

FACT SHEET

Iolanta

Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Composed: 1891

Genre: Opera

Length: 1 hr 30 mins

First Performed: St Petersburg, Mariinsky Theatre, 18 December 1892

In Brief:

Iolanta was Tchaikovsky's final work in a form that had absorbed him for most of his working life. The libretto was written by the composer's brother Modest Tchaikovsky, and is based on the Danish play *Kong Renés Datter* (King René's Daughter) by Henrik Hertz. The story revolves around Iolanta, the blind female protagonist, who has never known light or colour, and whose disability has been kept secret from her. Betrothed to marry the Duke, she is seduced by the Duke's best friend who tells her of the wonders of vision. The Duke abandons the betrothal in order that Iolanta and his best friend can marry. In a victorious ending Iolanta is granted her sight and falls in love. Tchaikovsky felt very fondly towards his female protagonist saying 'I am more than ever in love with her', and this passion is reflected in his approach to the music. The opera is a work of discovery: Iolanta's awakening into a world of vision and light; her rescuer Vaudémont's emergence into the realms of love and passion; and Tchaikovsky's transition to delicate, intimate music. The orchestra echoes emotional truths, evolving from darkness into light: from the stark wind ensemble of the opera's opening bars to ethereal, fragrant strings.

Cast:

Tatiana Monogarova *Iolanta*
Sergei Aleksashkin *King René*
Yevgeny Shapovalov *Count Vaudémont*
Vyacheslav Pochapsky *Ibn-Hakia*
Rodion Pogossov *Robert, Duke of Burgundy*
Peter Gijsbertsen *Alméric*
Maxim Mikhailov *Bertrand*
Anne Collins *Martha*
Ekaterina Lekhina *Brigitta*

Julie Pasturaud *Laura*

London Philharmonic Orchestra
Moscow Conservatory Chamber Choir
Vladimir Jurowski *conductor*

Synopsis:

Time: The 15th Century

Place: The mountains of southern France

Scene 1

Iolanta has been blind from birth, but no one has ever told her. In a beautiful garden on the king's estate, her friends bring flowers and sing to her.

Scene 2

After announcing the king's arrival, Almeric is warned by Bertrand not to speak of light with Iolanta or to reveal that Iolanta's father is the king. She is betrothed to Robert, who is also unaware of her misfortune. The king arrives with a physician who states Iolanta can be cured, but only if she is told and desires to see. The king refuses the treatment, fearing for Iolanta's happiness.

Scene 3

Wishing to avoid the marriage, Robert and Vaudémont escape to the garden where they encounter Iolanta. Robert, convinced she is a sorceress, leaves to prepare his troops. Vaudémont stays and discovers her blindness. They fall in love, after he explains light and colour to her.

Scene 4

The couple is discovered. Vaudémont pledges his love, whether Iolanta is blind or not. The king threatens to kill Vaudémont if the physician's treatment fails. Robert returns, having fallen in love with another. The king cancels the wedding contract, and gives Iolanta to Vaudémont. The treatment works and Iolanta can see!

Structure:

Introduction

No.1 — Scena

No.1a - Iolanta's Arioso

No.2 — Scena & Chorus

No.3 — Scena & Chorus

No.4 — Scena

No.4a - King Rene's Arioso

No.5 — Scena

No.5a - Ibn-Hakia's Monologue

No.6 — Scena

No.6a - Robert's Aria

No.6b - Vaudémont's Romance

No.7 — Scena & Duet

No.8 — Scena

No.9 — Finale

In Depth:

In his life, Tchaikovsky wrote two historical operas (*Mazeppa* and *Oprichnik*), and had, like many other nineteenth-century composers, tried his hand at French Grand Opera with *The Maid of Orleans*. He had also, like so many Russians, set Pushkin in his two operatic masterpieces, *Eugene Onegin* and *Pique Dame*. Again and again, Tchaikovsky tried to move away from predictable operatic subjects, scorning '*all the routine Pharaohs, Ethiopian princesses, poisoned cups and all the rest of these tales about automata*'. He was very keen then, when Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the energetic Director of the Imperial Theatres who had commissioned him to write *The Sleeping Beauty*, tried to lure him back into the theatre with a double-bill comprising a one-act opera and a two-act ballet.

For the ballet, Tchaikovsky turned to a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann that greatly interested him, and in sweetened form this was to become *The Nutcracker*. Choosing a good opera subject was more difficult. Shortly before its première, Tchaikovsky gave an interview to the journal *St Petersburg Life* in which he was asked how he had discovered *Iolanta*. '*Eight years ago there fell in my hands one of the booklets of The Russian Messenger, which included the one-act play by the writer Henrik Hertz, entitled in Fyodor's Miller's translation King René's Daughter. This subject enchanted me for its poetic quality, its originality and its profusion of lyrical moments. There and then I promised myself that one day I would set it to music. Owing to a number of obstacles, it was only last year that I was able to carry out this resolve*'.

Feeling unsure about the project and becoming aware of his increasing age, he found it difficult to settle, and shifted restlessly from opera to ballet as each in turn caused him frustration. As had been his custom, instead of starting the opera at the beginning of the story, Tchaikovsky chose the scene that most captured his imagination – the love scene between the blind *Iolanta* and her impassioned suitor. This was the emotional heart of the work and Tchaikovsky greatly appreciated the work his brother had done on the adaptation. *The Nutcracker* was composed between February 1891 and 4 April 1892, *Iolanta* between 22 July and 27 December 1891.