

Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* - A survey of the major recordings

by Ralph Moore

The Queen of Spades, alternatively known as *Pique Dame* is Tchaikovsky's "other" opera. He considered it to be his best, and in recent years it has been catching up in popularity with the more celebrated *Eugene Onegin* (another dark Pushkin tale); none of his eight other operas rivals those two - *Iolanta* and *Mazeppa* come in at a very distant third. For years I have gone along with the received wisdom that *Pique Dame* is demonstrably inferior to *Eugene Onegin* but better acquaintance with *Pique Dame* has led me to the conclusion that the gap between the two is less than I thought. The fact that it is a grim, sombre tale has not helped its advancement; it hardly makes for a jolly night at the opera.

Its action is to some degree realistic but also melodramatic, in that both main characters descend into madness and commit suicide; it is also dependent upon two respectively far-fetched and supernatural elements: the supposed existence of a secret gambling formula and the apparition of the Countess' ghost to Hermann. As Chekalinsky sceptically remarks, "Se non è vero, è ben trovato!" and those devices propel events entertainingly. The opera is primarily a study in the pernicious effects of greed and obsession and in that regard Hermann is in the same mould as other suicidal or destructive operatic (anti-)heroes, such as Werther, Otello and Heinrich in *Tannhäuser*. Arguably responsible for the deaths of both Lisa and her elderly guardian grandmother, the Countess, he is certainly unattractive as a personality, yet Tchaikovsky identified closely with him as an outsider and invested heavily in his depiction, giving the music great intensity and completing the whole opera in 44 days. The other main character, who, some would say, is more important than Hermann, is Lisa, the object of his obsession (albeit second to that of winning at cards); she is the victim of a romantic delusion and her suicide, seems like the consequence of an excessive reaction on her part, given that she would clearly always have been better off without him.

The music is almost as melodic as that of *Onegin*: an arresting admixture of both neo-Classical and faux-Baroque pastiche alternating with some sinister, darkly-scored Romantic chromaticism, exploiting the lower register of woodwinds to create a menacing atmosphere. There is a frenetic, unsettling quality to the whole opera which reflects Hermann's mounting hysteria and the low, muttering cello ostinato in the introduction to the scene when Hermann tries to force the secret of the three cards from the Countess and inadvertently causes her death mirrors the same instrumental effect used by Verdi just before Otello strangles Desdemona. Perhaps this was no coincidence, as *Otello* was first performed in St Petersburg in late 1887 and *Pique Dame* was first staged there in late 1890, so surely Tchaikovsky heard Verdi's penultimate masterpiece.

Occasionally the two musical genres are intertwined, as in the Countess' antique aria from Grétry's *Richard Cœur-de-Lion*. Some have suggested that the deliberately archaic interludes have merely padded out what should have been a two-hour opera by a further forty minutes, but their formal serenity forms an ironic contrast with the protagonist's disordered, whirlwind passion and are lovely as music per se.

With regard to the vocal style, nowhere, I think, is Tchaikovsky's gift for capturing profound emotion more apparent than in Yeletsky's aria, "Ya vas lyublyu". It comes an hour into the opera and is the most beautiful aria in it – indeed, it is one of the most beautiful in all opera and any successful recording must feature a first-rate rendering of it by a baritone of the highest quality - and on that I am not prepared to compromise. The soprano's first big, soul-searching aria in Scene 2, however, never quite takes off the way Tatiana's does in *Eugene Onegin*. There are principal roles for all voice types except a bass, and that includes a character part for a mezzo-soprano in the old Countess, who may be mature but must still have plenty of voice to do her music justice. Vladimir Atlantov is the most recorded tenor in the role of Hermann over two decades; he features in three recordings below and in many ways represents a kind of ideal, so I recommend hearing him in at least one.

There are around fifty recordings in the catalogue. I review below eight studio accounts and four high-quality live performances; I also break my usual rule of considering only complete accounts by including one studio recording of excerpts, for reasons I explain.

The Recordings:

Samuil A Samosud – 1940 (studio; mono) Opera d'Oro; Cantus
Orchestra & Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre
Hermann - Nikander Khanayev
Lisa - Xenia Derzhinskaya
Countess - Bronislava Zlatogorova
Count Tomsky - Alexandr Baturin
Prince Yeletsky - Panteleimon Nortsov
Pauline - Maria Maksakova
Chekalinsky - Sergei Ostraumov
Surin - I.I. Manshavin
Chaplitsky - M.K. Novozhenin
Major-domo - P.S. Biellinik
Narumov - Konstantin Terekin
Governess - M.K. Shchervinskaya

I have lost count of the number of times I have begun a review of a vintage recording by remarking how approachable its sound is, and this is another case where it is hardly inferior to any 50's mono recording; everything is clear and present, if rather distant, and there is inevitably some swish in the background.

The singers will be little known to modern collectors, even to buffs, but they have typically Russian hard, resonant, forward voices, with no weak links. The tenor, in particular, has one of those instantly recognisable Russian tenors: precise, powerful and rather nasal, with a special gift for caressing the music in a dreamy mezza voce. Nikander Khanayev is secure but could be more resonant on loud, high notes, where there is some strain, and his intonation can slip. The basses are likewise identifiably Russian in timbre; Alexandr Baturin as Tomsky has a lovely, dark sound. A less desirable characteristic of female voices of the era is a tendency to shriek and flap; the Lisa is indeed sometimes rather shrill and plaintive, and the lower voices are fruity, but they are devoid of wobble and Maria Maksakova in particular has a very attractive mezzo, with a quick vibrato and even tone throughout its range. The baritone who sings Yeletsky is rather light and tenorish but maintains admirable legato throughout his famous aria. The Countess, if anything for once sounds too young, but she has a superb voice.

The very experienced Samosud's conducting is taut yet flexible, the orchestral playing precise and energised – insofar as we can hear any detail.

This is obviously a fine ensemble recording of interest mainly – perhaps exclusively – to devotees of historical recordings but it is a faithful representation of how the opera was performed in wartime Soviet Russia – which is very well.

Alexander Melik-Pasheyev - 1949-50 (studio; mono) Melodiya; Cantus
Orchestra & Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre
Hermann - Georgi Nelepp
Lisa - Eugenia Smolenskaya
Countess - Eugenia Verbitskaya
Count Tomsky - Aleksey Petrovich Ivanov
Prince Yeletsky - Pavel Lisitsian

Pauline - Vera Ivanova Borisenko
Chekalinsky - Alexander Peregudov
Surin - Vsevolod Tyutyunnik
Chaplitsky - Fedor Godovkin
Major-domo - Benjamin Shevtsov
Narumov - Ivan Skobtsov
Governess - Elena Korneyeva
Chloe - Vera Firsova
Mary - N Koshisina

Several, excellent, more modern recordings of this opera are available, but if you are tolerant of clean mono sound without too much distortion, this remains one of the most authentic and exciting of sets. It dates back to 1949 and 1950 but is surprisingly listenable and may be found on various labels, most economically on a bargain Cantus Classics twofer. It offers the best all-Russian-speaking cast imaginable; I for one would consider it valuable for two incomparable singers alone in Bolshoi stalwart Georgi Nelepp and Armenian baritone Pavel Lisitsian - try the latter's beautifully sung "Ya vas lyublyu" - and Nelepp is extraordinarily intense and vibrant as Hermann but also capable of poetic tenderness - for me, he is the best on record.

The female side of the cast is very good if not quite so impressive: soprano Evgenya Smolenskaya is vibrant but not wobbly, Borisenko is a fine Pauline and another Evgenya, contralto Verbitskaya, is suitably characterful as the Countess, despite her heavily accented French – but that doesn't really matter given that she is supposed to be a Russian who lived in Paris. She isn't as good as Maureen Forrester or Irina Arkhipova but she's pleasing enough.

Conductor Melik-Pashayev really pushes the action along swiftly making one realise what a taut, dramatically gripping libretto Tchaikovsky's brother Modest made of Pushkin's original. It is also a pleasure to hear Russian so clearly and idiomatically enunciated.

This is Soviet recording at its best and artistically, if not sonically, one of the most striking and satisfying available.

Kresimir Baranovich – 1955 (studio; stereo) Decca Eloquence

Orchestra - Belgrade National Opera; Yugoslav Army Chorus & Belgrade Radio Children's Choir
Hermann - Alexander Marinković
Lisa - Valerija Heybal
Countess - Melanija Bugarinovic
Count Tomsky - Jovan Gligorjjević
Prince Yeletsky - Dushan Popović
Pauline - Biserka Cvejić
Chekalinsky - Drago Petrović
Surin - Alexander Veselinović
Chaplitsky - Zivojin Iovanović
Major-domo - Nicola Janchich
Narumov - Dušan Popović
Governess - Mira Verčević
Chloe - Sofija Janković

This was the penultimate recording in the series of seven Russian operas released for the first time on CD by Decca Eloquence. Virtually every one of those has merit but has also probably been surpassed by subsequent versions, not so much for reason of the sound, which is early stereo bar the first one, but more because of cuts or relative deficiencies in the casting, which is uniformly good but not necessarily all of "star quality". Nonetheless, some of the singers here were internationally successful

and admired, they were part of a homogeneous ensemble used to working together quickly and efficiently, and these recordings are now available reasonably priced, so their appearance is decidedly of interest to the devotee of Russian opera.

The listener will immediately be struck by how good this sounds for such an old recording; the stereo separation and depth of aural field are impressive with virtually no hiss and my admiration for its clarity is increased when I stop and think that this was recorded in the year of my birth. There are a few intonation issues in the orchestral playing but it is generally secure, the conducting is alert and well sprung and the choral singing spirited. An array of fine voices is needed for the large cast of this opera and none disappoints; the lead tenor has a rather hard, nasal tone but his voice is powerful and penetrating and authentically Russian sounding. I especially like the neat, flexible baritone of the Tomsky, Jovan Gligorjjević, who sings his narrative of the Countess' younger days as a beauty in France very engagingly – intermittently supported by the conductor's underlying but audible vocal obbligato; his grunts obtrude throughout at moments of particular intensity. The leading ladies sing the antique duet opening Scene 2 beautifully and Biserka Cvejić then sings her morbid "Grave" aria... gravely. Valerija Heybal has a vibrant, slightly piercing soprano, maintaining a good line and animating Lisa's distress feelingly; unfortunately, she makes a bit of a mess of the climactic high note in her Act 3 aria. Dušan Popović was the leading company baritone and as part of the same series of recordings sang a lovely Eugene Onegin, a fine Shaklovity in Khovanshchina, a strong Shchelkalov in Boris Godunov and a splendid Prince Igor – quite a roster. Here he sings Yeletsky so has one of Tchaikovsky's finest arias, "Ya vas lyublyu" and makes a predictably admirable job of it, including a good top G. Rich-voiced contralto Melanija Bugarinović makes a real impact as the old Countess; she is wonderful. The pastoral scene is beautifully sung by two of the best singers doubling roles and the sweet-voiced Sofija Janković.

There is no particular reason to place this above several other recordings but if you simply want a good account of the opera Tchaikovsky favoured above all others, performed by an excellent company, you will not be disappointed.

(Adapted from [my original review](#))

Boris Khaikin – 1967 (studio; stereo) Melodiya
 Orchestra & Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre
 Hermann - Zurab Anjaparidze
 Lisa - Tamara Milashkina
 Countess - Valentina Levko
 Count Tomsky - Mikhail Kiselev
 Prince Yeletsky - Yuri Mazurok
 Pauline - Irina Arkhipova
 Chekalinsky - Andrei Sokolov
 Surin - Valery Yaroslavtsev
 Chaplitsky - Vitali Vlassov
 Major-domo - Anatoly Mishutin
 Narumov - Yuri Dementiev
 Governess - Mariya Matukova

Three good things to start: first, the remastered sound here is astonishingly good for a recording now fifty years old: warm, full and well balanced, although occasionally, as in Herman's first entry, the voices are rather too close. Secondly, it is neatly and attractively packaged in Melodiya's new digipack format, with full notes but unfortunately no libretto. Finally, it is wholly Russian in atmosphere and performance, the conductor utterly immersed in the idiom and the singers of real quality, with that slightly hysterical intensity characteristic of both Tchaikovsky's oeuvre and vocal production of the era. The famous Georgian tenor Zurab Anjaparidze is vibrant, secure and compelling as Herman, if not especially subtle; great mezzo Irina Arkhipova doubles up as Pauline and a Shepherdess; elegant

baritone Yuri Mazurok is in his absolute prime and sings the best account on record of Yeletsky's aria - and the cast is generally peppered with singers who would be stars today. Soprano Tamara Milashkina made an unfortunate Tosca in her 1976 studio recording for Melodiya under Mark Ermler but is here much more at home as Lisa, her grainy, slightly acidic tone suiting the music admirably.

Mazurok as Yeletsky has one of those voices which pierces me to the heart with its beauty and I readily admit that I hunted down this rather scarce and often expensive Melodiya re-issue mainly to hear him in what remains a secondary role, but I also love the opera and was delighted to hear the exceptional quality of both the recording and the rest of the cast when I listened to the whole thing. Arkhipova, who sang the old Countess later in her career, has a voice of chocolatey warmth and total steadiness; her "Mogila" aria is riveting. The Countess here is the superb Valentina Levko, actually rather too young for the role at this stage of her career but sounding suitably querulous and imposing. Kiselyov could have a fruitier baritone in order to do full justice to his Act 1 narrative introducing the "tri karty" theme but he is very vivid and concentrated of tone. Artists with voices like those of Anjaparidze and Arkhipova are simply extinct today and with the lamentably early death of Dmitri Hvorostovsky we lost perhaps the last in the line of Russian-Soviet baritones to which he, Mazurok, Chernov and Lisitsian belong.

Khaikin's conducting is not as well-shaped and pointed as some, occasionally missing nuances that Rostropovich, for example, finds in the music; he just lets the music unfold naturally, without fuss.

There are other recommendable, more modern recordings as per below, but if you love this opera, I urge you to acquire this one.

Mark Ermler – 1974 (studio; stereo) Philips

Orchestra & Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Hermann - Vladimir Atlantov

Lisa - Tamara Milashkina

Countess - Valentina Levko

Count Tomsy - Vladimir Valaitis

Prince Yeletsky - Andrei Fedoseyev

Pauline - Galina Borisova

Chekalinsky - Andrei Sokolov

Surin - Valery Yaroslavtsev

Chaplitsky - Vitali Vlassov

Major-domo - Konstantin Baskov

Narumov - Yuri Dementiev

Governess - Nina Grigorieva

Ermler recorded a number of operas for Melodiya in the 70's and this has the best sound of them all, rich, full, forward and rounded. It drips authentic Russian atmosphere, with some stirring choral work from the Bolshoi forces and an especially animated boys' chorus. Ermler is thoroughly idiomatic and knows how to phrase and dynamically grade Tchaikovsky's febrile music to extract the maximum emotion from it; his conducting is the best alongside that of Tchakarov and Shuraitis (see below). His orchestra is excellent.

The cast is made up of Bolshoi regulars, headed by Atlantov's big, robust tenor – he is now in his 80's and was of course a celebrated Otello. He does not always make a very sweet sound and can be rather unyielding but what he lacks in tonal beauty and interpretative subtlety he makes up for with animal passion, even if the effect can be strident. He is at his best in his fervent declarations to Lisa, who is sung by his real-life wife, Tamara Milashkina, and whose bright, Russian soprano can here turn shrill in comparison with her fuller, firmer self of seven years previously. She is well-contrasted with Galina Borisova's warm mezzo and both have voices still apt for this music, blending nicely in their duet, but

both Borisova's and Milashkina's tone can turn "bottled" and, at times, oddly constricted. Both the Yeletsky and the Tomsy are quite good but rather woolly-voiced, lacking the penetration of the best exponents of those roles. Having said that, Andrei Fedoseyev sings his big aria in elegant and impassioned fashion. The pastiche music of the shepherdess tableau is beautifully sung.

In the end, for all its virtues, relative deficiencies in the cast mean that despite its authenticity combined with good sound and conducting, in comparison with the very best this is not a first choice. Nonetheless, it remains a fine, vivid performance.

Mstislav Rostropovich – 1976 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Orchestre National de France (Paris); Chœur Tchaikovsky - Maitrise de Radio France

Hermann - Peter Gougaloff

Lisa - Galina Vishnevskaya

Countess - Regina Resnik

Count Tomsy - Dan Iordăchescu

Prince Yeletsky - Bernd Weikl

Pauline - Hanna Schwarz

Chekalinsky - Fausto Tenzi

Surin - Dimiter Petkov

Chaplitsky - Heinz Kruse

Major-domo - Heinz Kruse

Narumov - Rudolf Alexander Sutey

Governess - Ewa Dobrowska

Chloe - Lucia Popp

This was a DG prestige production with the renowned partnership of husband and wife team Rostropovich and Vishnevskaya soon after they had defected heading a starry cast - the exception being the little-known and sadly short-lived Bulgarian tenor Peter Gougaloff. Unfortunately, the two leads constitute the main weaknesses in this recording: Vishnevskaya is vibrant but harsh, thin-toned and squally, as was too often the case later in her career (strangely, her Tosca recorded the same year was much better), and she sounds elderly. Gougaloff, despite having a big, open sound and an essentially attractive timbre, mostly just belts his way through the role without nuance – though he manages some fleeting tenderness in his duets with Vishnevskaya. That works to suggest his desperation but his characterisation remains one-dimensional, devoid of the subtleties we hear in tenors able to fine away their tone in true lyric, Russian fashion. Furthermore, the Tomsy is woolly and wobbly. The classiest singing comes from Regina Resnik as a riveting Countess, and while Hanna Schwarz provides good support, she is nothing special – in fact, a bit dull. Bernd Weikl's vividly drawn Yeletsky reminds us of his superb Eugene Onegin for Solti two years earlier, but it would be idle to pretend that he can rival the likes of Mazurok and Chernov for elegance and smoothness, as the incipient flutter in his baritone is distracting.

Rostropovich coaxes a very beefy, Russian sound from the Parisian orchestra but the French choirs sound too refined. Given that its prime virtues are the energy of the conducting and a fine Countess, those are not sufficient advantages to make this a prime recommendation.

Algis Shuraitis – 1984 (live; stereo/digital?) Ponto; Orfeo

Orchestra & Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Hermann - Vladimir Atlantov

Lisa - Julia Varady

Countess - Elena Obraztsova

Count Tomsy - Alexander Voroshilo

Prince Yeletsky - Bodo Brinkmann

Pauline - Ludmilla Shemchuk

Chekalinsky - Yoshihisa Yamaj
Surin - Karl Helm
Chaplitsky - Ulrich Reß
Major-domo - Friedrich Lenz
Narumov - Alfred Kuhn
Governess - Gudrun Wewezow
Masha - Carmen Anhorn

This is a vivid, spirited performance featuring some celebrated singers, a fine orchestra, an excellent chorus and an especially spirited children's choir, all expertly conducted; indeed, Shuraitis may well take the palm as the best conductor of this opera I have heard.

I remark above on the lack of finesses in Atlantov's Hermann for Ermler; there is a huskier, more strained quality to his tenor here and a live performance in a big theatre does not foster subtlety but it is still a mightily impressive instrument and he dominates a murderously difficult role. Julia Varady had already proved herself to be a fine Tatiana and I have always considered her to have been underrated. She is a great vocal actress and one of the few sopranos whose voice sits nicely between lyric and dramatic, thus able to make a convincingly girlish Lisa but also with the requisite reserves of power. Ludmilla Shemchuk is luxury casting as Polina, her plush, velvety mezzo contrasting strongly with Varady's shimmering, bell-like soprano without sounding matronly - and her top notes are superb, too. The distinctive, stentorian timbre of veteran Elena Obraztsova's mezzo-soprano is ideal for the Countess; she is first formidable, then wistfully melancholy in her reminiscences. She is still vocally solid and her performance is something of a tour de force.

There are, however, too many other vocal disappointments: the Surin is horribly woofy, wobbly and out of tune and a similar woolliness afflicts Bodo Brinkmann's dull, effortful Yeletsky. Voroshilo's Tomsy is thin, nasal and almost completely lacking in low notes. Another nail in the coffin is the twenty minutes of cuts, amongst which is "The Faithful Shepherdesses" pastorelle.

I'm not sure what to make of the indication "ADD Stereo Digital" but the sound is quite good, regardless, and seems like digital to me. There is a fair amount of coughing and ambient and stage noises; in addition, voices are placed quite far back, inevitably resulting in the occasional imbalance, and orchestral detail is sometimes subsumed into a wash of sound, but none of that is really too distracting. In the end, it is that opaque sound the cuts and the deficiencies in the secondary roles which prevent this from being a top choice, but the urgent, flexible conducting and the four leads I identify in the second paragraph above - especially Varady's radiant Lisa - are all definitely worth hearing.

Emil Tchakarov - 1988 (studio; digital) Sony

Orchestra - Sofia Festival Orchestra; Svetsolav Obretenov Chorus
Hermann - Wieslaw Ochman
Lisa - Stefka Evstatieva
Countess - Penka Dilova
Count Tomsy - Ivan Konsulov
Prince Yeletsky - Yuri Mazurok
Pauline - Stefania Toczyska
Chekalinsky - Angel Petkov
Surin - Peter V Petrov
Chaplitsky - Mincho Popov
Major-domo - Mincho Popov
Narumov - Stoil Georgiev
Governess - Wesselina Katsarova
Masha - Roumyana Bareva

Prilepa - Elena Stoyanova

While I am quite happy with, for example, Ozawa's conducting in the "international" concert performance recording below starring Mirella Freni, Atlantov and a young Hvorostovsky, the big difference between the two recordings lies in the quality of Tchaikovsky's direction here; he has much more feel for the passion and melancholy of this gloomy score and tempi are judged to a nicety. He makes frequent telling use of rubato but really cranks it up for the moments of high tension, hence overall there is little discrepancy in timings but it's a question, as ever, of phrasing and contrast. He also secures excellent singing and playing from his Sofia forces - but then, Ozawa also has the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Wieslaw Ochman has a voice tighter and less expansive even than that of Gergiev's Grigorian or Atlantov and his voice lacks the requisite "Heldentenor" heft, but he has a palpable empathy with Hermann's obsessive nature. There are further variations in the quality of the casting: Mazurok, heard at his peak in the 1967 studio recording conducted by Boris Khaikin, reviewed above, is here a little past his best here in 1988, yet he is still impressive and preferable even to Hvorostovsky and Chernov – both of whom are nonetheless very fine. Stefania Toczyska as a wonderful Pauline but Borodina, too, is lovely in the Kirov recording, as is the great veteran Irina Arkhipova as the Countess, whereas Penka Dilova here is plain wobbly and painful - a serious flaw in a short but crucial part; Maureen Forrester and Arkhipova are much more telling. A character's singing doesn't have to be ugly to make her sound old, methinks.

I admit to some slight disappointment with this recording, as the cast is rather ordinary except for Mazurok and Toczyska's lovely Pauline – but if, unlike me, you consider the conducting to be more important a criterion than the quality of the voices involved, you might still favour it for Tchaikovsky's excellent direction and its sense of ensemble. However, it doesn't make my own, final cut.

Vladimir Fedoseyev – 1990 (live radio broadcast; digital) Melodiya; Relief

Orchestra - Large Symphony Orchestra of USSR Radio and TV; Yurlov State Academic Russian Choir & The Children's Choir «Vesna»

Hermann - Vitaly Tarastchenko

Lisa - Natalya Datsko

Countess - Irina Arkhipova

Count Tomsky - Grigory Gritsyuk

Prince Yeletsky - Dmitri Hvorostovsky

Pauline - Nina Romanova

Chekalinsky - Oleg Klenov

Surin - Alexander Vedernikov

Major-domo - Vladimir Grishko

Governess - Tatyana Kuzminova

Masha - Lidiya Chernikh

Temirkanov's live Verdi Requiem was billed as "In memoriam Dmitri Hvorostovsky", but I feel that this first-time release on CD – at least officially, from the master tapes - of a thirty-year-old, live, concert performance on Christmas Day starring the same singer might also serve the same purpose. He had just turned 27 and had that same year won the Cardiff Singer of the World competition, having previously made his operatic debut in the West at the Nice Opera in the same role as he sings here. However, his is not the only name highlighted in the cast list; similarly emphasised is the great mezzo-soprano Irina Arkhipova, who sang well into her seventies and died in 2010. There are yet more famous and now deceased singers here, too, including Bolshoi bass Alexander Vedernikov, a fixture in Russian opera for many years who died aged 90 and Grigory Gritsyuk, whose firm, incisive baritone is a really striking asset to this recording; he was a first prize-winner in the vocal section of the Tchaikovsky

Competition in 1986 and died prematurely in 2000. In short, this serves as a memorial to a lot of excellent singers.

To hear Hvorostovsky's youthful baritone comes almost as a shock if you heard him in recent years just before and during the onset of his fatal illness when his voice was coarsening and losing resonance – whether because of his indisposition or age and wear, I could not say, but here it is in prime condition, clear, steady and deeply moving. He sings Yeletsky's jewel of an aria "I love you, love you beyond all measure" wonderfully – except for a habit which grew as the years passed of sometimes drawing breath with a disturbingly raking sound. Lisa and Pauline are sung by two lovely artists; the notes rightly praise the Ukrainian soprano but, oddly, make no mention of the native Russian mezzo-soprano Nadia Romanova's sumptuous voice. Datsko is thrilling in her Act 1 Arioso. A lusty chorus completes a first-class line-up. Distinguished tenor Vitaly Tarashchenko specialised in singing Hermann. His basic tone is rather plaintive and a tad constricted but he is very expressive and has excellent legato and breath control. This was a fine assembly of proper Russian voices here under a conductor steeped in the tradition.

This was Andrew McGregor's Record of the Week in his BBC Radio 3 Record Review. It does not necessarily eclipse other highly recommendable versions and it has relative weaknesses – in this case, a Hermann who is bettered by stronger-voiced tenors. Nonetheless, admirers of Hvorostovsky and this opera in general will not be disappointed by it.

The three CDs are enclosed in cardboard slipcases in a handsome black and white cardboard box with a booklet providing a synopsis, track list and a note on the performance.

(Adapted from [my original review](#))

Seiji Ozawa – 1991 (live composite; digital) RCA

Orchestra - Boston Symphony Orchestra; Tanglewood Festival Chorus & American Boys' Choir

Hermann - Vladimir Atlantov

Lisa - Mirella Freni

Countess - Maureen Forrester

Count Tomsy - Sergei Leiferkus

Prince Yeletsky - Dmitri Hvorostovsky

Pauline - Katherine Ciesinski

Chekalinsky - Ernesto Gavazzi

Surin - Julian Rodescu

Chaplitsky - Dennis Petersen

Major-domo - Richard Clement

Narumov - Jorge Chamine

Governess - Janis Taylor

This 1991 recording was made during carefully prepared live performances in the Symphony Hall and Carnegie Hall under Ozawa. The cast is interesting: the new young Russian star Hvorostovsky, established Russian singers Leiferkus and Atlantov, the two veteran ladies Mirella Freni and Maureen Forrester more renowned in other genres and who specialised in Italian and German repertoire respectively, under the direction of a Japanese conductor with an American orchestra and chorus. This eclectic mix might have led to something of a dog's breakfast stylistically speaking, yet, just as Solti was able to do with an international cast for his celebrated 1974 recording of *Eugene Onegin*, Ozawa produces something hardly less authentic to my ears than Gergiev's all-Russian version with the Kirov opera and orchestra recorded in the Mariinsky Theatre only six months later. Just listen to how he generates a febrile atmosphere of expectation in the introduction to the crucial scene where Hermann accosts the aged Countess in her bedchamber to extract from her the secret of the "tri karty".

It is perhaps less surprising that Freni is able successfully to surmount the linguistic challenges of singing Lisa given that her husband was Russian-speaking Bulgarian Nicolai Ghiaurov. Her voice at this later stage of her career is slightly larger and blowsier, with a marginally wider vibrato (the result of having moved into lirico-spinto roles such as Elisabetta in *Don Carlo*) and thus by no means unsuited to producing a "Russian" sound. It is still a beautiful instrument and she sounds very much at home in Tchaikovsky's sound world. Beauty is not the salient characteristic of Atlantov's big, strenuous, grainy tenor but he is right inside the part of the unstable Herman and occasionally tames that blaring sound to produce something subtler. Leiferkus seems to be enjoying himself singing Tomsy and uses his hard-edged baritone to bring the character vividly to life. Forrester is splendidly theatrical as the world-weary Countess and Hvorostovsky sounds as virile and soulful as you would expect in the small but important role of Yeletsky - yet he certainly does not outshine previous superb exponents of the part such as Lisitsian and Mazurok and one is always conscious that he is pushing his lovely, but relatively small, voice to its limits in that peach of high baritone arias, "Ya vas lublu". (In fact, he sounds richer and more secure ten years later in the excellent Delos highlights disc.) The only relative disappointment comes from the under-casting of Pauline - Katherine Ciesinski is weak and ordinary compared with Borodina - and also of the smaller roles, but this does not seriously compromise the set as a whole.

It is now available at bargain price and makes a superb introduction to this brooding, neglected masterpiece. However, because it is cheap, there is, as is now standard these days, no libretto and to non-Russian speakers that is essential - unless you already have a set with one, in which case you might not necessarily want this merely as a supplement.

Valery Gergiev – 1992 (studio; digital) Philips

Orchestra & Chorus - Kirov Theatre

Hermann - Gegam Grigorian

Lisa - Maria Guleghina

Countess - Irina Arkhipova

Count Tomsy - Nikolai Putilin

Prince Yeletsky - Vladimir Chernov

Pauline - Olga Borodina

Chekalinsky - Vladimir Solodovnikov

Surin - Sergei Alexashkin

Chaplitsky - Evgeni Boitsov

Major-domo - Nikolai Gassiev

Narumov - Gennadi Bezzubekov

Governess - Ludmila Filatova

Gergiev's driven, energised direction ideally suits the pace and propulsion of this opera, and the edge on the Kirov strings and the snarl in their brass is atmospherically caught by the digital recording. Of course, all the Russian is authentic and idiomatic and the array of voices, from soloists to chorus, is impressive. Grigorian has a rather hard, nasal, but powerful and steady tenor with a secure top – a great top B at the end of the first scene, for example – ideal for suggesting Hermann's neurotic nature. Artists as celebrated as Arkhipova, Borodina and Chernov fill the secondary roles; the latter in particular sings beautifully as Yeletsky and Nikolai Putilin is a characterful Tomsy, making the most of his narrative aria. Borodina sings her morbid "Mogila" with grave (as it were) beauty. There is never a wobbler to be heard; all the voices here are neat, tight and resonant.

If there is any vocal weakness, it is in the slight edge and unsteadiness in the upper regions of Maria Guleghina's soprano but those flaws are negligible when set against the pathos and intensity with which she invests her portrayal of Lisa. She makes her big Act 3 Scene 2 lament a highlight, in the great tradition of Tchaikovsky's tragic arias for his soprano leads.

This is one of the two most consistently satisfying recordings.

Constantine Orbelian – 2001-2 (studio; digital) N.B. selected excerpts; Delos

Orchestra - Philharmonia of Russia; The Spiritual Revival Chorus

Hermann - Sergei Larin

Lisa - Yelena Prokina

Countess - Elena Obraztsova

Count Tomsy - Vassily Gerello

Prince Yeletsky - Dmitri Hvorostovsky

Pauline - Marina Domashenko

Chekalinsky - Alexei Maslov

Masha - Irina Vaschenko

I depart here from my habitual practice of considering only complete operas despite the fact that in the end you are getting only 78 minutes' worth of a two and a half hour opera, as you certainly cannot fault the selection of extended extracts here, nor the philosophy behind the series, which is to provide a more holistic sense of the essence of the opera, with written narrative links in between the texts. Nor could you fault Delos in their recruitment of the singers and forces required to this splendid opera justice and these excerpts certainly do justice to the opera.

The six principal voices here were amongst the very best to be found at the time of recording in 2001, headed by the luxury casting of Dmitri Hvorostovsky for Yeletsky's one great aria, "Ya vas lyublyu". He does it as beautifully as any version I know, including his earlier version on a recital disc and those by Lisitsian and Masurok: long-breathed, velvety tone, huge passion - even if Hvorostovsky's habit of gasping too audibly for breath exceeds what is required to convey ardour. Equally impressive is Marina Domashenko who possesses one of the most attractive mezzo-sopranos I have ever heard; she is equally at home in the dirge-like aria to the grave as in the dancing song which follows. Tenor Sergei Larin is sweet-toned and powerful as Hermann and baritone Vassily Gerello is a superb Tomsy. Elena Prokina is touching and true as the desperate Lisa although her vibrato occasionally gets away from her. Veteran mezzo Elena Obraztsova puts in a convincing cameo as the old Countess; the leap between her two registers is now too pronounced but her fruity voice is not unsuited to the feisty old character she is impersonating and she sings lovely French unlike so many Russians in this role.

Orbelian is a seasoned accompanist and knows how to pace this most febrile and swooning of Romantic operas. Obviously this can be only a supplement to a complete recording, but...

Mariss Jansons – 2014 (live; digital) BR Klassik

Hermann - Misha Didyk

Lisa - Tatiana Serjan

Countess – Larissa Diadkova

Count Tomsy - Sergei Leiferkus

Prince Yeletsky - Alexey Markov

Pauline - Oksana Volkova

Chekalinsky - Vladimir Solodovnikov

Surin - Sergei Alexashkin

Chaplitsky - Evgeni Boitsov

Major-domo - Nikolai Gassiev

Narumov - Gennadi Bezzubekov

This is a semi-staged live performance from October 2014. I thoroughly enjoy it but also want to reflect a few reservations. First, however, let's proffer bouquets to BR Klassik for its production virtues: beautiful sound, casting in depth throughout from native Russian speakers (from Ukraine, Belarus and

Russia itself) to ensure a coherent ensemble, and handsome presentation in an elegant, beige clam-shell box with a libretto in transliterated Russian, German and English and intelligent notes - but why no synopsis? (Never mind: that's easily accessible on Wiki.)

Secondly, what a splendid leading pair we have in tenor Misha Didyk and dramatic soprano Tatiana Serjan, of whom I have not previously heard but would certainly like to hear more. Didyk makes a cracking job of the hysterical - and, in truth, for all Tchaikovsky's identification with his anti-hero - unlikable, unhinged Herman. Rather like Jonas Kaufmann, Didyk has baritonal heft and thrilling top notes, grainy but with rather more squillo than the German, and absolutely throws himself into his role, bringing out verbal nuances and translating them into a singable, musical idiom which remains wholly Russian. The role of Lisa is not especially grateful - it can seem like a rather pale and passive version of Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin* - but Serjan has a big, vibrant, slightly tremulous sound and is clearly not averse to the kind of risk-taking which keeps the listener transfixed - she's a real stage animal and her pre-suicide aria is a highlight; she sings with such commitment and intensity that Lisa emerges as a complete character.

My delight in this recording continues with the quality of the playing and conducting. Jansons is on fire from the first notes yet is equally capable of embracing the profound melancholy of, for example, the atmospheric instrumental introduction to Act III. The semi-staging evidently helped to engender the requisite dramatic involvement from the singers; in truth, some of the best operas I have heard have heard emerge from this format, perhaps because singers feel freed from the encumbrance of costumes and sets which are not invariably helpful. The performance is just ten minutes off three hours but never drags. The juxtapositions of dreamy nostalgia with present suffering, and worldly sophistication with raw passion, so typical of Tchaikovsky's idiom, are completely encompassed by Jansons and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. A word of praise, too, for the chorus, especially the children - and the brief concluding prayer for Herman in Orthodox chant style, apparently so incongruous yet wonderfully apt and clearly the composer's homage to his beloved hero, is magically sung by the men.

Now to my reservations. Granted that by far the most important roles here are the two doomed lovers, there are still several important supporting characters, some of whom have justly famous arias and scenes. The bass who sings Tomsy is rather lumpen and laboured compared with predecessors like Leiferkus, Putilin and Konsulov (on recordings by Ozawa, Gergiev and Tchakarov respectively). The tenor who sings Chekalinsky is a bleater of the worst type. The soprano who sings the Shepherdess is shrill and Oksana Volkova, singing in that scene and also the more important role of Polina, has a lovely, rich tone but also rather too pronounced a vibrato.

However, those are minor issues; for me, despite being almost cameo in scale, the roles of Prince Yeletsky and the Countess are very important. Alexey Markov has been garnering praise worldwide and is indeed a very capable artist with a smooth, expressive baritone, but I made comparison of that wonderful concert aria "Ya vas lyublyu" with versions on complete recordings by Mazurok (Tchakarov), Hvorostovsky (Ozawa), Chernov (Gergiev) and, above all, the sublime Pavel Lisitsian for Melik-Pashayev in the veteran, but surprisingly clean and clear Soviet recording made in 1949-50 - and in truth Markov is simply ordinary, nowhere near as charismatic, elegant, passionate or beautiful as any on those others, whose vibrancy and weight of tone outshine him - and that disadvantageous comparison extends to Bastianini singing in Italian!

The second important role of the Countess is sung in good, rather restrained style by Larissa Diadkova. This is usually a part given to a mezzo the best of whose career is behind her and in general it matters little if her vibrato has started to loosen or there is some audible break between the registers, as she is meant to be eighty years old. In reality, the singer will typically be in her early sixties, an age at which most performers will have retired or severely reined in their appearances. I have longed admired Diadkova but the wobble is there and the portrayal which some find subtle I find a bit bland and lacking in impact compared with Maureen Forrester (Ozawa) and Irena Arkhipova (a veteran at 67 for Gergiev

but still in fine voice). She doesn't in any sense let the side down and is certainly steadier than Penka Dilova (Tchakarov) or Obratsova in the excellent single CD of extended scenes on Delos; however Obratsova live in 1984 above is another story.

So is this a top recommendation? I think it deserves consideration and esteem if you want a modern version, but it is nonetheless far from perfect.

Recommendations

I perversely cling to the old, mono, Soviet recording conducted by Melik-Pasheyev for the sheer drama and energy of its ensemble and the magnificence of the voices of Nelepp, Smolenskaya and Lisitsian, but if you want a modern recording, try to listen to samples first and go with your preference, which will have to be an "on balance", compromised choice - yet overall no recording positively disappoints and all of them present a strong case for the continued rehabilitation of a neglected opera. On the other hand, no recording is perfect and all are to some extent compromised by some inadequacy in the cast or, in the case of earlier, mono recordings, antique sound. Other considerations are price and libretto; the Ozawa, for example, is very cheap in the new Sony re-issue but very short on documentation, whereas the other modern recordings are more expensive but exhaustively documented. Ultimately, for me, however, Khaikin's 1967 studio version is the one to have, with the Gergiev a very close second.

Studio mono: Melik-Pasheyev - 1949-50

Studio stereo/digital: Khaikin – 1967*; Valery Gergiev – 1992

Live digital: Fedoseyev – 1990

First choice*

Ralph Moore