

THE QUEEN OF SPADES

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Act I. During the reign of Catherine the Great (1762-96), children are at play in a St. Petersburg summer park. Two soldiers — Tsurin and Chekalinsky — enter, the former complaining about his bad luck at gambling. They remark that another soldier, Gherman, seems obsessed with the gaming table but never bets, since he is frugal and methodical. Gherman appears with Tomsky, who says his friend hardly seems like his old self: is anything bothering him? Gherman 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 Gherman, aside, curses him enviously. Yeletsky points out his fiancée, Lisa, who has just appeared with her grandmother, the old Countess, once known as the Venus of Moscow. Catching sight of Gherman, the two women note they have seen him before, staring at them with frightening intensity. Gherman realizes that Lisa is his unknown beloved. When Yeletsky and the women leave, Gherman is lost in thought as the other officers discuss the Countess: known as the Queen of Spades, she succeeded at gambling in her youth by trading her favors for the winning formula of Count St. Germain in Paris. Tomsky says only two men, one of them her husband, 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 magical three cards, the others lightly suggest that such a combination would solve Gherman's problems. Threatened by approaching thunder, all leave except Gherman, who vows to learn the Countess' secret.

At home, Lisa 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, Lisa 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 Lisa to cheer up; Lisa 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, Lisa voices her unhappiness with her engagement; she has been stirred by the romantic look of the young man in the park. To her shock, Gherman 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, Lisa hides Gherman and opens the door to the old woman, who tells her to shut the windows and go to bed. After the Countess retires, Lisa asks Gherman to leave but is betrayed by her feelings and falls into his embrace.

Act II. Not long afterward, at a masked ball, Gherman's comrades comment on his obsession with the secret of the winning cards. Yeletsky passes with Lisa, noting her sadness and reassuring her of his love. Gherman receives a note from Lisa, asking him to meet her later. Tsurin and Chekalinsky sneak up behind him, muttering he is the "third suitor" who will learn the Countess' secret, then melt into the crowd as Gherman wonders whether he is hearing things. The master of ceremonies announces a tableau of shepherdesses. Lisa slips Gherman the key to her grandmother's room, saying the old woman will not be there the next day, but Gherman 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 (1757-1831) is played and sung in greeting.

Gherman slips into the Countess' room and looks in fascination at her portrait as a young woman. Their fates, he feels, are linked: one of them will die because of the other. He conceals himself as the old lady approaches. The Countess deplores the manners of today and reminisces about her

youth, singing an air from Grétry's *Richard Coeur-de-Lion*. As she dozes off, Gherman 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. Lisa rushes in, only to learn that the lover to whom she gave her heart was more interested in the Old Countess' secret. She orders him out and falls sobbing.

Act III. In his room at the barracks, as the winter wind howls, Gherman reads a letter from Lisa, 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 Lisa. Dazed, Gherman repeats the three cards — three, seven, ace. By the Winter Canal, Lisa waits for Gherman: 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 Lisa, he rushes away. Realizing that all is lost, she throws herself into the icy waters.

At a gambling house, Gherman'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." Tomsyky entertains the others with a song. Then Chekalinsky leads a traditional gamblers' song. Settling down to play, they are surprised when Gherman arrives, wild and distracted. Yeletsky senses a confrontation and asks Tomsyky to be his second if a duel should result. Gherman, intent only on betting, starts with 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. Gherman bets the ace but is confronted by Yeletsky with the winning card — the queen of spades. Seeing the Countess' ghost, Gherman takes his own life, asking Yeletsky's forgiveness and Lisa's as well. The others pray for his tormented soul.