

Tchaikovsky, *The Queen of Spades* “an early landmark of Russian Symbolism” -- Richard Taruskin

(For a synopsis of the opera, go to <http://www.metopera.org/synopses/spades.html>.)

Symbolist how?

- “decadent” theme (mysterious, malevolent Fate; gambling; doomed love)
- mirrorings, doublings:
 - *Countess* chooses cards (chance) over love; but must yield to lover (*St-Germain*) to win at cards (learn the secret of the 3 cards)
 - A man in love (*Gherman*) will bring about her death when he learns the secret of the 3 cards
 - *Gherman* chooses love over cards (chance); but must yield to cards (learn the secret of the three cards) in order to win at love
 - He brings about the death of the *Countess*; but she in turn (as the Queen of Spades) causes his downfall.
- musical themes/motifs do not represent a particular character, relationship, mood, or situation; rather, they ironically or suggestively link disparate referents.” E.g., theme of the three cards (“Tri karty, tri karty, tri karty!”):
 - is ALMOST introduced in overture (the material that precedes it appears, but not the theme itself)
 - appears in full for the first time in *Gherman’s* love aria (Act I, sc. 1), but seems innocent enough
 - receives its definitive statement in the “backstory” of the *Countess*, as related by Tomsky later in Act I.
 - Ironic reprise in Act II, sc. 3, when *Surin* and *Chekalinsky* tease *Gherman* at the ball, suggesting that he is the passionate lover (of, they imply, the *Countess*) who seeks to learn the secret of the 3 cards. (Of course, he is, but not the way they mean.)
- Like Bely’s *Petersburg*, the opera simultaneously evokes a series of “Petersburg moments”—much of the musical material is deliberately anachronistic, creating a temporally layered effect (like Bely’s juxtaposition of motifs evoking Peter’s time, Pushkin’s time (the Bronze Horseman, Akaky Akakievich) and 1905, among others).

The triple timeframe of *The Queen of Spades* is as follows:

- **Empire: 1790s**—the time of Catherine the Great, Mme. Pompadour, Mozart; the “official” setting for the action of the opera. (See: Intermezzo at beginning of Act II; Polonaise at end of Act II sc. 3, when Catherine arrives at the ball)
- **Golden Age: 1810s**—the time of Pushkin’s youth, in which Pushkin’s original story was set (see: Liza and Polina’s duet on verses by Zhukovsky, and Polina’s aria on verses by Batiushkov, both in Act I, sc. 2).
- **late Romanticism 1880s-90s**—the time in which Tchaikovsky is actually composing; chromatic writing anticipates Modernism; expressionist contrasts and jagged melodies herald the heightened colours and shadows of Symbolism. (See: Overture; Winter Canal scene, Act III. Compare: Puccini, *La Bohème*, 1896).