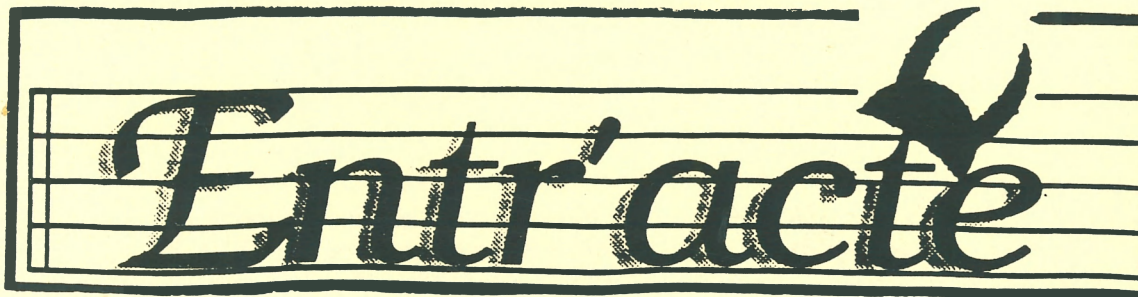


Yolanta



The Opera
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Newsletter

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Letter from the Editor

In this copy of the newsletter the background of *Yolanta* will be covered, completing my preparation of material for the forthcoming spring operas. I have been asked about the sources of my background material and the research I do in preparation for the newsletters and program-note writing that I do from time to time. I depend heavily upon the resources of the Rita Benton Music Library in the Voxman Music Building. (There, that is my way of letting you know, in case you missed it, that the Music Building has finally been named after Himie Voxman!). Also, I have my own collection of books on music: lexicons, including special topic dictionaries, histories, *Kobbe's Complete Opera Book*, biographies of composers, collections of essays, and a large number of record albums with notes. When writing program notes I try to locate a recording of the work in my own collection, or at the Music Library, and listen to the piece over and over again to help guide what I will write about it. After all, while I cannot read music, I can listen intently and remember what I hear. If I need to peruse *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, I can go to the Iowa City Public Library or to the Music Library. The Music Library has the more extensive *Grove Dictionary of Opera*, as well as any number of reference books. I look through the most recent, or definitive (not always the same) biographies of the particular composer for material on the specific work that is my target. It makes research easier and saves reading time when such books have detailed and accurate indices. I may refer to collections of letters associated with the composer. For example, Mozart and Tchaikovsky were great letter writers. Going through the material is time-consuming work but I enjoy it for I am getting an education while I am doing this. The challenge comes in trying to reconcile conflicting data, integrating and summarizing material, and then paring it down to fit the space limitations of a newsletter or the allotment for program notes in a playbill. I try to install a personal touch in the final product, otherwise it becomes overly pedantic. However, my goal is to inform the reader, and a bit of pedantry is unavoidable unless I were to cast the information into a Dave Barry or Donald Kaul style of presentation (which is tempting).

—Arthur Canter

Report of Meetings and Activities

The Supers meeting of February 20th drew twenty people including the new member of the music faculty, Stephen Swanson. A number of announcements were made about forthcoming events later in February and in March. The group learned of tentative plans for a special event commemorating Rita Benton for whom the Musical Library is named. This will take place sometime in September, 1995. It was also announced that the Music Building is now officially named the Himie Voxman Music Building. An honors convocation to be held on May 2d will formally recognize this. Supers will assist in the reception following the event.

Two of the members, Mary Wall and Patrick Nefzger, who will be attending the debut performance of Michele Crider at La Scala on February 28, will present flowers to Michele in the name of the Opera Supers.

It was decided to hold the Opera Supers Potluck on April 29, the day between performances. The strike party arrangements, as usual, will be guided by Anna Stranieri and Jean Walker. Some of the Supers may be asked to serve on a "Music Steering Committee" that will be developing plans for celebrating the 90th anniversary of the School of Music during the 1996-97 academic year. This will be tied in with the Iowa Sesquicentennial celebrations. The meeting adjourned at 8:00 PM for refreshments.

The next meeting is scheduled for Monday, March 27.

Tchaikovsky and Yolanta

Yolanta, the last opera by Tchaikovsky, was written at a time when the composer was going through the best and the worst times of his life. His relationship with Mrs. Von Meck, his longtime benefactor and correspondent, came to an end in the middle of 1890. The resulting depression was tempered somewhat by the success of his opera *The Queen of Spades* and an invitation to make a conducting tour to the United States during the spring of 1891. Just before the invitation was made, some time in December 1890, Tchaikovsky received a commission by the directorate of the Russian imperial theaters to write a one-act opera and a ballet to be presented in 1892 as the two halves of a double bill. The ballet was to portray the story of *The Nutcracker* (based on E.T.A. Hoffman's *Nussknacker und Mäusekönig*) but the libretto for the opera was left to Tchaikovsky. The composer asked his brother, Modest, to prepare a libretto using the play *King René's Daughter*, written in 1845 by the Danish dramatist and poet, Henrik Hertz.

King René's Daughter had been translated into almost every European language, including Russian. It is noted in several accounts of the origin of the libretto for *Yolanta* that Hertz based his play on a story by Hans Christian Andersen with whom Hertz had a brief close relationship and had accompanied for an extensive tour of Italy. However, as far as I have been able to determine, there is no single story by Andersen that corresponds to that of *King René's Daughter*, although the theme of blindness and finding love despite the affliction is found in some of Andersen's stories. The story of the Hertz play, very briefly, is about the King's blind daughter, Yolanta, falling in love with a visiting young prince, Vaudémont, and being cured of her blindness by this love. It is important to note that there was an actual historical figure, René, Duke of Anjou (1409-1480) who declared himself King of Naples and Sicily and whose eldest daughter was named Yolanda. René was a well-known and outstanding figure of the Renaissance period, remembered in many French legends as "*le bon roi René*". Faced with loss of the land of Lorraine after a defeat in battle by Antoine de Vaudémont, the king proposed a marriage between Antoine's son Ferry de Vaudémont and his daughter Yolanda. The two were married in 1445, the same year that René's younger daughter, Margaret, married Henry IV of England. Old King René had a knack for "dynastic connections" as well as a reputation for organizing knightly tournaments and sponsoring artists (including François Villon)! It seems that Henrik Hertz decided to romanticize and embellish the story of the marriage of Yolanda and Vaudémont, giving it more dramatic appeal by having her be blind and subject to the restoring powers of true love. Tchaikovsky became acquainted with the play in 1883, never forgot it, and eight years later found the opportunity to have it set to an opera. In his letter to Modest, the composer wrote "I shall write music that will bring tears to everyone's eyes."

Tchaikovsky did not actually start writing the music to the opera, *King René's Daughter*, until some time in July 1891. Before then, he had been occupied with a conducting tour to the United States, concerts in Paris, fretting about the bad treatment *The Queen of Spades* was getting in St. Petersburg and regretting he had accepted the commission to write a ballet on *The Nutcracker*. He learned from the newspapers that his sister had died (Modest lacked the courage to tell him). There was the constant turmoil of traveling. Thus mixed with the joys of acclamation were sorrow, despair, stress-fatigue and depressive moods. In a letter written in April 1891, well before his concert tour to the U.S., Tchaikovsky was already complaining to Modest that he was just getting rid of a heavy burden (melancholia) but was despaired over his inability to work. "Nothing came out but muck and *Casse Noisette* and *King René's Daughter* turned into terrifying feverish nightmares, so hateful that I don't dare to describe them.....I am in such a state of mind that I have started to hate *King René's Daughter*, when on the contrary I ought to love her!!!" He apparently changed the opera's title to *Yolanta* to emphasize his attraction to the central character. This was followed by a letter from Modest, upset by the composer's "cooled feelings" toward the opera, in which he expressed the fear that it was his fault and wondered if he should stop working on *Yolanta*. Over the next several weeks, the correspondence between Modest and Piotr reveals attempts on the part of the latter to clarify his feelings and apparent ambivalence about *Yolanta* to his brother and have him continue working on the libretto. He claimed to love the opera again "You will see; I shall write an opera to make everyone cry - but only for the 1892-93 season". By the time Tchaikovsky completed his tour to the U.S. at the end of June 1891 and

returned to Russia he began work on *Yolanta* in earnest, accepting Modest's work on the libretto. He turned down a visit to his brother-in-law, Lev Davydov (1839-1896), to work on the music, writing to him, July 11th: "My opera goes on lazily, with difficulty.....but in any case I shall finish it and if I then see that things are not as they were I shall definitely stop composing. I shall always find something else to do." Later that month in a letter to his nephew, Vladimir Davydov (1872-1906), he indicated he was able to give full attention to the opera and for him to tell Modest: "that the deeper I dive into the work the more pleased I am with his libretto. Very well done and the poetry is sometimes quite beautiful." Tchaikovsky worked sporadically on the opera during the rest of the summer and into October with distractions created by having to correct scores of *The Queen of Spades* for presentation in Hamburg, conduct his other opera *Voyevoda* in Moscow, and then to work on the rehearsals of *The Queen of Spades* for its Moscow premiere at the Bolshoi on November 4, 1891. By late December, he reported that *Yolanta* was just about finished but Moscow made him feel "glum". Yet he was sidetracked again by his many obligations and the need also to get going with the score for *The Nutcracker*. It must be remembered that Tchaikovsky was at the peak of his popularity in Moscow and under tremendous pressure not only from his work and obligations but also from the inner turmoil of his personal life. Finally on April 20, 1892 he could write that *Yolanta* was ready but he had to finish corrections for *The Nutcracker* by the end of the month. The two works were scheduled for rehearsal at the Mariinsky Theater (later called The Kirov) in St. Petersburg during the month of November 1892. He wrote an additional aria for Vaudémont and attended the auditions of conductors for the theater. On November 24, 1892, he wrote a brief letter to his brother, Anatoli Tchaikovsky (half-brother to Modest) that the rehearsals "for *Yolanta* and the ballet never seem to end. The Czar is probably coming on the 5th and the first night for the public will be the 6th." (Ed.—Tchaikovsky's dates in his letters are the Julian Calendar dates; add 12 days to get the Western Gregorian Calendar date). In his letter to Anatoli dated 9 December, 1892, Tchaikovsky wrote that the premiere of the ballet and opera were both successful and that the Czar (Alexander III) who had attended the special dress rehearsal performance for him the night before had kind words to say about them. However the works were attacked by the critics and the music establishment. The composer's "melodic inspirations" in the opera were judged to be "far from his usual high level" and "no creativity whatsoever" was found in the ballet. Rimsky-Korsakov thought the opera was the weakest of Tchaikovsky's compositions. It could have been sour grapes on the part of Rimsky-Korsakov, for his own recent opera-ballet *Mlada* had been removed for a period from the repertory of the Mariinsky to make room for *Yolanta*. To add insult to injury the Czar who had never attended *Mlada* did attend *Yolanta*. Also, the premiere performance of Tchaikovsky's opera featured the popular tenor Nikolai Figner and his equally popular wife, the soprano Medea Mei-Figner, neither of whom participated in Rimsky's opera. On the other hand, Rimsky-Korsakov's criticism may have been prompted by his leadership of the "Mighty Five" and their striving for Russian nationalism in music which they felt Tchaikovsky ignored. Tchaikovsky was quite used to hostile attacks to first performances of his theatrical works. He wrote to Anatoli "I am quite indifferent to it...it is not the first time, and I know that in the end I shall prevail". And so he did.

Yolanta, while practically unknown outside of Russia has remained fairly popular there. Tchaikovsky, although expressing the wish that it be done some time, did not live to see the opera put on in a double bill with Rachmaninov's *Aleko*. He died on November 6, 1893 during a cholera epidemic in St. Petersburg. *Yolanta* (also known as *Iolanta*) was first put on in the U.S on September 10, 1933 at the Garden Theater, Scarborough-on-Hudson. Its London premiere was on March 20, 1968 at St. Pancras Town Hall, during the Camden Festival. There have been occasional full staging and concert performances of the work in the past twenty years and at least one full length recording.

Note

Michele Crider's debut at La Scala, February 28, 1995, was a rousing success. She sang both roles of Marguerite and Helen of Troy in Boito's *Mefistofeles* conducted by Muti. Samuel Ramey sang the title role. She will be making her Covent Garden debut as Amelia in Verdi's *Ballo en maschera* on June 14, 1995.

Reminders

Friday, April 21, at 8:00 PM, Clapp Recital Hall: "An Evening of Operatic Arias" will be presented by Scott McCoy, tenor, Stephen Swanson, baritone and Darlene Lawrence, piano.

Saturday, April 22, at 4:30 PM, Harper Hall: The "Iowa Bach Soloists", a group made up of the voice students: Jeffrey Field, Nancy Hagen, and Gerald Grey, accompanied by faculty instrumentalists: David Nelson, violin, Mark Weiger, oboe, and Sven Hansell, harpsichord will present a recital.

Wednesday, May 3, 8:00 PM Clapp Recital Hall: The University Choir.

Friday, May 5, 8:00 PM, Clapp Recital Hall: Kantorei.

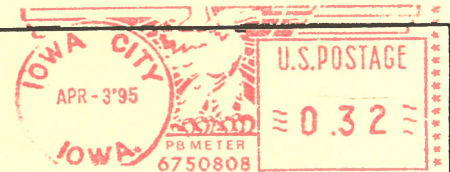
Sunday, May 7, 3:00 PM, Opera Studio: Scenes from the Opera Workshop

And don't forget **Aleko** and **Yolanta**, April 28th (Friday) and 30th (Sunday). If you have not as yet bought your ticket, do so now. It is an unusual opportunity to hear these operas live.

Anna Stranieri and Jean Walker will be calling you for Strike Party food or supplies.

The summer opera will be Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*.

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