladimir Stoyanov

Chekalinsky

Andrei Popov

Surin

Andrii Goniukov

Chaplitsky

Mikhail Makarov

Narumov

Anatoli Sivko

The Countess

Larissa Diadkova

Liza

Svetlana Aksenova

Polina/Daphnis

Anna Goryachova

PRESENTATION

As one of the highlights of the Holland Festival, renowned director Stefan Herheim staged Tchaikovsky's much-loved opera about a young man who, for the prospect of earthly wealth, gambles away his chance for love and happiness.

The protagonist Hermann stakes everything on gambling, in the belief that there has to be a secret formula that will prevent him from losing at cards. He wants to draw the secret from his girlfriend Lisa's grandmother, the old Countess: How is it that she is such a successful gambler? Herman confronts her and forces her to reveal her secret, menacing her with a revolver. The Countess dies from the shock. It is her ghost that later appears before the young officer and gives away the fatal sequence of cards: three, seven, ace. Having lost everything, Hermann commits suicide, thus becoming the third victim of his own compulsive gambling behavior – after the old Countess, who was supposed to know the secret, and Lisa, who was in love with him. The score of *Pique Dame* was written by Tchaikovsky within only 44 days, in a period of turmoil about himself and his homosexuality. Herheim, whose stagings are famous for their multi-layered levels of interpretation, attempts to reflect on the composer's hidden love for men.

Former Music Director Mariss Jansons returns to Amsterdam to conduct *Pique Dame* at the Dutch National Opera with "his" Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. He encounters a noteworthy cast, including star tenor Misha Didyk, a sought after interpreter of the Russian repertoire, who is making his Amsterdam debut in the role of Herman. The critics agree about the production's quality: "A *Pique Dame* of extraordinary musical and scenic power" (*Avant-Scène Opéra*), which it is "absolutely worth seeing!" (*Die Welt*).

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

Scene 1

During the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–96), children are at play in St. Petersburg's Summer Garden pretending to be soldiers. Two officers — Tsurin 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 bets, being frugal and methodical. Herman appears with Tomsy, who remarks that his friend hardly seems 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, Liza, 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 Liza 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 as the Muskovite Venus, due to her beauty, she succeeded at gambling in her youth by trading amorous favors for the winning formula of Count St. Germain in Paris. Tomsy says only two men, her husband and, later on, her young lover, ever learned her secret, because she was warned by an apparition to beware a "third suitor" who would try to force it from her. Musing on the winning sequence of three cards, the others lightly suggest that such a combination would solve Herman's problems. Threatened by approaching thunder, all leave except Herman, who vows to learn the Countess' secret.

Scene 2

At home, Liza plays the spinet 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, Liza 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 Liza to cheer up; Liza 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, Liza 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, Liza 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, Liza asks Herman to leave but is betrayed by her feelings and falls into his embrace.

ACT II

Scene 1

Not long afterward, at a masked ball, Herman's comrades comment on his obsession with the secret of the winning cards. Yeletsky passes with Liza, noting her sadness and reassuring her of his love. Herman receives a note from Liza, asking him to meet her later. Tsurin 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 tableau of shepherdesses. Liza slips Herman the key to her grandmother's room, 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' secret, he leaves. The guests' attention turns to the imminent arrival of Catherine the Great, for which a polonaise by O. Kozlovsky is played and sung in greeting.

Scene 2

Herman slips into the Countess' room and looks in fascination at the portrait of Muskovite Venus and 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 Liza's room and hears the Countess' retinue coming, so he conceals himself as the old lady approaches. The Countess deplors the manners of the day and reminisces about the better times of her youth, when she sang in Versailles. As she dozes off, 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. Liza 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 III

Scene 1

In his room at the barracks, as the winter wind howls, Herman reads a letter from Liza, who wants him to meet her at midnight by the river bank. He imagines he hears the chorus chanting at the old Countess' 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 Liza. Dazed, Herman repeats the three cards — three, seven, ace.

Scene 2

By the Winter Canal, Liza 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 Liza, he rushes away. Realizing that all is lost, she commits suicide.

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." Tomsy 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 Tomsy 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' ghost laughing at her vengeance, Herman takes his own life and asks Yeletsky's and Liza's forgiveness. The others pray for his tormented soul.