LOST IN A SYMBOLIST CITY:

CHAIKOVSKY'S THE QUEEN OF SPADES AND ANDREY BELY'S PETERSBURG

One of the crucial features of the fin de siècle culture was its rich reminiscent environment. Particulrly two imperial capitals, Vienna and St. Petersburg, were litereally immersed a peculiar atmosphere in which virtually every culturally significant gesture came out surrounded by multiple echoes from the past. Entangled in a web of symbolically charged "correspondences," the fin de siècle Vienna and Petersburg emerged as "symbolist cities" par excellence. For Vienna, the principal material out of which this web had been vowen was music. For Petersburg, it was mostly visual images—monuments, buildings, streets, embankments—and their reflection in literature, from the eighteenth century odes, to Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*, Gogol's demonization of the phantom-like city in *Nevsky Prospect*, and Dostoevsky's pictures of Petersburg, that "most abstract and premeditated city on earth."

The reminiscential stock of a symbolist city had been growing in a self-perpetuating fashion until, by the turn of the twentieth century, its crushing weight began to be felt. Saddled with pervasive memories, every event, thought, artifact came out as something that, to use Derrida's expression, "always already" (toujour dejà) had been there. A wall between the inner vision, prompted by memories, and the outside physical reality wore increasingly thin. One could not be certain whether what one saw was actually there in plain view or was merely a mental play, an echo of an echo. Consequently, one could not be certain about one's own self as well; the inner world of a person dissolved into mutually incompatible images, postures, actions, each provoked by ubiquitous precedents. What came out as a sum of those incoherent parts turned out to be a "man without properties," a disoriented neurotic self uncapable of taking an account of how, and for what purpose, he has gotten into the place in which he finds himself. The imposing

imperial façade showed signs of dissolution as much as individual consciousness, its granite edifices and sounds of the orchestral brass turning into semiotic phantoms. This was the atmosphere in which the anti-positivist philosophical revolution and modernist aesthetic explosion thrived alongside personal neuroses and political dementia. Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*, written on the eve and in anticipation of the crush of the Russian Empire, and Joseph Roth's *Radetzky March* and Musil's *Man without Properties*, both written in the wake of the breakdown of the Hapsburgs' world, registered the workings of this semiotic vortex—an increasing sense of semiotic fictitiousness of the world out of which the personal and social collapse emerged with the imminence of a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Chaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, conceived, written and staged in 1890, chronologically stood at the very beginning of that epoch; a few years remained for Nietzsche to become a universal presence in the European cultural world, for the first wave of "decadents" to appear on Russian, English, German literary scenes (following the French lead), for Mahler to come out with his "Resurrection" Symphony and Scriabin with his *Poème d'extase*. The author of the opera seemed to be firmly anchored in the nineteenth-century aesthetics and world-views; it is hard to imagine him embracing Nietzsche, Freud, Andrei Bely, or Scriabin, had he lived a few years more to witness their rise. Yet I agree with those critics who have pointed out to symbolist and expressionist traits in *The Queen of Spades*. Like Pushkin before and Bely after him, Chaikovsky, an outsider drawn into St. Petersburg's social and artistic milieu at a later stage of his career, produced a quintessentially "Petersburgian tale" that absorbed into itself and powerfully contributed to the peculiar spirit of a symbolist city.

There is no need to follow in detail differences between Pushkin's story and Modest Chaikovsky's libretto of the opera. Pushkin's dry, ellyptic, evasive manner gave way to the gasping eagerness. Pushkin's Liza, a poor orphan who seizes on Hermann's advances as a

chance to escape from the humiliating dependence on the Countess, has turned in the opera into the Countess' granddaughter who throws away a brilliant engagement with Prince Eletsky because of her overwhelming passion for an enigmatic stranger; Pushkin's Hermann, obsessed with the idea of becoming rich and seeing in his intrigue with Liza nothing but a pathway towards his goal, is transformed into an exalted lover who seeks money only as the means to "flee away from the people" together with the object of his adoration. In a few terse sentences concluding his story, Pushkin tells about his heroes' destiny: Liza (or rather Lizaveta Ivanovna as she is called in the tale) married a decent and well-to-do young man, and now in her turn has took an orphan to her household; Hermann spends the rest of his days in the madhouse, repeating nonstop the names of the three cards. In the opea, Liza succumbs to the inevitable fate of an operatic heroine by throwing herself into the Winter Ditch, and Hermann reciprocates by piercing himself with a dagger (or shooting himself, depending on the taste of a stage director). Although some of Pushkin's dialogs were used in recitatives, and various outside literary sources were incorporated into the opera's narrative rather ingeniously (mostly by the composer’s suggestion), its backbone consisted of verses written by M. Chaikovsky, and in a few instances by P. Chaikovsky himself, at whose occasional banalities (lines like "Forgive me, heavenly creature, for having disturbed your repose" etc.) one cannot help wincing. All of this offers an easy invitation either to a smirk over the operatic kitsch, or to a sigh over another desecration of another Pushkin's venerable creation.

But it is essentialy futile to judge a libretto as a purely literary text, without the meaning that music has induced in it. Had Modest Chaikovsky reworked Pushkin's story for a drama theater, the text he produced would have looked embarrasingly banal, maudlin, wrought in narrative and stylistic incoherences. Yet together with the music, its overblown sentimentality turns into the expressionist emotional hyperbole, its characters' thorough detachment from everyday logic indicate passions reaching the point of insanity,

and its apparent inability to make narrative ends meet results in producing a broken, disoriented, profoundly disturbed picture of the world. In this sense, it is fair to say that the libretto has served its purpose quite effectively—when the composer repeatedly praised his brother for it, it was not a vain praise. It was the effect produced by the libretto together with music that made an indelible imprint on the way Pushkin's story was coopted into the somber imagery of "St. Petersburg's myth." Quite a few literary works in the early twentieth century—notably Bely's *Petersburg*—appeared literally invaded by images and situations of *The Queen of Spade*—those of Chaikovsky's opera rather than Pushkin's tale.

There was one deviation of the libretto from its literary original whose consequences proved to be crucial for the meaning of the opera. It was the shift of the implied time of the narrative.

Pushkin's story, written in 1833-34, evidently happens about the same time. Each of its chaprters is garnished with an epigraph taken from fleety contemporary sources: a conversation, a letter, a private joke, a poetic impromptu. Real or fictitious, these references create the atmosphere of spontaneity; as far as Pushkin's implied audience was concerned, the story may have been told at a social gathering—perhaps over the supper after the game—as a piece of the *table-talk*, a mixture of gossip news and an anecdote Pushkin developed a taste for in his late years. In the vein of numerical hints and implicit calculations typical for the mock-cabbalistic mode of his narrative, Pushkin offers an explicit chronological signpost of the story: a casual remark, near its beginning, that states that the Countess "strictly followed fashions of the 'seventies, and proceeded with her toilette as laboriously and meticulously as sixty years ago" [Ch. II].

The opera's time is most obviously indicated by references to the reign of Catherine II. In the 3rd scene Catherine's appearance is announced at the end of the ball. The excited guests greet the approaching Empress with the famous polonaise "Glory to thee,

Catherine, our tender mother," whose words were written by Derzhavin, and music by Juzef Kozlowski, Prince Potemkin's court composer, for the occasion of a feast given by Potemkin in Catherine's honor on April 28, 1791. Thus, the opera's narrative time is unambiguously indicated as the early 1790s. Correspectively, the time of the Countess' youth is pushed back from the 1770s, the time of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, to the time of Louis XV and Marquise Pompadour, i.e., 1740-50s. It is Marquise Pompadour, who had presided over the Louis XVI's court since 1745, whom the Countess mentions in her reminiscences in the scene in her chamber.

An obvious if superficial reason for the time shift was the theater's desire to have an interlude with singing and a pantomime, for which an eighteenth-century's ball would provide an appropriate stylistic frame. Including into the Third scene the pastoral "The Sincerity of a Shepherdess" by a minor eighteenth-century poet Petr Karabanov (which the composer has selected himself, out of two possibilities proposed by the librettist), with its charmingly naive archaic verses, gave Chaikovsky an opportunity to write a pastiche in Mozartean style, akin with his Fourth orchestral suite "Mozartiana" (1887)—with the duet of Prilepa ["The Attractive"] and Milovzor ["Tender Looks"] echoing the duet of Zerlina and Don Giovanni. By seizing this opportunity, however, the authors of the opera committed themselves to pushing narrative time of Pushkin's tale back for about fourty years.

There are some signs of vacillation over this temporal design in the libretto which may indicate that the deviation from Pushkin's chronology was not decided from the very beginning. In the Second scene, Liza and Polina sing two pieces in the genre of the sentimental *romans*, with lyrics by Zhukovsky and Batiushkov—an allusional leap that placed the action in the next century. Although the poems themselves were written in the 1810s, one might easily picture a domestic gathering in the 1830s or even later at which they would be performed as songs. When the Countess reminisces about her youth in the

Fourth scene, her memories produce a glaring inconsistence: the song she ostensibly had sung for Marquise Pompadour (died in 1764) was taken from a French opera of the next decade—*Richard le cœur de lion* by André Modeste Gretri, 1773—a reference that would have been exactly right for Pushkin's chronology but not the opera's.

It is important to note, though, that at a later stage of his work Chaikovsky has made on his own some alterations in the libretto aimed at reinforcing and making more explicit references to the 1790s. The ball scene originally ended with Hermann's fatal exclamation: "It is not me, it is the fate that wishes so, and I'll learn the three cards!" The composer felt it necessary to add, in a way of the conclusion, the announcement of Catherine's arrival and the polonaise; he himself drafted excited exclamations of the guests and incorporated Derzhavin's famous verses. Later, when working on the Seventh scene, Chaikovsky again took initiative in adding Derzhavin's song "If only lovely maidens could fly like birds," to be sung by Tomsky. As he acknowledged in a letter to the Great Prince Konstantin Konstantinovich, he disliked Derzhavin in general, and found frivolous jocosity of the stanzas disgustingly vulgar, but wanted to include them precisely because their crudeness conveyed the spirit of their time. In fact, Derzhavin's verses could be considered a close kin to E. Schikaneder's "Ein Vögelfänger bin ich ja"—Papageno's entrance couplets.

No matter how explicit were the signs of the 1790s in the opera, its story as a whole could not be shifted arbitrarily back for almost half a century. Many of its situations, characters, discourses resisted that shift. As a result, the story presented in the opera appeared clad in temporal implausibilities and anachronisms. The time of the opening scene in the Summer park is marked by a reference to "the most wise Tsarina"; yet its overall composition unmistakenly indicates realities of the nineteenth century and their literary reflections. The way in which different waves of promenading people proceeded one after another—first children with their nurses and governesses, than a masculine company, to be eventually joined by the ladies—corresponded to, and probably was

inspired by the opening pages of Gogol's *Nevsky Prospect* (written the same year as Pushkin's tale, in 1834). The Second scene, at Liza's, as I have already mentioned, referred to the nineteenth century by virtue of the romances sung there. Even more misplaced looked the Sixth scene in which Liza awaited Hermann at the Winter Ditch at midnight. In a Petersburg of Bely's novel, i.e., at the turn of the twentieth century, Sofia Petrovna Likhutina dwelled at the place late in the night, imagining herself as operatic Liza and Nikolai Apollonovich as Hermann; but it is hard to picture a young woman from the upper crust of nobility (which is who Liza is in the opera) walking to the Winter Ditch at that hour, even for the express purpose of throwing herself into it, in a Petersburg of Pushkin's time, let alone of the eighteenth century. The circumstances of Liza's death could hardly look more anachronistic had she thrown herself under a train.

Even more important time shifts become apparent if we consider the opera's characters, their actions and the manner of speaking. They bear a definite imprint of the nineteenth century—more of a later part of it rather than of Pushkin's time. Let us consider just one example. Prince Eletsky, Liza's fiancé, approaches her at the ball in order to profess to her the noble selflessness of his love. He loves her beyond any measure but does not want to confine the freedom of her heart; if it is needed, he is prepared to disappear from her life, to suppress his jealousy; his dream is to become not merely a loving husband, "a servant occasionally used," but her friend and support. Chaikovsky wrote the text of Eletsky's aria himself, having sent it to Modest for approval after the music was already composed. We hear in it the voice of a progressive intellectual of the 1860-70s, a kin of Chernyshevsky's "new people," Goncharov's Stolz from *Oblomov*, Turgenev's Bersenev from *On the Eve*—someone who is a little plain, perhaps, but impeccably decent. This Eletsky had obviously read Chatsky's contemptuous line about "a husband the boy, a husband the servant, one of his wife's pages—the sublime ideal of all Moscow husbands." (Although written in the early 1820s, Griboedov's *Woe to Wit* became

universally known by the 1860s, thanks to its publication abroad; in Russia, first more or less complete editions appeared in 1862 and 1875). Meanwhile, the scene presumably happens at the feast in 1791; in a few minutes, Eletsky, Liza and other guests will be treated to the Pastorale "The Sincerity of a Shepherdess."

Most misplaced of all, of course, is the main character of the opera. The way Liza envisioned Hermann before she actually met him—a demonic nocturnal figure, menacing and irresistibly attractive at the same time—exuded a typical aura of a romantic hero. Later, however, as we become more and more acquainted with an actual Hermann, his Tristanesque romantic features become fused with those of Raskolnikov, in a self-annihilating symbiosis that betrays the "decadent" world of incoherent obsessions and perpetual disturbances—the world of the heroes of *Ivanov*, *Black Monk*, or *The Duel* (Chaikovsky became Chekhov's admirer in the late 1880s). Not only are his passions blown out of proportion and go beyond his control, they seem to be purely reactive. He thrusts headlong in all possible directions at the first provocation, so that his passionate endeavors eventually negate each other. A glance from afar at a "heavenly creature" plunges Hermann in a trance of amorous veneration, so sublime that he does not want even to learn her name—no earthly name exists by which one could call her. Upon hearing that the "creature" is engaged to Prince Eletsky, he avows to "wrest" her from Prince by any means. A possibility to become rich by employing the demonic three cards plunges him into the pursuit of their secret, first in view of attaining the object of his adoration but eventually to the oblivion of anything but the secret itself. Once he is certain that the secret is his he can think of nothing but the shine of “the piles of gold" that now all belong to him. However, when he has reached the green table and tasted his first winning, the enormous sum he has just won becomes all but forgotten: it is the game itself, the gambling with one's fate and life that he idolizes in his last aria. Increasingly cut

off from the reality by this maddening chase after clashing phantoms, Hermann eventually collapses, destroying everybody around him in the process.

It is striking to see how vividly the operatic Hermann reflected the perceived malaise of the fin de siècle. When in the last scene Hermann places himself, in his "aria with the goblet," at the yonder side of good and evil, proclaming them to be nothing but dreams, declaring labor and honesty just fairy tales for females, he defies, in the fog of his madness, everything held as sacrosanct by Chaikovsky's generation. At the same time, and by the same token, he offers a striking preview of Nietzschean characters, soon to mushroom in works of literature in Russia and elsewhere.

A small detail betrays futility of the operatic Hermann's pretence of being a man of the eighteenth or even early nineteenth century. In Pushkin's tale, its hero is called "Ghermann" [Germann], with the double "n"; in the opera, he has become "Gherman" [German]—the difference obfuscated in the English translation. "Ghermann" is a direct transliteration of the authentic German name. Indeed, it is said about the literary Hermann that he was the son of a "russified" German immigrant; when he needs to produce a love letter for Lizaveta Ivanovna, he picks it "word for word" from "a German novel"—*Werther*, perhaps? (Pushkin adds slyly that since Lizaveta Ivanovna did not know German she remained quite satisfied with the epistle). A person of German origin in Russian service, "russified" but not fully deracinated, perhaps still speaking a somewhat artificial Russian, was a common presence in Pushkin's time. In the second half of the century, however, the process of adaptation has come further, affecting, among other matters, the names. The original "Hermann," or its Russian transliteration "Ghermann," has lost the second "n" (in compliance with the way all German names on -*mann* turned out in Russian: Shuman, Gofman etc.) and became a conventional Russian first name. One of Chaikovsky's closest friends, the composer and critic known in the West as Hermann

Laroche, was in fact called Gherman Aleksandrovich Larosh. The operatic "Gherman" had to be, if only by virtue of his name, his and Chaikovsky's contemporary at the very least.

Chaikovsky's music matches these temporal swings. When the Second scene climaxes in the love duet, its music reaches expressionist heights comparable with those of the love duet in the second act of *Tristan and Isolde.* The next scene starts with Mozartean sounds of the introductory chorus celebrating the ball. Even with a break between the two scenes, the effect of this sharp and unexpected shift of the musical chronotope is dizzying. The same can be said about the confrontations, throughout the scene of the ball, of the sounds of the Pastorale, Eletsky's aria—written, true to his character, in a bona fide mid-nineteenth-century operatic style (for which Germond's aria from the second act of *La Traviata* may serve as a close analogy),—and episodes of Hermann's ravings whose chopped phrasing, shifting tonalities and lugubre orchestration keep pace with musical discourse of the *Götterdämmerung*. In this context, Chaikovsky's musical retrogression into the eighteenth century seems to be pointing, paradoxically, ahead in time; it presages the avant-garde fascination with classicist imitations spiced with stylistic shifts and twists—the world of Richard Strauss and Prokofiev, Ravel and Stravinsky.

In the libretto, the shifting temporal layers might originally signify no more than inadvertent side effects. The music of the opera, however, bestowed on its narrative anachronisms symbolical meaning. Its obvious stylistic diversity constituted something more significant than merely a response to different narrative chronotopes showing up at different moments in the opera. By using recurring motifs reemerging through all time layers, it made them reverberate with and echo each other. The musical discourse never jumps into a new temporal environment without retaining traces of other temporal-stylistic situations that appeared earlier in the story, or anticipating those that are to emerge later. Translated into this heterogenous and yet continual musical discourse, the story acquires **stereoscopic temporality**, as if it were happening in different historical epochs and

stylistic environments simultaneously. Different temporal incarnations mirror one another, leaving the listener transfixed by all elusive correspondences, in a way not unlikely to what is experienced by the characters on stage. When Hermann a "man of the nineties," like Wozzeck or a Chekhovian hero clouded in his obsessions and hearing taunting voices (of his fellow gamblers), lingers at a late eighteenth-century feast, or when he offers his Nietzschean "goblet aria" a few minutes after Tomsky delivered his quintessentially eighteenth-century's double entendre about lovely maidens flying like birds, one can be reminded of the Prince from *The Sleeping Beauty* as he is crossing the halls of an enchanted castle plunged in a century-long sleep, watching its glorious inhabitants dressed up after the latest fashions of a hundred years ago.

It looks as if the operatic Hermann were lost in time, amidst the incongrouos landscapes of a city that seems to share his predicament. In fact all the principal characters in the opera—Hermann, Liza, and the Countess—behave as if they were literally caught in this maze of temporal mirrors. It is their implied ability to remember and recognize, or rather their inability to escape from the prison house of contradictory images and voices arising from different epochs and invading their memories, that makes what happens on stage happen. The very irrationality of the drama's proceedings, the most bizarre inconsequences of the heroes' actions and reactions occur due to the fact that it all happens in a world projected by their confused consciousness. Let us trace some pathways in this temporal mirror-house.

a. The fate of a Shepherdess.

In the Second scene, Polina performs, at the request of her and Liza’s friends, what she called Liza's "favorite romance." It is based on Batiushkov's short poem of 1810. Although Batiushkov's poetry was not used for songs as profusely as Pushkin's or even Zhukovsky's, stylistically it represented the same strain in the early nineteenth-century Rusian poetry that was easily adaptable for domestic music-making. The situation in the

Second scene can be seen as typical for a private gathering somewhere in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Chaikovsky's music for this piece also does not deviate from a refined but relatively simple style of an art song of Glinka's time—an extension of the popular sentimental *romans*.

There is one feature in this typical and seemingly yet undisturbed scene that offers a clue to the characters' future progress: it is the choice of the poem. Its title (not mentioned in the opera) is "An Inscription on the Grave of a Shepherdess." The poem artfully translates the imagery of the mid-eighteenth-century pastorale into the mood of the early nineteenth-century elegy. Its heroine's lot was to be an early grave, instead of the timeless joy of the pastoral Arcadia which she had expected to be her destiny:

Podrugi milye! s bespeçnostæü igrivoj
Pod pläsovoj napev vy rezvitesæ v lugax.
I ä kak vy Ωila v Arkadii sçastlivoj;
I ä na utre dnej v six rowax i poläx
Minutny radosti vkusila.
Lübovæ v meçtax zlatyx mne sçastie sulila;
No çto Ω dostalosæ mne v six radostnyx mestax?—
Mogila!

Lovely companions, with a careless playfulness
You frolic in the meadows, under a dancing tune.
Like you, I had also lived in the happy Arcadia,
Had also on the morn of my days, amidst those woodlands and fields,
Tasted fleeting joys.
Love, in my golden dreams, offered me happiness;
Yet what has befallen me in those joyful sites?—
The grave!

Perhaps this sad story happened because this Shepherdess was born into a wrong age. The time of Boucher was gone; one might cast a glimpse at a tableau from the rococo age only to become more keenly aware of one's own elegiac melancholy. In the opera's world of poly-temporality, however, the age of rococo and the age of the elegy occur side by side.

In the next scene, at the ball, Polina will sing in and Liza listen to an eighteen-century Pastorale whose heroine is totally oblivious of the elegiac future. Before the performance starts, there comes a scene between Liza and Prince Eletsky in which Liza makes her suitor understand the futility of his entrities. By rejecting a glamorous suitor and showing readiness to give herself to the one she has chosen, Liza casts herself in the role of the Pastorale's Prilepa who unhesitatingly rejects Zlatogor ("Mountain of Gold") with all his promises of luxury and embraces the idyll in a hut with her beloved "Tender Looks." Some turns in Zlatogor's failed seduction of Prilepa echo Eletsky's aria. We listen to the suitors' voices through Liza's perception: it is her memory of her recent encounter with Eletsky that echoes in her mind when she listen to the scene between Zlatogor and Prilepa.

This happy turn of the mood, caused by the shift in the chronotope, does not, however, push the elegiac Shepherdess and her destiny completely into oblivion. A trace of her voice reappears for a moment, like a light cloud, amidst the scenes of the rococo happiness. There was a characteristic melodic turn close to the end of Polina's romance, just before its conclusion on the word "grave"—a long gradual descent spanning more than an octave (a decima, to be precise) [ex. 1]. A similar descent (this time, featuring a none) can be heard in the part of Milovzor, whose part is sung by the same Polina, of course [ex. 2]. This is how Liza is listening to, and Polina singing the innocent-sounding pastorale: they both remember the evening before; its romantic melancholy, restlessness, passions reverberate in the air amidst the naively cloudless world of "The Sincerity of a Shepherdess." By virtue of conflicting reminiscental associations, Liza's mind is transported simultaneously into the world of an eighteenth-century idyll and a nineteenth-century elegy—the world of the happy Prilepa joining her beloved after having rejected the "Mountain of Gold," and of the sad Shepherdess destined to an early grave instead of the joy of love. At this point, Liza is not sure what is going to befall her, or rather, whose

lot she is to choose. She is heading in both directions simultaneously—the best recipy for self-destruction.

The dilemma returns, in yet another temporal incarnation, in the Sixth scene when Liza, waiting for Hermann, sings out her woes. The words of her lament (written by the composer himself), as well as the music, are typical for the nineteenth-century popular urban song in a quasi-folklore style. In fact, the tune of Liza's singing reflects that of her "favorite romance," albeit in a simplified, straightforward transformation. Batiushkov's Shepherdess' refined melancholy gives way to a populist musical expression of the woes of love. Innumerable songs of different level of sophistication, from Glinka's "Don't disturb me vainly with the return of your tenderness" to Aleksandr Varlamov's "A little gray dove is moaning," paraded their naive poetic similes with nature and abundant minor subdominant harmonies in all households, from "best houses" to industrial suburbs. Alexander Blok listened avidly to their performance by the gypsies' choruses; Smerdiakov delighted chambermaids in his neighborhood by singing "I am attached to my beloved by the invincible force," accompanying himself on a guitar. Liza's deportment at this point is that of the opera's listeners' contemporary—a young woman from the mid- or late nineteenth-century expressing her real worries and woes through a simple but touching song. Hermann appears after all, dispelling Liza's forebodings, if only for a moment. A short-lived love duet follows. Through all its chromatic passing notes, polyphonic clashes of voices, and a feverish valse rhythm, one can discern a simple melodic backbone that comes straight from the naive duet of Prilepa and Milovzor. Both duets end with a *ritornello* played by the oboe; this time, however, the somber low register of the instrument and the rushing tempo make it a mocking echo of the Pastorale.

Even before the final catastrophe became imminent, one could overhear once more, in Liza's lament, the characteristic descending melodic figure—a simultaneous echo of the Pastorale and the elegy [ex. 3]. Now in a full possession of her late nineteenth-century

self, a strong-willed woman who has called the man she loves to a decisive *rendez-vous* on a deserted embankment (not his "obedient slave" she had declared herself within another chonotope, after having listened to the Pastorale), Liza still cannot find out what kind of a shepherdess she is destined or chooses to be.

b. The lover.

It was not in vain that Hermann proved to be a good match to Liza in their frenzied echo of Prilepa's and Milovzor's duet in the Sixth Scene. He had been listening to the Pastorale too. The announcement of the spectacle by the Majordomo, following by raiant sounds of its orchestral Introduction had caught him in the middle of his troubled thoughts, a situation similar to that of Wozzeck listening to cheery tunes in the beerhouse. When the crucial duet of Prilepa and Milovzor comes, one may notice that this pastiche reincarnation of the *Là ci darem' la mano* is in fact not as perfect as one might expect. Underneath the shining Mozartean surface of the vocal line followed by idyllic invocations of the flute and oboe, one can discern occasional dischordant voices of the bassoon and clarinet in a low register, whose clumsy darkness weight down the simulated lightness of the piece. These troubling voices, coming as if from the piece's underground, can be easily overlooked—the more easily so that conductors tend to play them down, sweeping under the rug, so to say, these awquard deviations from a "good" Mozartean stylization. Meanwhile, theit opresence is crucial for our understanding of the signifiance of the duet, and the Pastorale at large, in the development of the drama. For their voices echo the lugubre sound of the winds that accompanied Hermann's frenzied monologues at the ball. When, following his disparate daydreaming about Liza and three cards, he exclaims in dispair: "I am a madman, a madman!"—his words are accompanied by a prolonged duet of the bassoon and clarinet in the low register. It is this voice—the voice of Hermann's thoughts—whose trace bestowes an uncharacteristic somberness on the Pastorale.

The listener is invited to perceive "The Sincerity of a Shepherdess" in a way reminding of the theater scene in *Hamlet*: in both cases, a comically old-fashioned performance makes only more striking the hidden thoughts of the drama's characters that they bestow into it. Their presence in the music of the Pastorale reflects Hermanns perception in which tunes mix. Liza hears an echo of the elegiac Shepherdess creeping into Polina's singing of Milovzor's part; Hermann perceives the idyl through the dark glass of his longings and worries. Both have found in the story of the Sincere Shepherdess something that echoed their own thoughts. Indeed, Hermann's mind at this point is preoccupied with a shepherdess of his own whom he has to persuade in purity of his motives—the one with impeccable credentials of the rococo age; and what he eagerly expects of her is sincerity.

Whom is Hermann in love with? In the First scene of the opera, he proclaims to Tomsky that he does not know the name of his beloved because he does not want to call her with any earthly name, singing to a tune that is to become the leit-motif of his love. A little later, when Tomsky tells to his companions the anacdote about how the Countess had obtained the secret of the Three Cards, and received the prophesy about her death at the hand of an ardent lover who will try to wring it from her, he slips, on the words "three cards, three cards, three cards" into a tune whose melodic line replicates exactly—albeit under the disguise of a drastically different rhythm—Hermann's earlier profession of love [ex. 5 a & b]. Again, the reason of that coincidence may be that we are listening to Tomsky's ballade through Hermann's ears. It is his hidden thoughts—the instant connection that he has made between the story he is listening to and his passion—that affect the musical appearance of Tomsky's tale, resulting in an uncunny resemblance between the theme of the Three Cards and the love leitmotif. When we reach the scene at the ball, we witness the same motif running on a parallel course in Hermann increasingly incoherent monologues and in taunting remarks of the gamblers. In the next scene, in the

Countess' chamber, the converence of the two versions of the motif—the romance-like one from Hermann's arioso and the heavily emphatic one from Tomsky's ballade—reaches completion. It is imposible to tell which one is actually being sounded when Hermann, in the role of the morbid "ardent lover" prophesized in Tomsky's anecdote, confronts the Countess; at that point nobody, least of all himself, can tell unambiguously who is the target of his passion.

This double musical perspective gives peculiar meaning to Herrmann's refusal to name the object of his passion—was it indeed the sublime out-of-this-earth nature of his feelings, or an ambiguity of the object to which he was magnetically attracted? A fine detail in the First scene reveals this ambiguity. After Prince Eletsky accepts friends' congratulations for his engagement, he is asked: "Who is your bride?" At this very moment the Countess and Liza appear together in the park, so Eletsky replies by simply pointing out: "Here she is!" He obviously refers to Liza; yet the orchestra seconds his remark not by Hermann's amorous tune by which one could recognize the appearance of his beloved, but by the lugubre leitmotif of the Countess played by trombones. Apparently, even at this moment Hermann’s attention is attracted to the Countess, who reciprocates by inquiring Tomsky about Hermann and expressing her fear of him. No wonder that the following Tomsky's ballade draws a fatal connection in Hermann's consciousness between his love and the demonic secret.

As we have seen, of all characters in the opera Hermann most definitely belongs to the "dusk age" of the late 1880s or the 1890s. At the same time, however, he retains intense reminiscental relations with the world of the eighteenth century. Desperately he tries to enter the circle of lovely shades from the rococo Arcadia, to bare his ardent heart to his shepherdess and to plead with her to be once again as naively sincere, as artlessly obliging as she had been to the happy lovers of her rococo past.

Prilepa, the shepherdess from the Pastorale, does have her own secret, although it amounts to nothing more than her longing for Milovzor. "My dear little friend, the beloved little shepherd who makes me sigh and to whom I want to reveal my passion, alas! did not come to the dancing site"—she sings at the opening of the idyl. From the very beginning, Prilepa attests herself as most forthcoming, most willing to reveal her secret—it is only Milovzor's failure to come see her that prevents her for a time being from making her confession. When Milovzor does appear and in his turn bares out his heart, Prilepa happily reciprocates. Liza is one who feels inspired by the trusting sincerity of Prilepa; she gives Hermann the key from the Countess' chamber and succumbs to his bizarre wish to come there that very evening: she is his slave, whatever he wants will happen. But Hermann falls under the spell of the Pastorale as well. His vision of his chosen shepherdess becomes blurred, losing its time focus, amidst suggestive images from the age of Arcadia, intersperced with demonic taunting voices.

When Hermann awaits behind a curtain in the Countess' chamber, he hears her singing a French aria from the age of her youth. The words of the song seem to be directed to himself: "Je crains de lui parler la nuit, j'écute trop tout ce qu'il dit. Il me dit 'Je vous aime,' et je sens malgré moi. Je sens mon cœur, qui bat, qui bat, je ne sais pas pourquoi!" They echo naive words with which Prilepa and Milovzor expressed the tumult of their feelings: "I don't know, don't know, don't know why." But it is not only words that sound teasingly suggestive—it is the tune of the aria as well. For it reflects the theme of a small balley with which the story of Prilepa and Milovzor opened—the sarabande of shepherds and shepherdesses to which Milovzor had failed to appear [ex. 6 a & b]. Prompted by these secret messages that sprung from his own confused memories, Hermann-Milovzor rushes forward, bares out his heart in a passionate plea ("If only you have ever known the feeling of love…" etc.), and demands from his vis à vis something Prilepa was so artlessly willing to grant to her lover: "Reveal [your secret] to me!"

In the end, the old shepherdess seems to fulfill the promise of sincerity implied by her rococo image. When, having come to possession of her confession, Hermann reaches Liza at the Winter Ditch, his romantic love is completely superceded by the rococo image now firmly imprinted in his mind. Ironically, his last words to Liza: "Leave me alone! Who are you? I don't know you!"—echo his first ones: "I don't know her name, and don't want to learn it."

* * *

A few years ago, I have heard an interview with Luigi Menotti in which he expressed his delight with *The Queen of Spades*, noting perceptively its closeness to the modernity. One thing in the opera he did not like, though, was the Pastorale: he found it disruptive for the development of the drama and artificial as a stylization. His advise was to cut this segment as superfluous in order to make the whole more appealing to a modern audience. Half a century earlier, Meyerhold also found the Pastorale, or rather the explicit reference to the eighteenth century that it contained, troubling. In his famous and controversial setting of Chaikovsky's opera (1935), he shifted its action to the early nineteenth century, i.e., restored the original time of Pushkin's story. For this purpose he needed to rewrite parts of the libretto—a common practice in Soviet productions of classical operas in the 1930s, by no means limited to Gorodetsky's *Ivan Susanin* (typically, the tenor of such "modernizations" consisted in playing down religious moments and enhancing social critique).

I do not want to make any judgment on productions which I have never seen. But as it must be evident from the above analysis, to my mind the Pastorale—and the explicit reference to the eighteenth century that it carried with itself—stayed at the very epicenter of the opera's musical-dramatic conception; it constituted a cross-point for all veins of psychological development of the drama, reflected in its leitmotifs. Imagine a production of *Hamlet* in which the play "The murder of Gonzago" would be omitted for the sake of

conciseness and stylistic coherence. The problem with the Pastorale is that unless one perceives in it all hidden psychological tremors which it absorbs into itself and speads throughout the opera, it does look as a superfluous adornment, a routine operatic interlude. Its innocent appearance of a pastiche does not invite to take a hard look at it.

It does not take much to comprehend what a neoclassical pastiche may mean, say, in Richard Strauss' *Ariadne on Naxos*—but Chaikovsky… in 1890… in a work whose musical language, although by no means simplistic or retrograde, hardly qualifies as *Zukunftmusik*? So early is the date of this daring artistic achievement, from so unexpected quarters (giving Chaikovsky's reputation for conventionality verging on banality) it comes, that it takes not a small effort to begin noticing what is there in plain view: that *The Queen of Spades* in effect presages the montage technique of the avant-garde literature, music, and cinema; and that its use of this technique results in portraying its hero's fragmented consciousness, and showing the world falling apart along with the hero's mind—a psychological and aesthetic phenomenon that soon was to become the central nerve of the avant-garde world.

Hermann of the opera represented a new type of a hero typical for the early twentieth century—a "man without properties," whose mind is attuned to different, mutually incompatible wave lengths, and falls apart as a result. He himself cannot give himself an account of who he is: an eighteenth-century seducer, an early-nineteenth century "Byronic" figure, a Tristanesque character for whom love means death (his own as well as his beloved, of course), a Dostoevskian killer out of an obsessive idea, or a Chekhovian man of the "age of the dusk" afflicted by a deep spiritual malaise. The main hero's obsessions and eventual madness corresponded to a maddeningly elusive suggestiveness of the world that surrounded him. One could not say whether that world looked so because it was seen by Hermann's eyes, or it was an ambiguity of its allusive appearances that caused the collapse of Hermann's (and Liza's) consciousness.

Once again, I want to return to Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*. Written a quarter of a century later, it strikingly resembled Chaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* in its portrayal of the characters' actions and the city's scenery through a maze of time coulisses in which its heroes are losing their way, and eventually their mind. Moreover, it did so by consciously following the imagery of Chaikovsky's opera.

Sofia Petrovna Likhutina, the heroine of *Petersburg*, has a remarkable ability to mix up all names, images, and sites. She casts her lover, Nikolai Apollonovich, into an incongrous theatrical image of Hermann composed of patchworks of the opera: he will come to a rendez-vous, declare his love in a morbid tone, then shoot himself. She awaits her Hermann at the Winter Ditch, with Chaikovsky's "ta-tam-tam-tam, ta-ta-tam-tam-tam" (transparent allusion to the orchestral introduction to the scene at the Winter Ditch) pounding in her ears. Nikolai Apollonovich does appear clad in a theatrical attire, but it turns out to be far from a patchwork Byronic image created by Sofia Petrovna's confused imagination: he is covered by a mantle and a mask of a pagliazzo from a commedia del arte. To make the displacement of the chronotope even worse, he slipped on the bridge and fell, exposing his very modern striped pants. It was this mixture of overblown romantic postures, neoclassical theatricality, and unpictoresque modernity that stood at the core of the dramatic tension in the opera; now, it turns into a hilarious parody:

> Sofia Petrovna Likhutina considered the [Winter] Ditch not just another prosaic site where one could allow oneself what he just has done; it was not in vain that she often was letting a sigh over sounds of *The Queen of Spades*: there was something resembling Liza in her present situation (what was resembling, she would not be able to tell exactly). And obviously, she dreamed of finding a Hermann in Nikolai Apollonovich when he has appeared here. And Hermann?.. This Hermann behaved like a petty pickpocket. … This Hermann did not stay firm, did not tear down his mask in a heroic, tragic gesture; this Hermann did not say daringly, for everyone to hear, in a muted, smothered voice: "I love you!"; and did not shoot himself afterwords.

The novel explicitly adopted symbolic landscapes of the opera, which by that time had been firmly imprinted in readers' memory. Flashbacks to the characters, images,

situations of Chaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* became an integral part of the city's poli-temporal symbolism. The opera's expressionist ravings found their place in a gallery of reverberating images out of which the symbolic attire of the turn-of-the century Peterburg had been made—alongside with the fog of primordial swamps, the image of Peter the founder with his carpenter's hammer, his pertified equestrian monument, odes and polonaises of the age of Catherine, Pushkin's "Petersburgian tale," with its apocalyptic symbolism clad in a neoclassical attire, Gogol's, Vladimir Odoevsky's, the early Dostoevsky's nocturnal visions of the city and its people, and finally, murky alleys and dark attics of a late nineteenth-century industrial city of Dostoevsky's novels. The operatic reincarnation of the city proved to be a crucial step in shaping the "Petersburgian text" of Russian culture of modernism.

By that time, the feeling of symbolic density of the city became pervasive. Protagonists of Blok's and Mikhail Kuzmin's poems, Zinaida Gippius' tales, and of course, Bely's novel found themselves haunted by shades and echoes from the past posing as their doubles and threatening to take over their thoughts and life. A Moscovite Boris Pasternak might be asking, in a way of a nonchalant poetic aside, "What millenium exactly do you have out there, my dear?" For someone surrounded by Petersburg's temporal mirrors, a question in order was about a century or two rather than a millenium, but consequences of that uncertainty were ominously tangible. A street or a square with a monument in it, a white night or a sunset over the river, a dark staircase or a mis-en-scene in a living room refused to be just what they were; one could hear voices, glimpse ghostly images lurking in their background. The atmosphere was intoxicating and paranoidal, revelatory and saturated with self-fulfilling prophesies of the imminent calamity. The sounds of Chaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* had become an ouverture to the symbolist drama of an imperial city on the road to its collapse.