

Prokofiev was regarded by his contemporaries as a representative of the art of the grotesque, although in fact he avoided sentimentality of any kind and sought to offer the release of laughter, subtle lyricism, and warmth of feeling.

The Love for Three Oranges, set design by Max Bignens for the production by Arno Assmann, conductor Kurt Eichhorn, Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz, Munich 1962 (TWS). In this work Prokofiev clearly turned away from the sultry art of the turn of the century, introducing a kind of revival of *opera buffa*, and avoiding any psychological approach to his protagonists. The rapid change from one scene or situation to another is reminiscent of cinematic techniques, and the consistent use of strongly dissonant and disruptive effects for negative situations suggests the composer's later methods in film scores. He employed extreme vocal techniques and pure triads in a way that made even very innovative effects acceptable to audiences, as is shown by the international popularity of this work.



Prokofiev, Sergey Sergeyevich

b. 23 April 1891 in Sonzovka
d. 5 March 1953 in Moscow

After studying from 1904 to 1914 at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Prokofiev broadened his education by traveling, and met Diaghilev in London and →Stravinsky in Rome, but he kept returning to the Soviet Union, where he was long respected as an internationally famous composer. When he settled permanently in Russia in 1933, however, he was expected to conform to the principles of Socialist Realism, and could not do so convincingly enough. In 1948 he was censured by the Soviet cultural bureaucracy. Although he promised to tread the Party line, the authorities still found it difficult to see Communist doctrine expressed in his actual works. What appeared inadequate conformity at home seemed in the West to be the ultimate example of political indoctrination.

Works: *Maddalena* (1912/FP 1979, London), *Igrok (The Gambler)* (1929, Brussels), *Lyubov' k tryom apel'sinam (The Love for Three Oranges)* (1921, Chicago), *Ognenny angel (The Fiery Angel)*, (1919, rev.1927/FP 1954, Paris), *Semyon Kotko* (1940, Moscow), *Obrucheniye v monastire (Betrothal in a Monastery)* (1940/FP 1946, Leningrad), *Voyna i mir (War and Peace)* (1944, Moscow), *Povest' o nastoyashchem cheloveke (The Story of a Real Man)* (1948/FP 1960, Moscow); ballets, incidental music, film scores, orchestral works, chamber music, piano music, vocal compositions.

The Love for Three Oranges

Opera in a prologue and four acts (ten scenes)

Libretto: Sergey Prokofiev, after the play *L'amore delle tre melarance (The Love for Three Oranges)* by Carlo Gozzi, and the comedy of the same name by Konstantin Vogak, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Vladimir Solov'yov.

Première: 30 December 1921, Chicago (Auditorium Theater).

Characters: The King of Clubs, king of an imaginary kingdom where everyone dresses as a playing card (B), The Prince, his son (T), Princess Clarice, the king's niece (A), Leander, the prime minister, dressed as the King of Spades (Bar), Truffaldino, a jester (T), Pantalone, the king's confidant (Bar), Celio, a sorcerer and the king's protector (B), Fata Morgana, a witch and Leander's protector (S), Linetta, Nicoletta, and Ninetta, princesses in the oranges (A, Ms, S), Creonta's Cook (B), Farfarello, a devil (B), Smeraldina, an Arab girl (Ms), Master of Ceremonies (T), Herald (B), Trumpeteer (musician playing bass trombone); ten cranks, tragedians, comedians, lyricists, empty heads, imps, doctors, courtiers (chorus); monsters, drunks, gluttons, guards, servants, four soldiers (silent).

Synopsis

Prologue

The supporters of different kinds of drama demand the kind of art that suits them best, and threaten violence in making their claims. The Cranks, representing the theatrical management, send the disputants away, promising to do them all justice in a piece that will satisfy any audience. It bears the curious name of *The Love for Three Oranges*. They then post themselves on two watchtowers by the proscenium arch, to keep an eye on both the opera and the audience.

Act I

A council of doctors diagnoses the prince's sickness as incurable hypochondria. Pantalone tells the king, who is distressed, that according to popular wisdom sickness can be cured by laughter. The king orders entertainments and engages an expert in laughter: the jester Truffaldino. The magicians Celio and Fata

Pre-Socialist surrealism

Prokofiev's opera can be called neo-Classical, or more appropriately surrealistic and absurd. In his avant-garde years, the man who was later to be a master of musical Socialist Realism and the brilliant composer of scores for Eisenstein's films paid homage to a dramatic ideal linked to the aesthetics of Meyerhold, and much closer to the fairy-tale world of Carlo Gozzi than to realistic stage works.

Morgana, who are at odds, express their differences in a game of cards. Celio loses. Fata Morgana's servant Smeraldina tells Prime Minister Leander of the underground power struggle. Celio supports the prince, Fata Morgana is on the side of the prime minister, who is in league with the king's niece Clarice. She is planning to usurp the throne, and therefore does not want the prince to be cured. Celio is weakened, and the imps will not obey him any more. Leander's prospects look promising.

Act II

Truffaldino's attempts to cheer the prince are unsuccessful. Against his will, the hypochondriac is dragged to the festivities, but Truffaldino's art is all in vain. The prince does not even smile. Then Fata Morgana appears, and quarrels with Truffaldino. He collides with the old witch, who stumbles and falls. Now, at last, the prince laughs and is cured. However, he immediately comes under the spell of Fata Morgana's curse: he will fall in love with three oranges. The prince, against his father's will, sets off in search of the oranges. Farfarello blows the prince and his companion Truffaldino off stage with his bellows.

Act III

Now that the sorcerer Celio has lost at cards, Farfarello no longer obeys him. However, Celio succeeds in giving Truffaldino a ribbon. He is to give it to the witch Creonta's cook, who is guarding the three oranges. In Creonta's kitchen, the prince steals the three oranges while Truffaldino distracts the

cook's attention with the ribbon, and they both escape with their lives. On the tedious journey home the prince and Truffaldino feel tired and thirsty. While the prince sleeps, and in spite of Celio's warning, Truffaldino opens two of the oranges. Two princesses emerge, demanding water; without it, they are doomed to die of thirst in the desert. With a guilty conscience, Truffaldino steals away. When the prince opens the third orange, Princess Ninetta falls into his arms. But she too would die of thirst if the cranks did not act against all the rules of dramatic propriety and bring a bucket of water on stage. Ninetta sends her prince on ahead to fetch her some suitable clothes. Smeraldina changes the waiting Ninetta into a rat, and takes the princess's place herself. The unhappy prince is forced by his father to take Smeraldina home as his bride.

Act IV

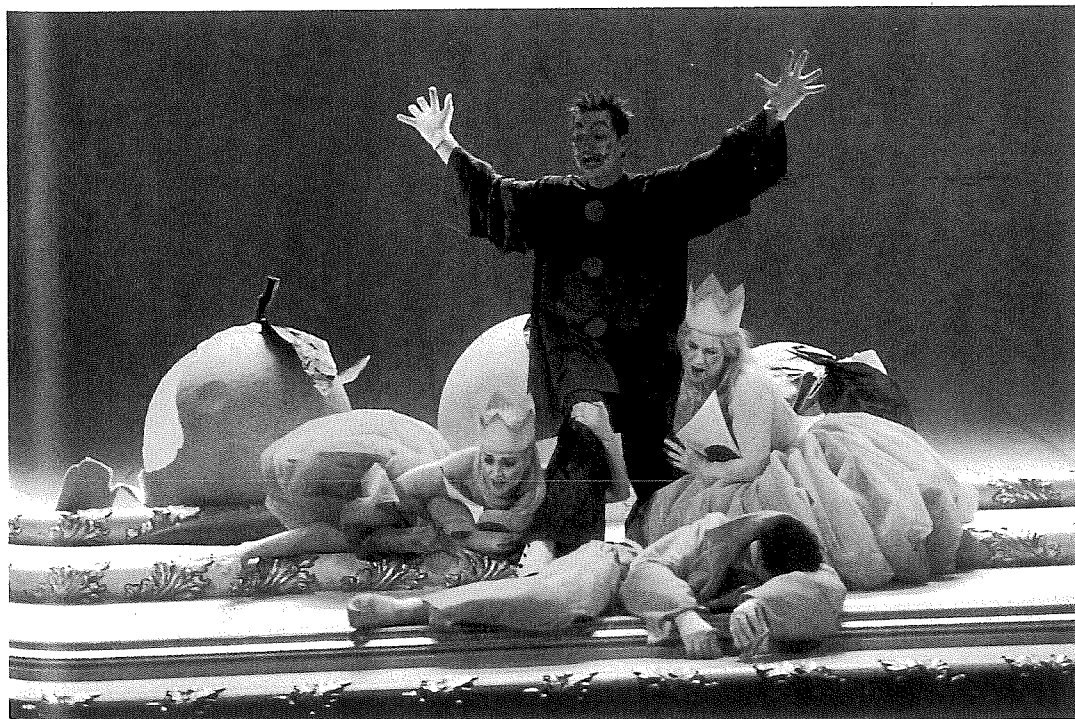
Celio and Fata Morgana accuse each other of fighting unfairly, but Fata Morgana is the stronger. The cranks intervene again, shutting the witch up in one of the towers by the proscenium arch. Now it is up to Truffaldino to bring the story to a happy conclusion. All is ready for the wedding, but there is a rat on the throne, for Celio cannot break the spell. The guards shoot the creature, and Ninetta appears. It is revealed that Leander, Clarice, and Smeraldina were all in league. The king gives orders to hang them, but Fata Morgana escapes with her accomplices through a trapdoor. Nonetheless, there is general rejoicing for the happy couple.

S.N.



Above

The Love for Three Oranges, historic playing cards with illustrations by Alfred Rethel: the King of Clubs and the King of Spades, 1852 (Deutsches Spielkarten-Museum Leinfelden-Echterdingen).



The Love for Three Oranges, production photograph with (from left to right) Diana Rehbock (Nicoletta), Donald George (lying front, the prince), Daniel Kirch (Truffaldino), and Caren van Oyen (Ninetta), production Andreas Homoki, conductor Mikhail Yurovsky, sets Frank Philipp Schlössmann, costumes Mechthild Seipel, Komische Oper, Berlin 1998.

The thirsty Truffaldino has opened two of the three oranges, although he was forbidden to do so. Instead of juicy fruit, he finds two girls inside. In despair, Truffaldino has to watch the two princesses die of thirst, while the prince sleeps through the tragedy. But the third orange is still intact.

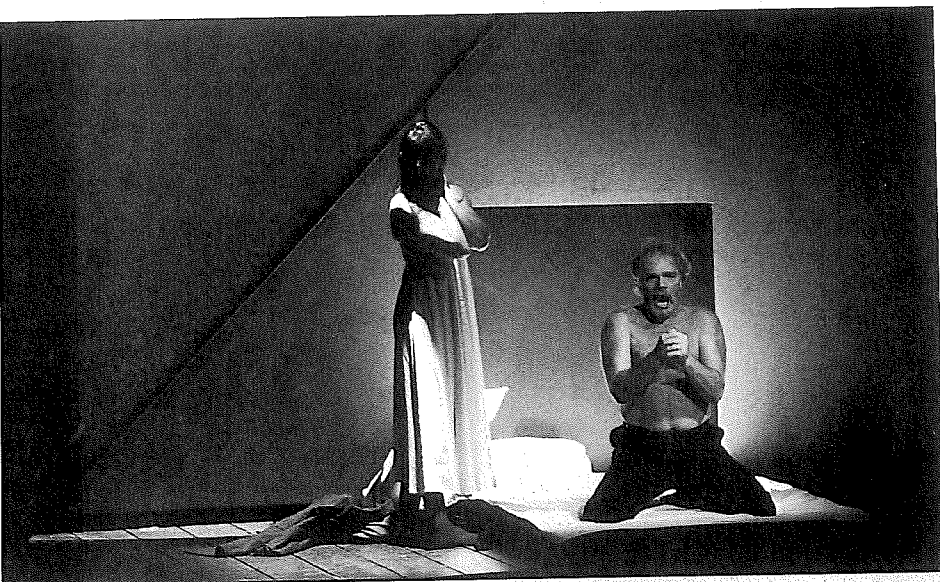
Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District

Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uyezda

Opera in four acts, nine scenes

Libretto: Alexander Preys and Dmitry Shostakovich, after the short story of the same name by Nikolay Leskov.

Première: First version: 22 January 1934, Leningrad (Maliy Operniy Teatr); second version, under the title *Katerina Izmaylova*: 8 January 1963, Moscow (Stanislavsky-Nemirovich-Danchenko Music Theater).



Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District, production photograph with Kathryn Harries (Katerina) and Jan Blinkhof (Sergey), production Johannes Schaaf, sets Nina Ritter, costumes Franz Lehr, conductor Ingo Metzmaier, Württembergisches Staatstheater, Stuttgart 1992. Over the years the inner themes of the opera have emerged ever more clearly. Productions of the work have moved away from the specifically Russian and folkloric aspects of the work to focus on the depiction of social and erotic tensions which express themselves with an elementary power.

Characters: Boris Timofeyevich Izmaylov, a merchant (high B), Zinovy Borisovich Izmaylov, his son, a merchant (T), Katerina L'voyna Izmaylova, Zinovy's wife (S), Sergey, a servant of the Izmaylovs (T), Aksin'ya, cook (S), Shabby Peasant (T), Steward (B), Porter (B), Three Workers (3 T), Millhand (Bar), Coachman (T), Priest (B), Chief of Police (Bar), Policeman (B), Teacher (T), Drunken Guest (T), Officer (B), Sentry (B), Sonetka, a convict (A), Old Convict (B), Woman Convict (S), Apparition of Boris Timofeyevich (B); workers, wedding guests, policemen, convicts (chorus).

Setting: The Russian provinces in the 1860s.

Synopsis *Act I*

The merchant's wife, Katerina Izmaylova, is bored: she finds her husband Zinovy repellent and she has no children. When Zinovy is required to leave the house for a few days, Katerina's father-in-law, Boris, humiliates her by forcing her to swear an oath of loyalty to her husband in front of the servants. The cook Aksin'ya suggests a solution: she draws Katerina's attention to a new worker, Sergey, who

was dismissed from his previous position for having an affair with his mistress, and suggests he might be able to relieve Katerina of her boredom. Some of the workers fool about with Aksin'ya, but the situation threatens to get out of hand. Katerina intervenes and is challenged by Sergey to test her strength against his. Katerina decides there is something attractive about his impudence. On the pretext of borrowing some books, Sergey enters Katerina's bedroom and his presence leads to a sexual encounter between the two.

Act II

Plagued by insomnia and dwelling on lust-filled memories, Boris keeps a careful eye on the house and property, especially his daughter-in-law. Just as he is thinking about fulfilling his son's conjugal duties himself, he spies Sergey climbing out of Katerina's window. Sergey falls into the clutches of the old man, who, instead of expending his strength in Katerina's bed, exhausts himself by thrashing Sergey in front of the other servants and the helpless Katerina. He then locks Sergey in the cellar. Feeling hungry, he orders his daughter-in-law to bring him the rest of that day's dish of mushrooms, which she proceeds to garnish with rat poison. While the old man is writhing in agony, she steals his keys and frees Sergey from his temporary prison. Katerina shares her bed with Sergey; when her husband returns that night she and Sergey murder him and dump his body in the cellar.

Act III

Katerina and Sergey are about to be married. As the guests gather in the church a ragged peasant breaks into the Izmaylov's cellar. Instead of finding wine, as he had hoped, he discovers a corpse and immediately runs to the police. The chief of police and his men are feeling slighted, because they have not been invited to the wedding. The peasant's information gives them the excuse they need to present themselves at the festivities. The wedding reception is in full swing when Katerina discovers the broken lock on the cellar door. It is too late to flee, and she and Sergey are arrested.

Act IV

Katerina and Sergey have been sentenced and are on their way to a labor prison in Siberia. In a camp set up for the night along the way, men and women are separated. Katerina bribes the guard to let her see Sergey, who is her only source of comfort and strength. But Sergey reproaches her, blaming her for his misfortune. He has lost interest in her, and is now attracted to a younger prisoner called Sonetka. When Katerina discovers his faithlessness she pushes her rival into the water and jumps in after her. Both women drown, but the relentless march of the prisoners continues.

Sexual liberation

Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District was composed between the fall of 1930 and December 1932, when Shostakovich was still in his mid-20s. Its theme is a most unusual one for an opera: its characters are from the lower class, it is set in one of the innermost Russian provinces, and the motivation for the action is banal: boredom and sexual dissatisfaction. Can music thrive in this kind of atmosphere? *Lady Macbeth* was written at a time when Shostakovich was himself being drawn into the turmoil of love and sexuality: in 1932 he married Nina Varsar, to whom the opera was dedicated. But this was also a time when the principles of sexual liberation were being discussed and put into practice by Soviet youth, even though the official line was still that love and sexuality were to be restricted to the rituals of procreation. The state did everything it could to inculcate the belief that sexual drives should be domesticated and placed at the service of Soviet society. Shostakovich's opera was a reaction against this false creed. His work deals with the untamable nature of sexuality, and with acts of sexual violence and emancipation.



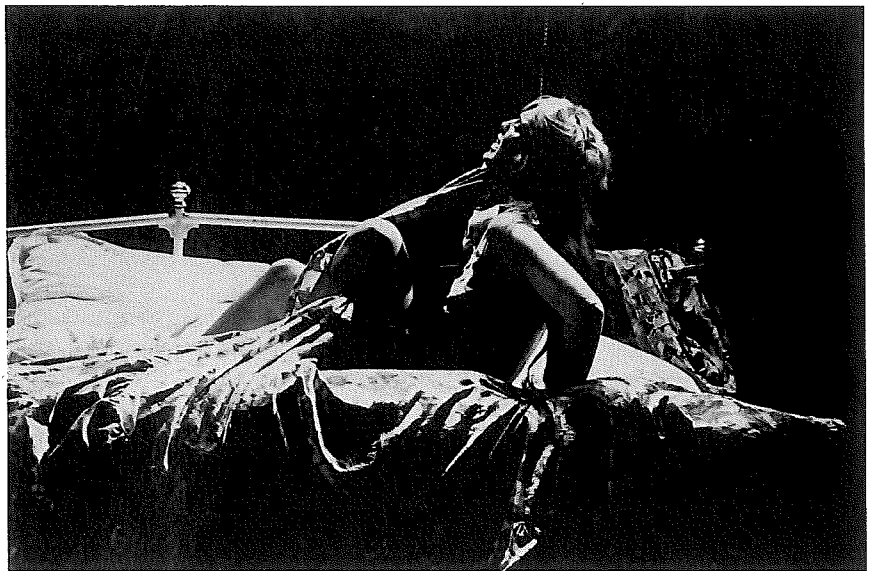
Satirical tragedy and satire-tragedy

The mixture of satire and tragedy in the work results in a cornucopia of musical styles: strident sounds taken from everyday life are combined with contrapuntal responses, and naturalistic effects overlay symphonic passages. The music presents situations rather than gesturing towards them, and only the grand and highly expressive orchestral interludes have a commenting function. By increasing and exaggerating the tempo, Shostakovich makes the violence inherent in everyday life evident in his music – a technique he borrowed from the world of the cinema.

Below left

Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District, production photograph with Hildegard Behrens (Katerina) and Kurt Schreilmayer (Sergey), production Volker Schlöndorff, sets Viktor A. Volsky, costumes Raphael Volsky, conductor Peter Schneider, Bayerische Staatsoper, Munich 1993.

Katerina Izmaylova became one of the most sought after roles in the operatic repertory, proof of which can be seen here, with the singer Hildegard Behrens as Katerina.



Above

Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District, Rebecca Blankenship as Katerina, production Christine Mielitz, conductor Donald Runnicles, Wiener Volksoper 1991.

The Russian version of the *Lady Macbeth* story does not focus on ambition and the desire for power, but on spiritual isolation, inner pain, and eruptions of sexual desire.

"Muddle instead of music"

Shostakovich was made to pay for his boldness. The première in 1934 was such a success that a second Moscow production followed later the same year. The opera caused quite a stir abroad, too: there was a production in January 1935 in Cleveland, followed by performances in New York, Philadelphia, Stockholm, Prague, and Zürich. But in 1936 the opera was – de facto if not de jure – banned in the Soviet Union. In January the original Leningrad production was performed in Moscow, and was attended by Stalin. The dictator left the theater early to attend a meeting, without expressing an opinion on the work. This was interpreted as a sign of displeasure, and, as is often the case in a totalitarian state, resulted in a hostile press campaign triggered by the infamous "Muddle instead of music" article in *Pravda* on 28 January 1936. The article attacked Shostakovich for his allegedly false depiction of what was essentially a perfect world. The

work disappeared from the schedules of opera houses throughout the Soviet Union almost overnight. Shostakovich was forced to make changes to *Lady Macbeth*, and this ultimately led to a revision of the piece in 1963 under the title *Katerina Izmaylova*. In this version the conflicts were toned down, and Katerina was presented as a pitiable woman who is tyrannized by a male-dominated society. Not until 1979, four years after Shostakovich's death, was Mstislav Rostropovich able to obtain the score of the original version and allow *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* to return to the international stage in the form intended by the composer.

S. N.

Physical music

If "emotional confusion" is one of the traditional themes of opera, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth* tells of the anarchic and mute desires of the body. In order to convey this phenomenon instrumental sounds become metaphors for physical states, and this explains the stumbling, gliding, sliding, grimacing, belching, squeaking, and tumbling noises produced by the instruments. Shostakovich created symbolic sound forms and instrumental color, endowing individual characters with their own aura: the alto flute for Zinovy, the double bassoon for Boris, the cello for Sergey, and the oboe and clarinet for Katerina.