

The Queen of Spades

A Guide for Educators



The Met
ropolitan
Opera

Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM *THE QUEEN OF SPADES*

ROMANTIC LOVE: IN ALL OF OPERA, THERE IS NO MORE POWERFUL FORCE THAN THIS MANIFESTLY human emotion. Indeed, operatic love is typically exaggerated and outsized, inspiring eternal melodies of bombastic sweep, driving characters' behavior, and leading them inexorably to their histrionic ends (whether comic or tragic). In grand opera, in other words, love is grand. But in Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's sardonic work *The Queen of Spades*, love is something much more perverse and poisonous. The opera portrays a young man's obsessive fixation on discovering a secret combination of cards that will enable him to win any hand at gambling. Although initially compelled by his hope of meriting the woman he loves, he soon begins to neglect not only his love but also his responsibilities and honor, with disastrous results. In *The Queen of Spades*, love is not grand but fragile, incapable of withstanding poverty or temptation. Unlike in other operatic stories, however, this temptation comes from no demonic Mephistopheles ... it comes from within the hero himself.

It was surely no accident that Tchaikovsky—that tortured creator of semi-autobiographical works rife with brooding melancholy—should have found such fertile ground in Alexander Pushkin's story of romantic failure. In the opera, just as in so many of Tchaikovsky's symphonic works, the action grinds inevitably towards a fateful end. Indeed, the only characters who escape this dire pessimism and find romantic success live inside the opera's pastoral cantata, a neoclassical play-within-a-play in the second act. Outside of this world of perversely stylized balance, Tchaikovsky's characters spin out their fates in music of nervous syncopation and aching chromaticism. Whether because of personal weakness, supernatural revenge, or merely the luck of the draw, Tchaikovsky's melodies seem to tell us, love cannot save us from a disastrous end.

This guide is intended to help your students appreciate *The Queen of Spades* and Tchaikovsky's masterful depiction of its characters' mental states through music. Students will also discuss the work's blurring of the border between reality and the supernatural. The resources on the following pages are designed to provide context, deepen background knowledge, and enrich the overall experience of this final dress rehearsal, equipping students to respond to the opera with confidence, familiarity, and joy.

Access Opera: Open Rehearsals for Students
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Major sponsorship is provided by

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THE WORK:

THE QUEEN OF SPADES

An opera in three acts, sung in Russian
Music by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Libretto by Modest and Pyotr
Tchaikovsky
Adapted from a novella by Alexander
Pushkin
First performed December 19, 1890,
at the Mariinsky Theatre, St.
Petersburg, Russia

PRODUCTION

Vasily Petrenko, Conductor
Elijah Moshinsky, Production
Mark Thompson, Set and Costume
Designer
Paul Pyant, Lighting Designer
John Meehan, Choreographer

STARRING

Lise Davidsen
LISA

Elena Maximova
PAULINE

Larissa Diadkova
THE COUNTESS

Aleksandrs Antonenko
HERMANN

Igor Golovatenko
YELETSKY

Aleksey Markov
TOMSKY

Production a gift of the Lila Acheson
and DeWitt Wallace Fund, established
by the founders of The Reader's Digest
Association, Inc.

ABOUT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE



Johnathan Tichler/
Metropolitan Opera

The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world.

The Metropolitan Opera was founded in 1883, with its first opera house built on Broadway and 39th Street by a group of wealthy businessmen who wanted their own theater. In the company's early years, the management changed course several times, first performing everything in Italian (even *Carmen* and *Lohengrin*), then everything in German (even *Aida* and *Faust*), before finally settling into a policy of performing most works in their original language.

Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the opera house on 39th Street did not have adequate stage facilities. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September of 1966, was equipped with the finest technical facilities of the day.

Each season the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York. More than 800,000 people attend the performances in the opera house during the season, and millions more experience the Met through new media distribution initiatives and state-of-the-art technology.

This guide includes several sections with a variety of background material on Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*.

- **The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *The Queen of Spades***
- **A Timeline:** The historical context of the opera's story and composition
- **A Closer Look:** A brief article highlighting an important aspect of Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*
- **Guided Listening:** A series of musical excerpts with questions and a roadmap to possible student responses
- **Student Critique:** A performance activity highlighting specific aspects of this production, and topics for a wrap-up discussion following students' attendance
- **Further Resources:** Recommendations for additional study, both online and in print
- **Glossary:** Common musical terms found in this guide and in the concert hall

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *The Queen of Spades*, whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera or the performing arts. It includes activities for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds and seeks to encourage them to think about opera—and the performing arts as a whole—as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression.

In particular, this guide will offer in-depth introductions to:

- The work's literary basis and the status of Pushkin in Russian literature
- The characteristics of Tchaikovsky's musical style
- Creative choices made by the artists of the Metropolitan Opera for this production
- The opera as a unified work of art, involving the efforts of composer, librettist, and Met artists



Marty Sohl/
Metropolitan Opera

SUMMARY

The impoverished officer Hermann loves Lisa from afar, but his beloved is jealously guarded by her aristocratic grandmother, the Countess. Then Hermann overhears a fanciful story about a gambling secret known only to the Countess: an unbeatable combination of cards. Sensing that his fate will be indelibly linked with Lisa, her grandmother, and these “three cards,” Hermann sets about discovering the Countess’s secret. Soon, opportunity knocks, and Hermann seizes his chances—only to find himself descending into a nightmare of fixation and greed where he will be forced to reckon with the fragility of love, hope, and luck.

Marty Sohl/Metropolitan
Opera



THE SOURCE: NOVELLA *PIKOVAYA DAMA* (*THE QUEEN OF SPADES*) BY ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

The stature of Alexander Pushkin in Russian literature is matched only by Shakespeare in the English canon: It is such that not only is he revered as the perfect illustrator of Russian consciousness and temperament, but he also is the subject of an entire museum in St. Petersburg. His writings span novels, poetry, verse dramas, and other narratives on topics ranging from historical dramas to fairy stories, mock-epics, political reflections, romances, contemporary dramas, and much more. Across these protean styles, Pushkin lavished a musical approach to language and a virtuosic mastery of form. As the “inexhaustible poetic wellspring for Russian opera,” in the words of one historian, Pushkin has provided inspiration for composers as varied as Glinka and Stravinsky.

Pushkin’s *The Queen of Spades* is a concise novella, once described by Fyodor Dostoyevsky as a work of “cold fury.” When Modest Tchaikovsky (the composer’s brother and an accomplished playwright) expanded the work into a libretto, he introduced new dialogue and scenes—including a large-scale play-within-a-play in the second act—that have earned him the disapprobation of Pushkin purists ever since. He also transformed Lisa, originally an impoverished ward, into the Countess’s aristocratic granddaughter, and made Hermann’s love for her real, rather than merely feigned. Finally, he shifted the setting to the time of Catherine the Great, placing this revered Golden Age of Russia against the ethical murkiness and fallibility of the story’s characters.



A Russian poster advertising a 1916 film based on Pushkin’s novella

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

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

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

ACT II

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

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

ACT III

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

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

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

VOICE TYPE

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified in six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

SOPRANO

the highest-pitched type of human voice, normally possessed only by women and boys

MEZZO-SOPRANO

the female voice whose range lies between the soprano and the contralto (Italian "mezzo"=middle, medium)

CONTRALTO

the lowest female voice, also called an alto

TENOR

the highest naturally occurring voice type in adult males

BARITONE

the male voice lying below the tenor and above the bass

BASS

the lowest male voice

WHO'S WHO IN *THE QUEEN OF SPADES*

Character		Pronunciation	Voice type	The Lowdown
Hermann (Gherman in Russian)	An impoverished officer	GEHR-mahn	tenor	Hermann pines after Lisa, a woman above his station. When he hears a tall tale about a gambling secret, he cannot turn away from the dream of winning riches that will make him worthy of Lisa.
Lisa	An elegant young lady	LEE-zah	soprano	Lisa impetuously embraces romantic love over the wishes of her grandmother.
The Countess	Lisa's grandmother		mezzo-soprano	Greatly desired in her youth, when she was known as the "Queen of Spades," the aged countess now broods over her ruined beauty and hawkishly guards her granddaughter Lisa.
Prince Yeletsky	An aristocrat	yeh-LET-skee	baritone	Yeletsky is honorable and devoted to Lisa, although he suspects that her heart is held by another.
Tomsky	A fellow officer	TOHM-skee	baritone	Tomsky's dashing ballad about the Countess's youthful gambling sets Hermann on a fateful path.

— **1731** With a performance on December 11 of *Calandro* by Giovanni Ristori, Russian audiences are first exposed to Italian opera. Before this time, there has been no Russian operatic tradition.

— **1799** Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin is born in Moscow, Russia, to an old aristocratic family. On his mother's side, he is a descendant of Abram Hannibal, who was abducted from his African family, eventually adopted by Peter the Great, and elevated as a member of the imperial court. Many scholars consider Pushkin to be Russia's greatest poet and the founder of modern Russian literature.

— **1834** Pushkin publishes the novella *Pikovaya dama* (*The Queen of Spades*), a story exploring love, greed, and the supernatural. The central character's obsession with finding an unbeatable combination of cards and his implied search for forbidden truths later inspires comparison to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

— **1836** Mikhail Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar* premieres at the Bolshoi Theater in St. Petersburg. The work is hailed as the first truly Russian opera, featuring not only a libretto in the Russian language and a story based on the folk hero Ivan Susanin but also the incorporation of folk melodies and other distinctively Russian musical elements.

After witnessing his wife accept the flirtatious behavior of their acquaintance George d'Anthès, Pushkin receives a letter informing him that he has been elected to "The Most Serene Order of Cuckolds." Pushkin challenges d'Anthès to a duel and is mortally wounded. He dies two days later.

— **1840** Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky is born on May 7 near Votkinsk, in rural north-eastern Russia, to a large middle-class family. Tchaikovsky's parents encourage his early musical talent by hiring a tutor and purchasing an orchestrion, a type of organ, for their family home. Tchaikovsky is also a precocious student of poetry and writes a number of literary works at a young age.



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, 1874

- **1852** Tchaikovsky is sent to St. Petersburg to attend the School of Jurisprudence with the aim of later pursuing a career in law. While there, he continues his musical education privately, attending concerts, performing in choirs, and writing his first musical compositions.
- **1859** Upon his graduation from the School of Jurisprudence, Tchaikovsky begins working as a clerk at the Ministry of Justice. He is an avid participant in St. Petersburg's rich cultural life, attending performances of theater, ballet, opera, and amateur theatrical organizations.
- **1862** Tchaikovsky matriculates at the newly established St. Petersburg Conservatory, the first academic musical institution in Russia, studying composition, piano, flute, organ, and music theory. Herman Laroche, one of his classmates at the conservatory and one of his earliest biographers, later claims he told Tchaikovsky, "You are the greatest musical talent in present-day Russia ... I see in you the greatest, or, better said, the sole hope, of our musical future."
- **1885** Ivan Aleksandrovich Vsevolozhskiy, the Director of Russian Imperial Theaters and a great admirer of Pushkin's work, invites a series of composers and librettists to work on an opera based on *The Queen of Spades*. When these efforts come to naught, he turns in 1887 to Modest Tchaikovsky, a well-known playwright and Pyotr's brother. When two composers pass on the project, Modest's program of influence prevails and the libretto is offered to Tchaikovsky.
- **1890** Shortly after the premiere of his ballet *The Sleeping Beauty*, Tchaikovsky travels to Florence, Italy, where he composes *The Queen of Spades* with remarkable speed, completing the full opera in only 44 days. His letters to his brother communicate his pleasure: "Either I am horribly mistaken, Modya, or the opera is a masterpiece," he writes in mid-winter. By June, Tchaikovsky completes the orchestration and submits it to the theater and to his publisher. It premieres on December 19.
- **1893** Not long after conducting the premiere of his sixth symphony, Tchaikovsky falls ill. Four days later, despite extensive efforts by his doctors, he dies, on November 6. The cause is still under debate, with hypotheses ranging from cholera contracted from drinking unboiled water (according to his brother) to colorful and preposterous conjectures.

ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

Although his writing is among the best known in Russian literature, Alexander Pushkin remains a somewhat enigmatic historical figure. Born in 1799, he prided himself on his family's noble and supposedly exotic lineage. His father's family could be traced back to 12th-century aristocracy, while his mother was a descendant of Abram Hannibal, who had been an African slave brought to Russia by Peter the Great. Pushkin relished his unique ancestry and sometimes used it to excuse his erratic behavior, which included a dissipated lifestyle long after it was a socially excusable aspect of youth, protracted literary feuds, and his impolitic antagonism to the Russian court.

After graduating from the prestigious Imperial Lyceum at 16, Pushkin was given a post in the foreign office in St. Petersburg. His narrative poem *Ruslan and Ludmila*, which he completed in 1820, was attacked by critics for flouting literary convention but made him well known in cultural circles. Shortly afterwards, Pushkin's involvement in political movements that took aim at the tsarist regime and the publication of similarly political poetry earned him a transfer to a remote southern province.

In 1826, Pushkin was pardoned by the new tsar, Nicholas I, and allowed to return to Moscow. After several years of writing and leading a frenzied social life, he married Natalya Goncharova, a famous Moscow beauty. They settled in St. Petersburg, but neither was happy in the marriage. Pushkin continued to antagonize and provoke those within his social set, and in 1837 he was shot and killed in a duel defending his wife's honor.



An 1827 portrait of Alexander Pushkin by Orest Kiprensky

The Guided Listening Activities are designed to introduce students to a selection of memorable moments from the opera. They include information on what is happening dramatically, a description of the musical style, and a roadmap of musical features to listen for. Guided Listening Activities can be used by students and teachers of varying levels of musical experience.

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, teachers will need access to a recording of *Queen of Spades* and a libretto. Time stamps in the following activity correspond to the audio clips available at metopera.org/education.

"MNE STRASHNO!"

At the opening of the opera, a garden in St. Petersburg is filled with crowds of children, nurses, and soldiers enjoying the spring weather. But not everyone is joyful: Hermann has become moody and introspective, and he confesses to his fellow officer Tomsy that he is in love with a woman far above his station. When Prince Yeletsky announces his engagement, Hermann can only respond with envy. Yeletsky's fiancée, Lisa, enters with her grandmother, and Hermann realizes with horror that she is the beauty he has loved from afar. In this quintet, the five characters take turns expressing the sudden feelings of dread brought on by this strange circumstance.

What to listen for:

- The frequent repetitions of the text "Mne strashno" ("I'm afraid")
- Tchaikovsky's wavering half-step motive
- The alternation between orchestral accompaniment and an *a cappella* (i.e., voices only) style

- (00:00) Several events have just taken place at once. As Lisa and her grandmother enter, Yeletsky has pointed her out as his fiancée. Hermann has recognized the woman he loves as more unavailable than ever, and his friend Tomsy has also learned the identity of the woman Hermann has been obsessed with. And both Lisa and the Countess have recognized Hermann as the young man who often watches them from afar. Each of them immediately has the same reaction: fear. "Mne strashno" ("I'm afraid"), they each sing, entering in a densely staggered texture. The low strings intone an ominous pedal point underneath the voices. Pay attention to a recognizable motive: the chromatic oscillation as the characters sing "mne strashno" (G#-A-G# in its first statement). This wavering half-step motive will return several times over the quintet.
- (00:25) As the voices begin to move to a new key area, the orchestral accompaniment suddenly drops out and the voices proceed alone, in a polyphonic style. Each vocal line has its own text, and there is little obvious imitation between the voices. This contributes to the dense sound of the quintet. The orchestra enters briefly with an accented rising scale before leaving the voices once again. This intermittent feature of the orchestral accompaniment contributes to the unstable feeling of the music.
- (00:45) With another statement of "Mne strashno," Lisa leads a chromatic shift to a new key area. She increases the dramatic tension of the music while also moving into a higher part of her range.
- (01:18) Following the previous extended *a cappella* section, the low orchestral pedal returns as the characters trade a few final statements of the "Mne strashno" motive.
- (01:19) The quintet closes as the orchestra enters with a considerably fuller texture, marked by quiet repeated chords in the strings and a plaintive melody in the oboe. Tomsy escapes the fearful reverie first and offers his congratulations to the Countess on her granddaughter's favorable connection with Yeletsky. As the Countess questions him on Hermann's identity, the accompaniment underscores her disturbed frame of mind.
- (02:00) The pulsating violins suddenly give way to a lush and yearning melody, as Yeletsky calls on the splendor of spring and their surrounding friends to bless his happy union with Lisa. A cloud of harp arpeggios creates an almost mystical beauty to his words. But the minor mode and chromaticism of his melody complicate his simple desires.
- (02:35) A concluding arpeggio in the cellos paves the way for Hermann's parting curse. Against ominous tremolos in the strings, Hermann issues a vicious response: "Be happy while you can, for God can turn smiles into tears!"

"YA VAS LYUBLYU"

At the start of Act II, a large company has gathered at a lavish ball. When the guests move outside for a display of fireworks, Prince Yeletsky approaches Lisa. He has noticed her recent unhappiness and begs her to confide in him. He follows with this aria, in which he confesses his love for her. It is a popular work, frequently performed outside of the opera house in recitals. The text, an elegant ode to unfulfilled longing, is by Tchaikovsky himself.

What to listen for:

- The aria's ABA' form
- The stately and balanced quality of the Prince's melodies
- Tchaikovsky's instrumental counterpoint

- (00:00) The prince enters before the orchestral accompaniment with a stately and slow melody. Tchaikovsky marks his music "con grandezza," indicating that it should be performed with grandeur. Yeletsky's music is remarkably balanced: His first phrase can be divided into two even sections of two bars each, with the second section mirroring the melodic shape of the first. This structural neatness stands in contrast to the deep romanticism of the text, in which Yeletsky exclaims, "I love you beyond all measure; I could not live another day without you." At (00:26), the music proceeds with an answering phrase, also arranged as two even sections of two bars each. While the first phrase gradually moved up in pitch, this second phrase gradually moves back down again, creating an elegant arc shape.
- (00:45) The prince returns to the opening melody as his text continues, "But I respect the freedom of your heart." His stately music is now accompanied by a sweeping counterpoint in the warm lower range of the violins.
- (00:59) Rather than proceeding to the same answering phrase we heard from the beginning, the voice veers off into a new key area in a more impassioned style. Yeletsky loses the stately balance of his previous style, singing with chromatic inflections and sustained notes in a higher section of his range. "I would do anything for you," he concludes, as the first section of the aria, the A section, comes to a close.
- (01:24) The B section starts with a faster tempo, and a more animated orchestral accompaniment, with off-beat figures in the violins and pulsating low notes in the cellos and basses. Yeletsky states that he'd not only be Lisa's husband but her faithful servant. His music becomes more expansive as he reflects on how he wants to be the one to console her and ease her pain. But the animated style of this brief section soon winds away ...
- (02:01) ... as the prince returns to the original tempo and the more restrained music of the start of the aria, with the return of the A section. "But now I see how my dreams have misled me," Yeletsky sings.
- (02:43) In this answering phrase, pay attention to the high violins' soaring counterpoint to Yeletsky's melody. The voice also rises to a high point, accompanied by the text "my soul shares all that you suffer." But unlike in the first A section, the musical structure in this second A section remains more regular and balanced, proceeding mostly in 2-bar phrases.
- (03:38) The prince continues with a final valediction in a wrenchingly beautiful coda. Despite knowing that Lisa does not return his feelings, he sings, "My love is boundless," while plaintive bassoons hint at the sadness behind his words.

"AKH, ISTOMILAS' YA GOREM"

Lisa has had to withstand seeing the man she loves standing over the dead body of her grandmother and the ensuing doubt that he was only using her to gain an audience with the keeper of the secret of the three cards. Wanting to believe Hermann was merely a victim of circumstance, Lisa sends him a letter offering her forgiveness and asking him to meet her at the canal at midnight. As this scene opens, she paces along the quay, exhausted and distraught, as she waits to learn whether he is as depraved as she fears.

What to listen for:

- How the orchestral music augments Lisa's grief
- How Tchaikovsky juxtaposes strophic music (repeating melodies underneath new words) and through-composed music to reflect Lisa's tormented state

- (00:00) The melancholy sound of low woodwinds sets the tone for Lisa's aria. "I am exhausted with grief," she laments. The orchestral scoring of strings playing sustained chords underneath her vocal line contributes to the lament-like character of her song. Lisa spins out her sad complaint in halting phrases that communicate her world-weariness.
- (01:25) The second verse of Lisa's aria repeats the melody from the start. In this stanza, Lisa laments her broken dreams: Love promised her happiness, but now she has lost all, without any hope of remedy. She ends on a sustained half cadence.
- (02:18) With a sudden change of tempo, Lisa erupts into a more frenzied lament, bemoaning how she thinks of him both night and day. Tremolos in the strings and rapid clarinet arpeggios underscore the turbulence of her mind. Lisa extends into the high part of her range as she exclaims "Ah!", but soon these exclamations exhaust her, and the tempo and dynamics slowly return to the more plangent quality of the first section.
- (03:13) An oboe now takes over Lisa's opening melody, while she can only lament "Ah, I am so weary," in brief falling phrases. The aria closes on a note of bleakness, with Lisa remaining in a quiet and low part of her range.

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the reproducible handout “Opera Review: *The Queen of Spades*,” found in the back of this guide.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND OPERA

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1d
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

ENCOURAGING STUDENT RESPONSE IN ATTENDING THE FINAL DRESS REHEARSAL

Watching and listening to a performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. Performance activities help students analyze different aspects of the experience and engage critically with the performance. They will consider the creative choices that have been made for the particular production they are watching and examine different aspects of the performance.

The enclosed performance activity is called “Opera Review: *The Queen of Spades*.” The reproducible handout for this activity, available at the back of this guide, will invite students to think of themselves as opera critics, taking notes on what they see and hear during the performance and critiquing each singer and scene on a five-star scale. Students should bring this activity sheet to the final dress rehearsal and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. When you return to class, students can use their “Opera Review” sheets as they review and discuss their experience.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the Met performance. What did they like? What didn't they like? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? This discussion should be an opportunity for students to review their performance activity sheets and express their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production, the singers' performances, and *The Queen of Spades's* music and story.

Apart from its pessimistic view of human nature, *The Queen of Spades* is also an exploration of the supernatural. We never know (just as Hermann never knows) whether his discovery of the "three cards" is truly the result of a ghostly apparition of the countess or a product of his own fevered imagination. Likewise, it is never clear whether his ultimate loss at the card table is merely chance or the enactment of the Countess's revenge from beyond the grave. Ask your students to consider this tension between reality and our perceptions that is a recurring theme in Tchaikovsky's opera. The following questions may facilitate your discussion:

- Is Hermann's love for Lisa real? Is Lisa's love real? Is Prince Yeletsky's love real? What other desires might be guiding each of them?
- Do you think the Countess knew a secret combination of cards?
- Is Hermann of sound mind? Are there any musical clues that indicate his mental state?
- What is the Countess's role in the opera after her own death?
- Is the outcome of the final card game a matter of chance? Fate? Revenge?

To conclude the discussion, ask students to consider a time that they greatly desired something. Were they convinced that they deserved it, no matter the consequences? Did their pursuit of this thing cause them to neglect other responsibilities? If not, how were they able to remain grounded? What issues did they consider when evaluating their course of action? And finally, can they think of any instance in Tchaikovsky's opera when Hermann displayed similar considerations?

IN PRINT

Holden, Anthony. *Tchaikovsky*. London: Bantam Press, 1995.

Holden's biography for lay audiences is based on a study of previously inaccessible resources in post-Soviet-era Russia. It vividly depicts the conflicts of Tchaikovsky's tortured life and proposes an alternate and sensational cause for his early death.

Pushkin, Alexander. *The Queen of Spades and Other Stories*. Translated by Alan Myers. Oxford World Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

A collection of four of Pushkin's short stories, presented in new translations with substantial critical introductions.

ONLINE

The Royal Opera. "Why *The Queen of Spades* is Tchaikovsky's lesser-known masterpiece."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eqJvemEVik>

*An introduction to the Royal Opera's 2019 production of *The Queen of Spades*, directed by Stefan Herheim. Includes brief discussions of the opera's characters and conjecture on Tchaikovsky's psychological outlook.*

The Royal Opera. "Antonio Pappano Explores the Musical Secrets of *The Queen of Spades*."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FzVj6Vo-dM>

Pappano walks the listener through some of the predominant themes of Tchaikovsky's opera.

Dmitri Hvorostovsky. "Ja vas lyublyu" from the Russian Opera "The Queen of Spades."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywb492BL4iM>

*The late baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky sings the famous Act II aria from *The Queen of Spades*, in concert performance. With English subtitles.*

act/scene

Acts and scenes are ways of categorizing sections of operas. An act is a large-scale division of an opera, and each opera will typically include from two to five acts. Acts can be subdivided into scenes, which are often differentiated by a change in setting or characters.

adagio

Literally “at ease,” adagio is a tempo marking that indicates a slow speed. An adagio tempo marking indicates that the performer should play in a slow and leisurely style.

allegro

Italian for “cheerful” or “joyful,” allegro is the most common tempo marking in Western music, indicating a moderately fast to quick speed.

aria

A song for solo voice accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting musically on his or her emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition. For example, the earliest arias in opera consist of music sung with different stanzas of text (strophic arias). Another type of aria, the da capo aria, became common by the eighteenth century and features the return of the opening music and text after a contrasting middle section. Nineteenth-century Italian arias often feature a two-part form that showcases an intensification of emotion from the first section (the cantabile) to the second section (the cabaletta).

articulation

The smoothness or hardness with which a note is begun and ended. Articulation is a way of indicating the degree to which each note connects to the next, and can be seen while watching the bow of a stringed instrument player. A note can be attacked sharply and made short, or it can flow smoothly into the next note.

baritone

Literally “deep sounding,” a baritone is what a typical male voice sounds like—the term refers to a male singer with a low but not extremely low vocal range. A baritone will sing notes that are higher than those sung by a bass and lower than those sung by a tenor. Uncommon until the nineteenth century, baritone roles have grown in popularity in opera since the works of Verdi, who often reserved the voice type for villains.

Baroque

A designation for music and art produced roughly between the years 1600 and 1750. In music history, the beginning of the Baroque period coincides with the invention of opera as a genre, and its end coincides with the death of the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. Originally, the word “baroque” was a term for oddly shaped pearls; it was first applied to music in the 1730s by critics who preferred a simpler, less-ornamented style and thus found the intricate counterpoint of seventeenth-century music to be reminiscent of these bizarre natural gems.

bass

The lowest sounding line in music. Bass also refers to the lowest singing range for the male voice. Opera composers often choose a bass voice to sing one of two opposite types of roles: comic characters or dramatic and serious characters. For example, Mozart and Rossini wrote comic parts for bass voice, using musical repetition and low register for comic effect. Wagner and Mozart wrote serious parts for bass voice, focusing on the gravity that a low register can contribute to the overall musical texture.

bel canto

Referring to the Italian vocal style of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bel canto singing emphasizes lyricism and ornamentation in order to showcase the beauty of the singer's voice. Its focus on lyrical embellishment directly contrasts with a contemporary Germanic focus on a weighty, dramatic style. Bel canto singing is most closely associated with the music of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti.

cadenza

An ornamented musical elaboration played in a free style by a soloist to display his or her virtuosity. Cadenzas are typically improvised—that is, created by a performer on the spot—though they can also be written out in advance. They most frequently occur near the end of a piece, at a point of harmonic tension when the piece is about to conclude.

chorus

A section of an opera in which a large group of singers performs together, typically with orchestral accompaniment. Most choruses include at least four different vocal lines, in registers from low to high, with multiple singers per part. The singers are typically from a particular group of people who play a certain role on stage—soldiers, peasants, prisoners, and so on. Choruses may offer a moral, comment on the plot, or participate in the dramatic action.

Classical

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1750 to 1830, bordered by the earlier Baroque period and the later Romantic period. Contrasting with the ornamentation common to the preceding Baroque period, Classical music is characterized by simple and elegant melodies, regular harmonic accompaniment, and contrasts between melodic themes. The composers most closely associated with the Classical period include Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven.

coloratura

A rapid and elaborate ornamentation by a solo singer, particularly common in operas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Requiring vocal agility and a wide and high range, coloratura showcases the virtuosity of a singer by featuring repeating melodic figures, rapid scales, trills, and other embellishments.

conductor

The person who directs the orchestra, setting the tempo, giving interpretive directions to the musicians, and generally holding all the musical elements of a performance together. The conductor typically stands in front of the players and uses a baton to communicate the meter and tempo; their non-baton hand indicates dynamics, phrasing, and articulation to the musicians. The gestures of a conductor can thus be likened to a non-verbal language that the musicians understand.

contralto

A deep female voice, with a vocal range that extends lower than that of a mezzo-soprano. Contraltos are known for having a very wide range and for the power and depth of sound with which they can sing. As is the case for roles for basses, many of the earliest roles in opera for contraltos are comic roles, though nineteenth-century composers also wrote dramatic roles for female singers with a lower range.

crescendo

A gradual raising of volume in music achieved by increasing the dynamic level. When music crescendos, the performers begin at a softer dynamic level and become incrementally louder. One of the most famous types of crescendos in opera, the Rossini crescendo, includes an increase in volume together with repeating melodic and rhythmic phrases, higher instrumental registers, and the gradual addition of instruments in order to create a particularly dramatic effect.

diminuendo

A gradual lowering of volume in music achieved by decreasing the dynamic level. During a diminuendo, the performers begin at a louder dynamic level and become incrementally softer.

dynamics

A musical trait pertaining to loudness and softness. During the eighteenth century, composers began indicating their desired intensity of volume in music by writing words such as *piano* (soft) and *forte* (loud) into the musical score. Dynamics encompass a spectrum from *pianissimo* (very soft) to *piano* (soft) to *mezzo piano* (moderately soft), all the way up to *fortissimo* (very loud). Music can shift to another dynamic level either suddenly or gradually, through a crescendo or diminuendo.

ensemble

A musical piece for two or more soloists, accompanied by orchestra. Types of ensembles include duets (for two soloists), trios (for three soloists), and quartets (for four soloists). Sometimes singers will respond directly to one another during an ensemble. At other times, singers will each sing to themselves as if the other singers were not on stage. In ensembles, multiple characters may simultaneously express very different emotions from one another.

finale

The last portion of an act, a finale consists of several musical sections that accompany escalating dramatic tension. Finales frequently consist of multiple ensembles with different numbers of characters. When it occurs at the end of an early act in the opera, a finale may create a messy situation—and the resolution of this situation will only happen in subsequent acts. One type of finale common in comic operas, a chain finale, features characters entering or exiting from the stage to create unexpected combinations of characters, in turn increasing the opera's dramatic tension.

forte

Meaning “loud” or “strong” in Italian, forte is a dynamic level in music that indicates a loud volume. Adding the suffix “-issimo” to a word serves as an intensifier—since forte means “loud,” fortissimo means “very loud.”

harmony

The simultaneous sounding of pitches to produce chords, and the relationship between different chords as they succeed one another. Throughout much of Western music, systems of rules govern these progressions to help create our sense of musical tension, expectation, and conclusion. Tonal harmony is based on progressions of chords in relationship to a tonic (or home) key. In the 19th century, as composers sought novel sounds to reflect the originality of their invention, they began to employ chords and progressions of greater dissonance and greater distance from the home key. As such dissonances moved beyond mere sound effects into the musical structure itself, the traditional theory of tonal harmony began to become insufficient as a way to understand and describe musical structure.

intermission

A break between acts of an opera. At the beginning of an intermission, the curtain will fall (that is, close) on stage, and the lights in the auditorium, called the house lights, will become brighter. Intermissions provide audiences with a chance to walk around, talk with one another, and reflect on what they have seen and what could happen next. The break in the performance may also correspond with a change of time or scene in the story of the opera—the next act may take place hours or months later, or be set in a different location. Usually lights will dim and a bell may sound to indicate that the intermission is drawing to a close and the opera is about to resume.

legato

A type of articulation in which a melody is played without any spaces or gaps between the notes, thereby creating a smooth line. In contrast, a passage that is played “staccato” features notes played in a separated manner.

Leitmotif

From a German term meaning “leading motive,” a Leitmotif is a recurring musical idea, or motive, that represents a particular person, object, idea, emotion, or place. This musical idea is usually a few seconds in length and can occur in the music’s melody, harmony, or rhythm—or a combination of the three. Leitmotifs are most closely associated with the operas of Richard Wagner, where they are used repeatedly throughout the opera to provide unity; they also appear (although less frequently) in the operas of other composers, including Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Strauss.

libretto

The text of an opera, including all the words that are said or sung by performers. Until the early eighteenth century, a composer would frequently set music to a pre-existing libretto, and any given libretto could thus be set to music multiple times by different composers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, collaboration between the author of the libretto, known as the librettist, and the composer became more frequent. Some opera composers, most notably Richard Wagner, are known for writing their own text.

maestro

A title of respect used to address a conductor.

melody

A succession of pitches that form an understandable unit. The melody of a piece consists of the tune that a listener can hum or sing. During arias, the singer will usually sing the main melody, though other instruments may play parts of the melody. Sometimes, such as during ensembles, multiple melodies can occur simultaneously.

mezzo-soprano

A female voice with a range between that of a contralto and soprano. A mezzo-soprano's voice is slightly deeper than that of a soprano, so mezzo-sopranos are often cast in supporting roles as older women, including nurses, confidantes, or maids.

opera buffa

A term applied to Italian comic operas from the mid-eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. The plot of an opera buffa often features scenes and characters from everyday life and addresses a light or sentimental subject, concluding with a happy ending.

opera seria

An eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Italian opera employing a noble and serious style. The plot of an opera seria often upholds morality by presenting conflicting emotions such as love versus duty, or by modeling enlightened rulers.

operetta

Featuring spoken dialogue, songs, and dances, an operetta is a short theatrical piece. Shorter in duration than operas, operettas typically feature light subject matter, spoken dialogue, and melodies composed in a popular style. Most popular from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the genre is the precursor of the American musical.

ornamentation

An embellishment to the melody, rhythm, or harmony of music, intended to make a melody more expressive or ornate. Ornamentation can be either indicated through symbols written into the music or improvised by the performer.

overture

An instrumental piece that occurs before the first act as an introduction to an opera. After the conductor enters the orchestra pit and takes a bow, the music for the overture begins. Most overtures are a few minutes in duration, and set the mood for the opera—even featuring musical themes that will occur later in the opera.

piano

Abbreviated *p* in a musical score, piano indicates a soft dynamic level. Musicians may achieve a piano sound by using less bow, less air, or less force. In opera, soft music will often correspond with emotions of sadness or moments in the plot when a character is reflecting on a course of action or emotional state. Pianissimo is “very soft,” and can be so quiet that an audience may need to listen carefully in order to discern its melody and harmony.

pitch

The quality of a musical sound corresponding to its perceived highness or lowness. Scientifically, pitch can be measured as the number of vibrations (or repetitions) of a sound wave per second, which is called its frequency. A sound with a low frequency, like a bass drum, will sound low and have a low pitch, while a sound with a high frequency, like a siren, will sound high.

prima donna

Meaning “first lady” in Italian, the prima donna is the leading female role in an opera. The term may apply to the role or to the singer herself, who usually sings in the soprano register and is the star of the show. Since the nineteenth century, the term has also been applied to a singer of any gender with a self-centered and demanding personality.

recitative

A type of vocal writing between speech and song that imitates the accents and inflections of natural speech. Composers often employ recitative for passages of text that involve quick dialogue and the advancement of plot, since the style allows singers to move rapidly through a large amount of text. Recitative may be accompanied either by keyboard or by the whole orchestra.

rhythm

Rhythm refers to the way music unfolds over time; it is a series of durations in a range from long to short. Along with pitch, it is a basic and indispensable parameter of music. Rhythm is perceived in relation to an underlying beat and within the context of a meter. Western musical notation indicates to the performer the exact duration of each note or rest.

Romantic

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1830 to 1900. Beginning in literature and later adopted by composers, romanticism reflected a newfound focus on individuality, nature, and emotional extremes. Music from the Romantic period often explores music’s redemptive power, focusing on the sublimity of nature, love, and the mysterious. Romantic composers revised standard musical forms, devised new musical forms, and added more expressive harmonies to their works to convey the originality of their musical vision.

score

The complete musical notation for a piece, the score includes notated lines for all of the different instrumental and vocal parts that unite to constitute a musical composition. In an opera orchestra, the conductor follows the score during rehearsals and performances, while each performer follows his or her individual part.

Singspiel

Literally “sung play,” a Singspiel is an opera with spoken dialogue. Singspiels are typically in German and are from the Classical or early Romantic eras. The plot of a Singspiel is usually comic in nature, and its music may include songs, choruses, and instrumental numbers that are separated by spoken dialogue.

solo

A piece, musical passage, or line for a lone singer or other performer, with or without instrumental accompaniment. The most common type of solo in opera is the aria, which is composed for a single voice with orchestral accompaniment.

soprano

The highest singing range for the female voice. Roles composed for soprano singers are typically among the leading roles in the opera and require soprano singers to show off their virtuosic flexibility and range.

tempo

Literally “time” in Italian, tempo refers to the speed of a piece of music. Tempo is indicated in a score by a variety of conventional (often Italian) words—such as *allegro*, *adagio*, *vivace*, *moderato*, *grave*, and many more—that not only provide direction on the composer’s desired rate of speed, but also carry associations of gesture and character. For instance, *vivace* indicates not only a brisk speed but also a lively spirit. Additional tempo markings may indicate when a composer asks for a section of music to be sped up (such as “*accelerando*”) or slowed down (such as “*rallentando*”).

tenor

The highest natural male vocal range. By the nineteenth century, the tenor had become the most common vocal range for male leading roles in operas. Tenor roles often feature high-pitched notes for male voice in order to showcase the singer’s range and power. A related voice type is the countertenor, with a range above that of a tenor and similar to that of a contralto.

theme/motive

Themes are the melodic ideas that are musical building blocks for a piece. A theme is often recognizable as a distinct tune and may reappear in its original form or in altered form throughout the piece. A motif (or motive) is a brief musical idea that recurs throughout a musical work. Motives can be based on a melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic component, and their repetition makes them recognizable to the listener. In opera, musical motives are often symbolically associated with specific characters or dramatic ideas.

timbre

Pronounced TAM-bruh, a French word that means “sound color.” It refers to the complex combination of characteristics that give each instrument or voice its unique sound. Just as we can recognize each other by the differences in our speaking voices, operatic singing voices are distinguishable by their unique timbres. Listeners can also identify orchestral instruments by their timbre without being able to see them. The creative combination of different instrumental timbres is one of the artistic aspects of orchestration.

trill

A rapid alternation between two pitches that are adjacent to one another. Trills are a type of ornamentation, serving to embellish the melodic line, and appear regularly within coloratura passages. Trills also may appear near the end of a piece in order to prolong the musical tension before the music concludes.

verismo

A movement in Italian theater and opera in the late 19th century that embraced realism and explored areas of society previously ignored on the stage: the poor, the lower-class, and the criminal. Musically, verismo operas react against the forced ornamentation of the *bel canto* style and instead emphasize a more natural setting of the text to music. Before its exploration on the operatic stage, the verismo aesthetic first developed within the realm of literature.

Reviewed by _____

Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!

As you watch *The Queen of Spades*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what might you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design, and rate each of the star singers. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about Handel's opera and this performance at the Met!

THE STARS:	STAR POWER	MY COMMENTS
Aleksandrs Antonenko as Hermann	*****	
Lise Davidsen as Lisa	*****	
Larissa Diadkova as The Countess	*****	
Igor Golovatenko as Yeletsky	*****	
Elena Maximova as Pauline	*****	
Alexey Markov as Tomsky	*****	

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
An agitated Hermann tells of his love			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Hermann discovers his sweetheart's identity			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
A tale of three cards			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
A balcony visit			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
At a ball, Yeletsky proclaims his love			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
The guests enjoy a pastoral ballet			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Tsarina Catherine blesses the guests			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The old Countess readies for bed			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
A deadly confrontation			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Hermann's torment and a ghostly revelation			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Lisa's final disillusionment			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The fateful card game			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5