



Takes My Breath Away

Written by Stephen J. Trygar
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Regardless of what genre of music you enjoy, there are always moments that take our breath away. Sometimes these moments are triggered by the sheer power being blasted into our ears, while other moments are so tranquil and serene that absolute silence is needed to fully appreciate the beauty.

While I have been able to enjoy these moments in several genres of music on my own time, some of my favorite moments are found in operatic music. I have had several conversations with musicians and opera enthusiasts who debate over their favorite arias or solos, but I have often found more beauty elsewhere in operas. Several of my favorite occasions are within the choruses or orchestral works of these masterpieces. I have compiled a list of my favorite operatic moments; I have listed them in alphabetical order by composer as to not assign any ranking to these pieces. Let me know what your favorite operatic moments are by contacting me!

This post contains audio and video clips. Most of the listed moments contain a Spotify player. As a caveat, they only play 30 seconds worth of the music unless you log in to your Spotify account. To resolve this issue, I have embedded YouTube videos to each. My intention to include the Spotify players is because of the quality of the audio on each of them.

The Death of Klinghoffer by John Adams Prologue: “Chorus of the Exiled Jews”

The Death of Klinghoffer was developed from a concept by the American theatrical director Peter Sellars. He collaborated with the choreographer Mark Morris to bring the project to life. The opera’s original commission was through a consortium of six different organizations: the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels; the San Francisco Opera; the Opéra National de Lyon in Lyon, France; the Los Angeles Festival; the Glyndebourne Festival Opera in East Sussex, England; and the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

The opera begins with a Prologue consisting of two choruses: “Chorus of the Exiled Palestinians” and “Chorus of the Exiled Jews”; both choruses reflect on the respective peoples and their history. These two groups are chosen because of the primary struggle that takes place throughout the opera. The “Chorus of the Exiled Palestinians” embodies the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF) who become responsible for the Anchille Lauro hijacking (the event that the plot is centralized around). The “Chorus of the Exiled Jews” represents Leon Klinghoffer, a wheelchair-bound, 69-year-old Jewish-American who was murdered during the hijacking.

I have often found beauty in the simplest of musical works. As John Adams is predominantly a minimalist composer, his repertoire is stocked with simple techniques that often build on one another. One of my favorite techniques is a drone or a series of words sung on the same note. The “Chorus of the Exiled Jews” makes use of the drone technique in the low-pitched instruments while the chorus and high-pitched instruments build lush chords over it. The effect is a suspension in time that is brilliantly placed after the ticking clock that is the “Chorus of the Exiled Palestinians”. The true moments of this work where my breath is taken away is Adams’ use of dissonance. He often holds dissonant chords at the end of each musical phrase, only to be resolved once the next phrase begins. As the listener, this leaves me yearning for resolution that never truly comes, leaving me stuck in the ethereal atmosphere Adams has created for this Chorus.

Peter Grimes by Benjamin Britten Act II: “From the Gutter”

Britten’s second opera *Peter Grimes* is based on George Crabbe’s book *The Borough*. Although the book and the opera are set in a fictitious village, it holds strong ties to both Crabbe’s and Britten’s hometown of Aldeburgh, England. The libretto was adapted from “Letter XXII” of *The Borough* by Montagu Slater. The opera was premiered on June 7th, 1945 at Sadler’s Wells in London.

The opera highlights the life of Peter Grimes over the span of a few weeks. The curtain rises on an inquest in which Grimes is questioned about the death of his apprentice while at sea. Throughout

the opera, Grimes is continuously accused of murdering the young apprentice, but he protests that he did not. The schoolteacher, Ellen Orford, being fond of Grimes, repeatedly attempts to calm him down when he gets angry at the community for their unwillingness to give him a chance; Grimes intends on proposing to Ellen when the community finally accepts him. When Grimes receives word of a possible new apprentice, he begs that someone fetch the young lad for him. Eventually Ellen offers to get him. When she returns with John, the new apprentice, Grimes immediately takes the boy to his hut, despite the terrible storm. A few weeks later, Ellen notices bruises on John's neck. When confronted, Grimes claims it was an accident. Growing agitated with her interference, Grimes strikes Ellen and runs off with the boy. By the end of the opera, we are stranded without answers. John is dead, and Grimes has possibly committed suicide by sinking his own ship at sea.

“From the Gutter” is a quartet sung by Ellen, Auntie, and the Nieces shortly after several members of the community witness Ellen being struck by Grimes. The women woefully sing of the relationship of women with men, particularly how it is built around ensuring the men are taken care of in order to be granted a semblance of love. Alongside Ellen's relationship with Grimes, Auntie, trying to run a business, is forced to bend to the desires of the men in the town. This is paired with the men's attraction to the Nieces; Auntie keeps the Nieces employed at her bar in order to draw in business, and the Nieces keep up the charade that they are interested in all of them. I believe Britten wrote this quartet to show the strength of women. Individually they talk about their strengths as a woman in their society, but by musically joining them together in a musical phrase that only ascends, Britten can present them in a fashion that proves their power.

“Do we smile or do we weep
Or wait quietly till they sleep?”
~Montagu Slater, Peter Grimes

I first encountered this quartet when attending a production of opera scenes in my undergraduate program. I had been invited to partake in the production, but I had declined. Feeling guilty, I made sure to attend an open dress rehearsal and the performance. I don't remember most of that performance; however, “From the Gutter” left a lasting impression. Every time they began their musical ascent over the words found in the quotation above, I would get excited. At the time, the buildup seemed so chaotic and dissonant, but once they reached the top, I felt as if I was released from a tight grip and left suspended in the air. To this day, the final ascent never ceases to amaze me. When the voices finally reach their destination on the final chord, I can't help but take a breath; I often discover I had been holding my breath because I refuse to interrupt the gorgeous web of music the women are weaving. The support they give to one another, as characters and musically, is breathtaking. I truly hope you find the same beauty in this quartet as I have.

Ainadamar by Osvaldo Golijov Act III, Margarita: “Yo Soy La Libertad”

Osvaldo Golijov's opera *Ainadamar* was premiered at Tanglewood on August 10th, 2003. The opera tells the story of Federico García Lorca through the eyes of his lover and muse Margarita Xirgu. “Ainadamar” is an Arabic word that translates to “fountain of tears”. This title refers to Fuente Grande, a natural spring located northeast of the city of Granada; Fuente Grande was the site of Lorca's murder.

Margarita has a flashback to the premiere of Lorca's play *Mariana Pineda* to convey the brilliance of author to her student Nuria. Nuria is preparing for a production of the play forty years after the premiere of the work in Uruguay, where Margarita now lives and promotes Lorca's plays. Margarita continues having flashbacks of her meeting with Lorca in Madrid where he describes the play to her for the first time. Margarita compares Mariana Pineda's tragic tale to the eerily similar fate of Lorca. Her flashbacks are interrupted by Ramón Ruiz Alonso's voice (Alonso being the murderer of Lorca) over the radio as he revels in the extinguishing of the revolution. *Ainadamar* continues to unravel the gruesome details of Lorca's arrest and murder through several flashbacks of Margarita. All the while she continues to assist Nuria prepare for the play. As the play begins, Lorca's spirit comes in to comfort the dying Margarita, and with her passing, her courage and humanity are passed on to the young actresses.

"Yo soy la libertad" is the final scene of the opera. It comes to us as Margarita is dying and being comforted by the spirit of her dead lover. In this scene Margarita sings the final lines of *Mariana Pineda* "I am freedom" in an act to pass on her passion and courage to Nuria, the rest of her students, and for all future generations. Her final breaths are spent singing "I am fountain from which you drink", and the play begins.

When I began my masters degree, *Ainadamar* was one of the very first pieces of music that was brought to my attention; however, I was very stubborn and refused to listen to it because it was a modern opera. My professor asked us to read the chapters on John Adams' *Doctor Atomic* and Tan Dun's *The First Emperor* from Yayoi Uno Everett's book *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera* (I wasn't too keen on listening to those operas either); *Ainadamar* was the topic of the first chapter, and in a pang of curiosity, I listened to the first few minutes of it and quickly turned it off because I didn't find it interesting. When I finally graduated from my masters degree, my views on modern and new operas had made a complete 180 degrees turn. Remembering Everett's book, I purchased it to indulge in my new-found love of contemporary opera. Reading the chapter on *Ainadamar* inspired me to find a recording, and I began listening to it. I started it when I got into my car on my way to the gym, and by the time I was finished with my workout, I had finished the opera. I was so mesmerized by the final scene that I had to sit in my car and re-listen to it on full volume. I lost myself in the hypnotic oscillation of the chordal figure, and I was pleasantly surprised with how well the guitar fit into the ethereal atmosphere Golijov created for his final scene.

Les Contes d'Hoffmann by Jacques Offenbach

Act IV: "belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour" (Barcarolle)

Les Contes d'Hoffmann was Jacques Offenbach's final work, dying four months before the opera's premiere. The libretto was written by Jules Barbier and based on three short stories by the German Romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann; Hoffmann is the protagonist of the opera. It was premiered on February 10th, 1881 at the Opéra-Comique in Paris.

The Muse reveals her intentions of drawing Hoffmann's attention, abjure all other loves, and devoting himself to her; she takes on the form of Hoffmann's best friend Nicklausse. The prima donna Stella, who is performing Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, sent a letter to Hoffmann inviting him to

meet her in her dressing room after the performance. The letter and key to the room are intercepted by Councilor Lindorf (the first incarnation of evil), Hoffmann's nemesis who intends to replace Hoffmann at the rendezvous. Hoffmann's students wait for him to arrive at a local tavern, and when he finally arrives, he entertains them with the legend of Kleinzach the dwarf. Lindorf, to throw Hoffmann off, coaxes him to recount his greatest loves to the eager audience. First is Olympia, an automaton created by the scientist Spalanzani. Hoffmann finds the doll, mistaking her for a real woman, and falls in love with her. Olympia's co-creator Coppélius (the second incarnation of Nemesis), sells Hoffmann magic glasses that make Olympia appear as a real woman. At a party Nicklausse tries to warn his friend, but Hoffmann is dancing with Olympia and is not paying attention. While dancing, Hoffmann trips and falls resulting in the glasses shattering. At the same moment, Coppélius charges in and destroys the doll in retaliation of Spalanzani cheating him out of his fees. The party crowd ridicules the heartbroken Hoffmann as he realizes Olympia was just an automaton. Second is Antonia; her father Crespel has hidden his daughter away from Hoffmann who is encouraging her to pursue a musical career. Hoffmann is unaware that his encouragement is endangering her due to her mysterious illness. When Crespel leaves his house, Hoffmann takes advantage and sneaks in, and the lovers are happily re-united. Crespel returns home and receives an unexpected visit from Dr. Miracle (the third incarnation of Nemesis). Hoffmann eavesdrops on the men's conversation, and he learns that if Antonia ever sang, she would die. He rushes to her and demands that she give up her artistic dreams. She accepts, but once Dr. Miracle comes in to check on her, he raises a vision of Antonia's dead mother to induce Antonia to sing, causing her death. Crespel arrives in time to witness her last breath, and he blames Hoffmann. While attempting to kill Hoffmann, Nicklausse steps in to save his mournful friend. Next, Hoffmann falls in love with the courtesan Giulietta. He thinks that she returns his affections, but she is just seducing him under the orders of Captain Dapertutto (the fourth incarnation of Nemesis). He has promised her a diamond if she steals Hoffmann's reflection from a mirror. The jealous Schlemil, who is a previous victim of Giulietta and Dapertutto's scheme, challenges the poet to a duel, but he is killed. While Nicklausse looks for a horse to escape Venice on, Hoffmann meets Giulietta. He gives her his reflection, only to be abandoned by her. He tells Dapertutto his friend Nicklausse will save him, and to stop him, Dapertutto prepares a poison. Giulietta drinks it by mistake and dies in Hoffmann's arms. Back in the tavern in Nuremberg, Hoffman swears he will never love again. He says that Olympia, Antonia, and Giulietta represent the young, musical, and seductive sides of Stella. Nicklausse reveals she is the Muse and reclaims Hoffmann. Stella, tired of waiting for Hoffmann to come to her, enters the tavern to find him drunk. He tells her to leave, and Lindorf comes forward; Stella and Lindorf leave the tavern together.

"Belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour" opens Act IV (Giulietta). It is sung by Giulietta and Nicklausse and sets the mood for the act's seductive and sinister tone. It is often considered the most famous barcarolle ever written. While this duet is my favorite moment of this opera, it is not what introduced me to this incredible work. *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* is in my top five favorite operas of all time, and it was brought to my attention during the same opera scenes performance I mentioned while talking about "From the Gutter". From *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* my fellow classmates sang the trio from Act III (Antonia): "Ah, quelle est cette voix". I had the absolute pleasure of performing this scene in the orchestra when it was chosen to be one of the few staged scenes with full orchestra. Shortly after, I heard a friend of my perform Act II (Olympia): "Les oiseaux dans la charmille" ("The Doll Song") in a recital, and I knew it was time for me to buy a recording of the whole opera. When I finally received it, I listened to it, in full, that night. I was absolutely mesmerized by both the dazzling music and intriguing stories (slowly becoming a fan of E.T.A. Hoffmann's writing). "Belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour" melted my heart; I had no understanding of the French language at this point, but I could

feel its power. In this case, the orchestration is what gives this duet its charm. The strings' ominous introduction slowly transforms into a sparkling duet for mezzo-soprano and soprano. Offenbach's inclusion of a chorus and full orchestra heightens the work's romantic atmosphere, and it is perfectly balanced between all parties. It is truly a work of art that takes my breath away.

Dialogues des Carmélites by Francis Poulenc

Act III, Tableau 4: "Salve Regina"

Dialogues des Carmélites was Francis Poulenc's second opera, after *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. The opera premiered on January 26th, 1957 at La Scala, Milan in Italian rather than the original French. That same year it premiered in Paris in June (in French) and in San Francisco in September (in English). The libretto was written by Poulenc himself from Georges Barnanos' film screenplay of the same name. The opera is a fictionalized version of the story of the Martyrs of Compiègne, Carmelite nuns who were guillotined in Paris for refusing to renounce their vocation during the closing days of the Reign of Terror. Poulenc wrote this opera after recommitting himself to spirituality and the Roman Catholic church despite his open homosexuality.

Blanche de la Force, being immensely afraid of the political climate around her, enters a Carmelite convent. The Mother Superior informs her that the Carmelite Order is not a refuge, but the protectors of the Order. Shortly after her arrival Blanche is told by Sister Constance that she has had a dream in which the two of them will die young together. The Mother Superior dies, but not before committing Blanche in the care of Mother Marie and shouting that God has abandoned her. Blanche's brother, the Chevalier de la Force, arrives to announce that their father believes Blanche should withdraw from the convent. He says due to her aristocratic blood and being a member of a religious community at a time of anti-aristocracy and anti-clericalism is unsafe. Blanche refuses to leave; she has found happiness in the Carmelite Order, but she later admits to Mother Marie that it is fear that keeps her from leaving. After the chaplain announces he has been forbidden to preach, Mother Marie says that the Carmelites can save France by giving up their lives. Mother Superior disputes with Mother Marie saying that it is God who decides who is martyred. A police officer exclaims to the community that the Legislative Assembly has nationalized the convent and its property. He continues that the nuns must give up their religion's habits, and Mother Marie acquiesces. Despite taunting for being so easy to wear civilian clothing, she replies that the nuns will continue to serve no matter how they are dressed. Later, she proposes that the nuns take a vow of martyrdom, but all must agree or she will not carry it out. In a secret poll, only one dissenting voice finds its way into the mix. Sister Constance declares that she was the dissenter, but she has changed her mind. Now that the vow can proceed, Blanche gets scared and runs away. Mother Marie goes to look for her, finding her in her father's library. Blanche's father has been guillotined and she has been forced to serve her former servants. While Mother Marie and Blanche are away, the nuns are all arrested and condemned to death. The chaplain tells Mother Marie that since God has chosen to spare her, she cannot voluntarily become a martyr by joining the others in prison. As one none after the other processes towards the guillotine, Blanche joins by her sisters' side; they are all executed.

Unlike most of the other pieces I have talked about, I do not have a moment in my life that drew my attention towards *Dialogues des Carmélites*. I did, however, have a very dear friend that introduced me to the "Salve Regina", and I fell in love with it the moment I heard it. This heart-wrenching piece of music concludes the opera as the nuns process to the guillotine. This devastating scene is

accompanied by a rich harmonic scheme and perfectly calculated orchestral color. As heavy and foreboding as it is, Poulenc still provides a lightness that a prayer demands. The nuns' cries for mercy to the Holy Mother in a moment where others would have given up on faith undoubtedly causes one to reflect on themselves (spiritually or otherwise). When the final words of the "Salve Regina" have been expended, Blanche offers one final prayer before walking to her death. The final stanza of the "Veni Creator Spiritus" is traditionally sung when taking holy vows and offering one's life to God. Blanche sings through the stanza once completely, but on the second time around, she is executed upon uttering the word "endless"; a powerful word to end on while never being able to pray again.

Salve, Regina, Mater misericordiæ,/vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve./Ad te clamamus exsules filii
Hevæ,/Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes/in hac lacrimarum valle./Eia, ergo, advocata nostra,
illos tuos/misericordes oculos ad nos converte;/Et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui,/nobis
post hoc exsilium ostende./O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria.
~Latin Text of "Salve Regina"

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,/Hail our life, our sweetness and our hope./To thee do we
cry,/Poor banished children of Eve;/To thee do we send up our sighs,/Mourning and weeping in
this valley of tears.//Turn then, most gracious advocate,/Thine eyes of mercy toward us;/And after
this our exile,/Show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus./O clement, O loving,/O sweet
Virgin Mary.
~English Translation

Deo Patri sit gloria/et Filio, qui a mortuis/surrexit, ac Paraclito/in saeculorum saecula.
~Latin Text of "Veni Creator Spiritus"

All glory to the Father be,/with his coequal Son;/the same to thee, great Paraclete,/while endless
ages run.
~English Translation

Война и мир (War and Peace) by Sergei Prokofiev Act I, Scene 1: "The Radiance of the Sky in Spring"

Sergei Prokofiev's penultimate opera *War and Peace* was set to a libretto by the composer and Mira Mendelson; it is based on Leo Tolstoy's novel of the same name. While the piece's performance history is convoluted, the opera was premiered on June 12th, 1946 at the Maly Theatre in Leningrad. This premiere was with a highly altered version of the score due to the Soviet Union's Committee of the Arts demands for more patriotism in Part II (War); it was a significantly longer score than the original. The original version was not premiered until 2010 in Glasgow in collaboration between Scottish Opera and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. The original version is 90 minutes shorter than the Leningrad premiere.

Prokofiev's plot structure for the opera pays homage to Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. Its "lyric-dramatic scenes" are snippets in time of the entire Tolstoy novel that reflect on the emotional status of each scene's characters. It would be futile to provide a synopsis of this masterpiece. Rather, I want to express my admiration for this astonishing aria. "The Radiance of the Sky in Spring" is the

very first piece of music that starts the action of the story (prior to this there is either the Overture or the Epigraph). The aria is placed at a time where Prince Andrei is walking in the garden of Count Rostov at night, depressed by the loss of his wife. In this aria, Andrei sings about the beauty and joys of Spring. The gorgeous melody line is supported by a stunning harmonic structure. The peaceful, flowing lines are occasionally broken by foreboding and poignant fanfare-like passages representing Andrei's battle with depression during this moment of forced tranquility. What makes this aria so breath-taking is how unaffected the music is by Andrei's depression; if we didn't know the plot behind the aria, we would think it was a man's blissful inner thoughts on the beauty of spring. "The Radiance of the Sky in Spring", is an aria that you must listen to for yourself in order to fully appreciate its beauty. (In this case, I suggest the YouTube link over the Spotify link.)

Silent Night by Kevin Puts

Act I, Scene 2: "J'ai perdu ta photo"

Kevin Puts' first opera *Silent Night* received its world premiere at the Ordway Theater in Saint Paul, Minnesota with the Minnesota Opera on November 12th, 2011. The libretto was written by Mark Campbell and based on the 2005 war film *Joyeux Noël*, itself being based on the Christmas Truce of 1914. The opera was co-commissioned by Opera Philadelphia and received its East Coast Premiere at the Academy of Music on February 8th, 2013.

A performance at a Berlin opera house is interrupted by the announcement of war. The performers, and lovers, Anna Sørensen and Nikolaus Sprink are separated from each other as Nikolaus is drafted into the war. In Scotland, William Dale encourages his brother Jonathan to enlist; in Paris, pregnant Madeleine is angry as her husband Audebert leaves for war. On December 23rd, 1914, an attack by the French and the Scottish on the German line fails. Nikolaus stabs a man and is disgusted, while William is shot and dies. On December 24th, the Kronprinz has Christmas trees delivered to the German soldiers. Nikolaus is ordered to come sing for him later that day and is delighted to hear he will be singing with Anna. The French soldiers receive wine, sausages, and chocolates, and the Scottish soldiers receive crates of whisky. After performing for the Kronprinz, a French soldier moves out to infiltrate the German line with grenades, but the Scottish soldiers begin singing and Nikolaus responds by singing "Silent Night"; a Scottish bagpiper joins in to accompany him and Nikolaus raises a Christmas tree on the bunker. All the soldiers agree to stop fighting until the morning, and the French soldier returns without using the grenades. The soldiers intermingle and a mass is conducted, but Jonathan finds the body of his dead brother and vows revenge. The next morning, he buries his brother, and a decision has been made to extend the truce to bury all the fallen soldiers. Word of the truce reaches each of the three headquarters, and punishment is ordered: Nikolaus avoids arrest for insubordination when Anna, who followed Nikolaus back to camp after their performance, takes his hand and leads him across the no-man's land towards the French side where they seek asylum; the Scottish soldiers are ordered to the front lines, where Jonathan shoots a Frenchman disguised as a German who was crossing the lines to visit his mother; Audebert is ordered to Verdun and his unit is disbanded. The Germans are ordered Pomerania, leaving the no-man's land deserted.

"J'ai perdu ta photo" is sung by Audebert during the truce. He imagines his wife and newborn child living happily in an instant where Madeleine is cradling their crying baby to calm them down. Much like the "Chorus of the Exiled Jews" in Adams' opera, this aria is blissfully simple. The melodic

motion is dependent on the singer, while the orchestra supports him with light, colorful chords that are held for long periods of time. I happened upon this piece while scrolling through Instagram and hearing a singer I follow perform this work at the Minnesota Opera's most recent production. It was also a perfect time in my life to hear, as I was getting ready to go to my partner's friend's wedding. To know that such beauty can take place in such a dark moment is wholly magnificent to behold.

Fellow Travelers by Gregory Spears Scene 14b – Brick House: “Our Very Own Home”

Gregory Spears' one act opera *Fellow Travelers* is set to a libretto by Greg Pierce and based on Thomas Mallon's novel of the same name. It was premiered on June 17th, 2016 at Cincinnati Opera. It was a co-commission between Cincinnati Opera and G. Sterling Zinsmeyer and developed by Opera Fusion: New Works. The opera is comprised of sixteen scenes revolving around the life of Timothy Laughlin and Hawkins “Hawk” Fuller during the 1950s “lavender scare”.

Much like *War and Peace*, *Fellow Travelers* is structured in a way in which the story spans many years; it is broken up into sixteen smaller chunks that depict the love affair, struggles, and broken relationship of Tim and Hawk. “Our Very Own Home” frames a moment later in their lives after their failed relationship. Tim believes they are getting back together, but Hawk reveals he is now married to a woman. Tim reveals that he has never been able to give Hawk up, but Hawk is content in his marriage and expresses that he cannot give Tim everything he wants. In this aria, Hawk paints a picture of what their life as a couple could look like, but continuously rips it away by inserting his belief their relationship could never work. This incredible aria has brought me to tears several times, and it remains one of my absolute favorite pieces of music. Similarly to “J'ai perdu ta photo”, the baritone singer initiates all the melodic and harmonic movement. The minimalist effect created by the chamber-like orchestra expertly sets the stage for the vocalist; Hawk gets a chance to paint his image by himself upon the canvas that is the orchestra.

Иоланта (Iolanta) by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky Scene I

Iolanta is Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's final opera. It was commissioned as a double billing with his ballet *The Nutcracker*. It was premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg on December 18th, 1892. The one-act opera was set to a libretto by the composer's brother Modest Tchaikovsky and based on the play *Kong Renés Datter* by Henrik Hertz. Although the opera was well received, Tchaikovsky was slightly disappointed in his work, believing he was repeating himself musically.

Princess Iolanta has been blind since birth. Her blindness and her royal blood have been kept secret from her while she lives in a beautiful garden just outside the king's estate. She is under the care of the castle's doorkeeper Bertrand and his wife Marta, who is Iolanta's nursemaid. Iolanta feels that something is missing in her life that other people can experience. Her father, King René insists that she and her betrothed, Duke Robert, never find out about her blindness. The king arrives with Ibn-Hakia, a Moorish physician, who states that Iolanta can be cured, but the physical cure will only work if she is made aware of her own blindness. The king refuses out of fear for Iolanta's happiness if the treatment should fail and knows what she is missing. Robert arrives to court with his friend

Count Vaudémont. He tells the count that he wishes to break off the marriage due to his love for Countess Matilde. Vaudémont finds the entrance into Ionanta's garden, ignoring all warnings of death to anyone who enters. Seeing the sleeping Iolanta, he falls in love. Robert, having never seen his betrothed, believes she is a sorceress for making Vaudémont fall in love with her so easily. Robert leaves to get troops, believing it will set Vaudémont free from Iolanta's fabricated enchantment. Iolanta awakens, and Vaudémont asks for a red rose as a token of love, but he realizes she is blind when she gives him a white one instead. After an explanation of color and light, the two fall deeply in love. They are discovered by the king, and Ibn-Hakia exclaims that Iolanta's treatment could be a success now that she is aware of her blindness. Iolanta shares that she does not want to be cured, and the hope for a successful treatment is lost. Vaudémont admits to seeing the signs before walking into the garden, and the furious king threatens execution for having revealed Iolanta's blindness to her. The king tells her that if her treatment is unsuccessful, Vaudémont will be killed. Iolanta is horrified and agrees to the treatment. After Ibn-Hakia and Iolanta leave, the king reveals that he was faking his threats in order to motivate Iolanta towards a successful treatment. Robert returns with troops and admits he has fallen in love with another. The king cancels the contract and gives Iolanta to Vaudémont. Iolanta returns from her treatment and is now able to see. She is overjoyed by the new world she can explore with her newly betrothed.

The diegetic string quartet music at the beginning of this scene is music that I wish I could hear walking around a garden. Tchaikovsky seems to conjure the image of a garden in the music that Iolanta can hear but doesn't know she can't see. At the other end of the scene is Iolanta's *arioso*, in which she sings about her confusion over what is being hidden from her. Throughout this entire scene, and for most of the opera, Tchaikovsky weaves graceful melodies that just leave me mystified. He also supports those melodies with well-crafted harmonies, particularly in sections involving multiple female voices. The YouTube video I have provided is of the full opera. I have provided this video because musically it is a stunning opera, despite Tchaikovsky's doubts of his own abilities.