

MAZEPPA

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Tchaikovsky's opera "Mazeppa" is based on Pushkin's poem "Poltava," which depicts the historical Ukrainian separatist, Mazeppa, in both his political and romantic exploits. The 70-year-old "hetman" or military leader surprises the Cossack judge, Kochubey, by asking for the hand of his young daughter, Maria. After Maria runs off with Mazeppa, Kochubey denounces Mazeppa's separatist plans to Peter the Great. Peter doesn't believe Kochubey, and delivers him up to Mazeppa, who tortures and then executes him. When Maria learns of her father's fate, she goes mad.

Act I: Young girls are telling their fortunes. Maria, Kochubey's daughter, runs in, excited that the hetman Mazeppa has arrived. The young girl has fallen in love with him and cannot imagine life without him. Andrei, a young Cossack, is in love with Maria and tells her of his deep love. But Maria's thoughts are only of Mazeppa. Andrei comes to realize the futility of his hopes. After the grand feast in Mazeppa's honor, Mazeppa asks Kochubey for his youngest daughter's hand in marriage. Kochubey is stunned: Maria is the hetman's god daughter, and he is much older than she. Mazeppa presses the issue and Kochubey demands that he leave the house. Their quarrel attracts the attention of the other guests and Kochubey's retainers. Finally Mazeppa suggests that Maria make the choice: her father or him? Maria chooses the hetman, and runs off with him.

Kochubey's wife, Lyubov, is in despair. Weeping for her daughter who has abandoned her father's house, she calls on her husband to take decisive action against Mazeppa. Kochubey has long wanted to tell Peter the Great of Mazeppa's secret plans to make the Ukraine an independent state, allied with the Swedish King Charles XII. Iskra, Kochubey's friend, suggests that Kochubey send a rider to the capital at once, to give warning of the hetman's planned treachery. Andrei is entrusted with the letter to the Czar.

Act II: The Czar still trusts Mazeppa. He did not believe Kochubey's denunciation, and has turned him and Iskra over to Mazeppa, who sends them to be chained in his prison. Kochubey is prepared to die, but refuses to bow his head to a traitor. Orlik, Mazeppa's henchman, interrupts Kochubey's unhappy thoughts, demanding that he disclose where he hid his treasure. Kochubey refuses. He has lost two treasures--his honor, and his youngest daughter's honor--and will not give away his third. Orlik, enraged, summons the torturer.

Mazeppa admires the quiet of the Ukrainian night, and compares its peacefulness with the turmoil in his soul. When Orlik tells him that torture has failed to make Kochubey reveal his secret, Mazeppa orders the execution for the morning.

When Maria enters she reproaches Mazeppa for his seeming coolness to her. Mazeppa reassures her of his love. He then discloses his political plans to her, which the kings of Sweden and Poland have pledged to support. Maria is carried away by his plans, and imagines him on the throne of an independent Ukraine. But Mazeppa knows the risks he runs. He asks her whom she would save, if she had to choose: her husband or her father? Totally ignorant of her father's plight, she affirms that she would sacrifice anyone rather than her husband. Mazeppa leaves, deeply troubled.

Lyubov slips into the room unseen by the guards, and begs her daughter to save her father. Maria doesn't understand, and Lyubov recounts the fate awaiting Kochubey and Iskra, asking her

daughter to beg Mazeppa for mercy. A march is heard in the distance: the executions are ready to begin. Maria and Lyubov rush off to save Kochubey.

A crowd has gathered to witness the executions. They watch the procession as Mazeppa rides in, followed by armed guards, executioners, and the condemned men. Kochubey and Iskra kneel and pray, and then mount the scaffold. As the ax falls, Lyubov and Maria run in, too late to stop the executions.

Act III: The symphonic picture "The Battle of Poltava" describes the battle in which Peter the Great decisively beat the Swedish forces.

Kochubey's garden now lies in ruins. Andrei had searched the battlefield for Mazeppa, but in vain. He recalls how happy he once was, here, as he regrets the lost chance to avenge himself on the hetman. Mazeppa and Orlik enter, fleeing the Russian forces. Andrei challenges Mazeppa, and is mortally wounded.

Maria appears. Mazeppa tries to speak with her, but the poor girl doesn't recognize her beloved. She imagines she sees her father's blood on this man's hands and clothing. Orlik drags Mazeppa away, urging him to forget the madwoman.

Only now does Maria notice Andrei. She thinks he is her child. She cradles the dying young man in her arms, and sings a gentle lullaby, staring blankly ahead.