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English

PYOTR I. TCHAIKOVSKY

IOLANTA

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IOLANTA

LYRIC OPERA in one act

Text by MODEST TCHAIKOVSKY

based on *KING RENÉ'S DAUGHTER*

Play by HENRIK HERTZ

ORCHESTRA

3 flutes (3 doubling piccolo),
2 oboes / cor anglais
2 clarinets / 2 bassoons
4 horns / 2 trumpets
3 trombones / tuba
2 harps / timpani
strings

AUTOGRAPH **RUSSIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM
FOR MUSIC, MOSCOW**

(except Vaudémont's Romance, No. 6a)

**CENTRAL MUSIC BIBLIOTHEQUE OF
THE MARIINSKI-THEATRE, ST PETERSBURG**

(Vaudémont's Romance, No. 6a)

WORLD PREMIÈRE **6 DEC 1892**

Mariinski-Theatre, St Petersburg

AUSTRIAN PREMIÈRE **22 MARCH 1900**

K. u. K. Hofopertheater

DURATION **1 H 30 MIN** **NO INTERMISSION**

“I FEEL I CAN MAKE A MASTERPIECE OUT OF KING RENÉ’S DAUGHTER”

TCHAIKOVSKY’S ONE-ACT OPERA *IOLANTA*

Tchaikovsky’s final opera, the one-act *Iolanta*, is based on the 1845 drama *King René’s Daughter* (*Kong Renés Datter*) by Danish poet Henrik Hertz, which Tchaikovsky first encountered in 1883 through Fyodor Miller’s Russian translation. Even then, he considered it a potential opera subject and revived the idea five years later after attending a theater performance in Moscow. But it wasn’t until 1891 that a commission from the Imperial Theatres prompted him to begin composition in earnest. “I feel I can make a masterpiece out of *King René’s Daughter*,” he wrote to his youngest brother, Modest, who wrote the libretto based on a Russian translation by Vladimir Zotov.

The score was composed between July and September 1891 and premiered on December 6/18, 1892 at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, alongside the ballet *The Nutcracker*. Reactions at the premiere were mixed: the press was

rather cool, but the audience gave repeated applause and even demanded an encore of the duet between Iolanta and Vaudémont.

The collaboration between the two brothers resulted in a very personal interpretation of the literary source, allowing the composer to deepen the dramaturgical principles of his operatic work – and for the first and only time, to guide the theme of love to a happy ending.

A comparison with Henrik Hertz’s drama reveals three fundamental deviations. By adding the first three scenes, the libretto not only focuses on Iolanta’s cure from blindness but also on her path from childhood into conscious adult life. In portraying Iolanta’s father with more complexity and ambiguity than in Hertz’s version – even threatening Vaudémont with execution if her cure fails – the father-daughter dynamic becomes psychologically problematic

Previous pages:

SIMONAS STRAZDAS as BERTRAND
DANIEL JENZ as ALMERIK
SONYA YONCHEVA as IOLANTA

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(on a deeper level). Furthermore, since Vaudémont is not her fiancé, but rather a friend of the fiancé, the libretto explores various kinds of love: friendship, filial love, love as passion, as possessiveness, or also the idealised love between Iolanta and Vaudémont. In no other stage work did Tchaikovsky so explicitly celebrate love as an inevitable, divine force imposed upon humanity – one that is imposed upon us to prove ourselves.

**MUSIC OF INNER EMOTION:
SEARCHING, SIGHING,
BREATHING**

As in the ballet *The Nutcracker*, Tchaikovsky also uses rich orchestral colours in the one-act *Iolanta* to create a sound dramaturgy that not only evokes a magical fairytale atmosphere like in the dance piece, but also reveals the characters' inner motivations. The orchestra adds depth to the characters and their actions, creating a space where their most profound sensitivities resonate far beyond the words and stage directions.

The nuanced way in which Tchaikovsky works is already evident in the "Introduction", where he uses exclusively horns and woodwinds. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, the great master of orchestration, not only missed the presence of the other instrument groups here, but also noted with some irritation, "music suitable for strings is given by Tchaikovsky to the winds." Indeed, the tremolo accompaniment figures in the bassoons and horns would be easier to play on cellos. The whirling scales pushing the music forward are originally violin figures, and the chromatic sigh motif of the cor anglais, which

floats on a bed of clarinet and bassoon chords and, bearing such a resemblance to Wagner's *Tristan*, would sound smoother with strings. The pure wind ensemble thus clearly lacks grounding in a "normal" orchestral setting.

But rather than criticize this unusual approach, we should ask: what does Tchaikovsky achieve by selecting only one group of instruments from the full orchestra – specifically those that, through the breath required to play them, come closest to the human voice and the human spirit?

Tchaikovsky was a music dramatist through and through, and so it seems only natural to interpret this seemingly sparse writing as a subtle reference to the title character. The purely wind-based orchestration shows that Iolanta lives in a reduced world, deliberately sealed-off from the intrusion of foreign elements. Her world is missing something – just as the orchestral sound lacks the fullness of all the instruments. However, if the "Introduction" is not measured against familiar listening experiences but instead judged on its own terms, it reveals a rich palette of colors and expressive gestures from within: the wind instruments are capable, in their own unique, way of expressing everything that is typically associated with string music. Just as the blind young woman experiences the world on her own terms. Since she does not know that anything is missing, her perception feels complete to her. The audience, with its ingrained listening habits and learned expectations of sound, may – like Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov – initially feel unsettled. But for those willing to engage with it, the unfamiliar orchestral colours sharpen the sense of

hearing and open up an awareness for the unique way the title character perceives the world.

In fact, the story of *King René's Daughter* unfolds twice during a performance of the opera: once as a stage action with text, singing, and outward events, and a second time as an inner experience – purely through music – in rich orchestral colours, surprising soundscapes, and a purposeful musical dramaturgy. When the composer, in a moment of self-criticism during the composition process, noted that at times his new work contained “too little music – everything is an elaboration of the narrative”, it becomes clear that we must distinguish between what the audience sees on stage, and how the music adds a dimension to the “visible” action – one that cannot be grasped with the eyes or through ordinary senses. This shift in perception in *Iolanta* lies at the very heart of Tchaikovsky's compositional approach.

THE FIRM OUTER FRAME: A PARADISE GARDEN OF WOMEN

As if to underscore this contrast, the dramatic action of the opera begins with an acoustic “coup de théâtre.” At the premiere on December 6/18, 1892, the set designer, Mikhail Bocharov, had faithfully and picturesquely realised Tchaikovsky's scenic directions: the curtain of the Mariinsky-Theatre in St. Petersburg rose to reveal “a beautiful garden full of lush plants, a pavilion in Gothic style, blooming rosebushes, and trees heavy with ripe fruit.” At the same moment, the instruments, too, seem to draw back the curtain: the woodwinds fall silent and give way

to a finely wrought but more conventional musical tableau of lyrical solo strings (stage music), harp arpeggios, and women's voices. The comparison makes it clear that, for all its apparent incompleteness, the “Introduction” is a music of interiority – Iolanta's inner world, which is as personal as it is open to transformation. In contrast, the paradise surrounding her is musically composed of pleasant-sounding set pieces. Here, everything is fixed in its assigned place. In this idealised but static outer beauty, Iolanta's searching soul finds no resonance. In her “arioso”, full of unanswered questions, the wind section of the orchestra likewise fails to achieve a balanced interplay with the strings – just as the young blind woman herself cannot harmonise with the sighted world around her. Only in the lullaby at the end of the “third scene” – sung by the sighted to the blind – do strings and winds finally arrive at the usual musical balance. But the cost of this, however is that, in sleep, Iolanta's yearning and the impulse for growth and change fall silent.

Much like the stage character Iolanta, who senses a vague unease in her situation, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, too, reacts to the peculiarities of the score with an instinctive (and quite accurate) sense of resistance. And this is precisely where Tchaikovsky's compositional artistry lies: through his use of instrumentation, timbre, and orchestration, he evokes an immediate emotional response. Even before any rational understanding takes hold, a feeling arises – a sense that something is not quite right in this idyllic world. The audience instinctively perceives Iolanta's longing and solitude, her readiness for transformation and renewal, as well as the

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invisible walls that hold her captive in the ever-unchanging paradise garden. Scenery and dialogue alone cannot evoke this emotional insight nearly as directly as the music does.

MEN: POWER AND CONFLICT

The scene with Iolanta surrounded by her companions Brigitte and Laura, the caring Marta, and the maidservants was added by the composer and librettist to the drama by Henrik Hertz. Such glimpses into an only seemingly harmonious world – in which the heroine, despite outward belonging, remains inwardly a stranger – can be found in almost every Tchaikovsky opera: Tatjana, who dreams herself out of her purely feminine family world even before meeting *Eugene Onegin*; Maria, who can no longer relate to the girlish songs of her friends because of her secret love for the Cossack leader *Mazepa*; and Liza, who in the opera *Pique Dame* may outwardly be a well-integrated member of society, but inwardly longs to escape the life laid out for her.

It is from this fundamental disposition toward inner awakening that conflicts arise – conflicts through which the heroines either grow or break. Tchaikovsky also hints at this inner tension in *Iolanta*, first through the orchestra: following Iolanta's lullaby, the "fourth scene" begins with horn signals, opening the ear to a world of hunting, military, and nobility. Cellos and double basses, with a restless tremolo, prepare for the entrance of men into the paradise garden. This contrast in sound also affects the vocal style: instead of the closed vocal forms that dominate Iolanta's world of women, Tchaikovsky

now composes extended dialogues and, in the style of the so-called "melodic recitative", conveys backstory and context of the plot. It quickly becomes clear: Iolanta's life is built on multiple layers of deception. She knows neither of her blindness nor that sight exists at all; she is unaware that her beloved father René is the King of Provence, and knows nothing of the world beyond her garden.

When René enters, the orchestra introduces fanfare motifs and drumrolls imitated by the strings: the lovingly concerned, protective – indeed, over-protective – father is simultaneously preoccupied with matters of state, military, and power. For the king has concealed his daughter's disability not only for the sake of her inner peace, but also to avoid jeopardising Iolanta's politically significant marriage to Robert, Duke of Burgundy. Yet this union depends on one crucial condition: a healthy bride. And so, King René places all his hope in the Moorish doctor Ibn-Hakia, who is renowned for his wisdom in the art of healing.

Thus, two powerful male figures come face to face: the monarch, whose authority ends where nature has denied his daughter the gift of sight, and the exotic doctor, who places his trust in the divine harmony of nature and spirit.

René speaks with Ibn-Hakia with words of fatherly concern and love. Yet the orchestra betrays the King's inner conflict. The martial orchestral tutti in his first monologue reveal the will of the politician, whose restlessness stems not only from concern for his daughter's future, but also for matters of state. As both father and ruler, René is not accustomed to relinquishing

responsibility – least of all entrusting his daughter's fate to a mysterious and disconcertingly self-assured doctor. All the more so, since Ibn-Hakia sets one clear precondition for healing: an end to all deception. Only when the blind woman herself feels the desire for change, and when the father releases his daughter from his control, does Ibn-Hakia see a chance for recovery.

The Enlightenment aspect that the Moorish doctor brings into the opera's narrative is – unusual for Tchaikovsky, but entirely fitting for the work's dramaturgy – closely linked to the idea of the stranger, the outsider. Without doubt, the composer could have written music in the spirit of the then-fashionable exoticism; yet, despite the references to Allah in the text and a few gently orientalising gestures in the vocal line, his Ibn-Hakia is embedded in an orchestral sound world that is unmistakably Tchaikovsky. This invites comparison more with Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, in which Sarastro embodies a similarly Enlightenment-inspired authority figure.

Moreover, Tchaikovsky continues with the figure of the doctor a character type that is essential to understanding his operatic dramaturgy: in almost all of his stage works, there is a secondary character of dramatic importance who delivers a central aria. In this aria, an ethical point of orientation is articulated – one against which the actions of the main characters must be measured. Just as Prince Gremin in *Eugene Onegin* and Prince Elezki in *Pique Dame* proclaim the ideal of devoted, altruistic love, so too does Ibn-Hakia proclaim the power of divine love – yet a love that must be trustingly embraced by the individual and transformed into an inner disposition.

At the beginning of the opera, neither Iolanta nor King René is capable of embracing such an idea: Iolanta, because she lacks even the basic ability to choose; René, because his pride as a ruler prevents him from true insight. The martial orchestral tutti that concludes the "fifth scene" makes clear that he is even prepared to take things a step further: "whoever uncovers Iolanta's secret will pay with his life, and the doctor must submit to the father's will." The doctor that René has summoned is to heal Iolanta – or face death.

CHANGE

The dramatic situation on stage is just as confrontational as the two musical worlds Tchaikovsky creates: movement can only come into this constellation from the outside. Thus, the "sixth scene" not only introduces the friends Robert and Vaudémont into the action, but also once again shifts the musical structure. Both the harp and string harmonies of the women's world and the martial undertones of the men's world possess a clarity and stability that Tchaikovsky now dissolves in favour of a more varied and fluid orchestration.

Robert and Vaudémont have lost their way; they discover the paradisiacal garden by accident and ignore the warning sign: "entry punishable by death." In a figurative sense, they too are seekers and wanderers: Robert, Duke of Burgundy and Iolanta's fiancé, has no interest in a politically arranged marriage; he is in love with Matilda, whom he praises with vivid language and sensual longing. The contrast between his exuberantly direct feeling of love and Iolanta's still undefined longing for life is unmistakable.

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Robert's friend, Count Gottfried Vaudémont (in Henrik Hertz's original text, he is called "Tristan Vaudémont"; Tchaikovsky's music also refers to him by that name), is also searching for love, though he imagines it quite differently. In a "Romanze" added specifically for the singer of the premiere, he sings of an idealised image of womanhood – worthy of worship and pure. For this, Tchaikovsky draws on vocal intonations that recall both Prince Elezki's sincere declaration of love and the passion of Hermann in his opera *Pique Dame*, which had premiered just six months earlier. Musically, Tchaikovsky defines Vaudémont as an almost ideal combination of emotional depth and passion.

By this point in the opera, it becomes unmistakably clear that the idyllic garden scenes are far more than mere lyrical ornamentation. They are directly connected to the dramatic action. By highlighting Iolanta's delicacy, her thoughtfulness, and her sensitivity to kindness, generosity, and affection, they prepare the way for her encounter with Vaudémont. In their solo numbers, the two young characters sing of their longing to oppose something personal and different to the everyday life that leaves them unfulfilled.

There are also compositional parallels: both Iolanta's "Arioso" and Vaudémont's "Romanze" – unlike the other solo numbers in the opera – are made up of two distinct large sections; the orchestral part, scored almost identically in both, is similarly shaped. In both cases, the clear metrical structure disintegrates toward the end, and the closed vocal line breaks into fragments,

making the core message stand out all the more clearly: Iolanta's twofold question "Why? Why?" and Vaudémont's repeated cry "I wait, hurry! Oh, come!" reveal their shared inner state of searching and yearning.

That Vaudémont instantly loses his heart to Iolanta is thus logical. In conversation, the enamored young man comes to realise that Iolanta cannot distinguish colors and does not understand words related to the sense of sight. As he tries to describe what she has never experienced, he discovers that they both love the beauty of nature and divine creation, though they perceive it in different ways – and he understands that these modes of perception do not exclude one another. Unlike Iolanta's father and the circle of women around her, Vaudémont does not view her blindness as a defect, but as something unique and complete in itself – something that can even enrich his own way of perceiving the world.

**TRANSFORMATION:
EXULTATION AND
REFLECTION**

When Vaudémont is seized as an unauthorised intruder, both King René and the doctor recognise that fate has now decided whether Iolanta will undergo the healing procedure or remain in ignorance for the rest of her life. To intensify Iolanta's desire for sight, René threatens Vaudémont with death should the treatment fail. Light, love, and hopes for the future now rise together in Iolanta's consciousness, and at the same time are met with their opposites: blindness, sorrow, and death – all elements she had never known before. Love and

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fear for her beloved's life lead Iolanta to consent to Ibn-Hakia's treatment.

In Henrik Hertz's drama, Ibn-Hakia has cared for the girl for years and been preparing for a possible cure. Recovery is within reach, since Iolanta was not born blind but lost her sight as a baby when, during a castle fire, she was thrown from a window to save her life. But such details do not interest the opera dramatist Tchaikovsky, nor do the political motives behind the planned marriage. Right after the highly dramatic *Pique Dame*, in which every form of love and passion leads only to misfortune and death, Tchaikovsky celebrates in his one-act *Iolanta* the miracle of fulfilled love – love as a heavenly and divine gift capable of healing all human imperfection.

It is no coincidence that Tchaikovsky began composing his score with the

duet between Iolanta and Vaudémont: these are his central figures; this is where his focus lies. The happiness of a lively, mutually appreciative relationship with Vaudémont allows Iolanta to step out of the artificial paradise of her childhood and, together with him, discover life and her full self. That King René at first tries to prevent this awakening but ultimately allows and supports it frees him from the one-dimensional role of the "superfather" in the Freudian sense. And so, the final chorus and orchestral tutti celebrate – in a jubilant march that is almost martial in character and echoes René's regal motifs – that God has answered human prayer. Yet just before the end, the orchestra briefly pauses, as if to make space for individual reflection and to bow before the divine gift of fulfilled human love.



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IOLANTA

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LYRISCHE OPER in einem Akt

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