

The Curtis Opera Theatre

presents

Iolanta

Music by Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky
Libretto by Modest Tchaikovsky,
based on the play *Kong Renés datter* by Henrik Hertz

Rossen Milanov, *conductor*
Ghenady Meirson, *vocal and Russian coach*

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 8 p.m.
Sunday, May 11, 2008, at 2:30 p.m.

Prince Music Theater

Iolanta will run about ninety-five minutes with no intermission.

Titles provided by arrangement with Bayshore Opera Translations.
Translation by Lindley L. Becker.

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a grant from the Spector Gadon & Rosen Foundation.

Photographic and recording equipment may not be used in Prince Music Theater.

CAST

(in singing order)

	May 9	May 11
Martha, <i>Iolanta's nurse and Bertrand's wife</i>	Marquita Raley	Marquita Raley
Iolanta, <i>the king's daughter</i>	Amanda Majeski	Charlotte Dobbs
Brigitta, <i>Iolanta's friend</i>	Allison Sanders	Allison Sanders
Laura, <i>Iolanta's friend</i>	Tammy Coil	Tammy Coil
Bertrand, <i>the gate-keeper</i>	Thomas Shivone	Thomas Shivone
Almeric, <i>King René's armor-bearer</i>	Joshua Stewart	Jason Coffey
René, <i>King of Provence</i>	Evan Hughes	Evan Boyer
Ibn-Hakia, <i>a Moorish doctor</i>	Allen Boxer	Nathan Bachhuber
Robert, <i>Duke of Burgundy</i>	Adrian Kramer	Kevin Ray
Count Vaudémont, <i>a Burgundian knight</i>	Dominic Armstrong	Dominic Armstrong
Friends of Iolanta	Karen Jesse Ashley Thouret	Karen Jesse Ashley Thouret

SETTING

The estate of King René

SYNOPSIS

In fifteenth-century Provence, King René's daughter, the lovely Iolanta, lives in a remote castle, unaware that she is blind. Her father will not allow her devoted attendants to reveal her disability because he wants to find someone who will cure her before her fiancé—Robert, the Duke of Burgundy—learns of her condition. Iolanta, however, suspects that something is wrong and, despite the fact that she is loved and protected by all, including her father, is sad at heart.

A great Moorish physician, Ibn-Hakia, who has been summoned to examine Iolanta, visits her while she is asleep and tells the king his diagnosis. A cure for Princess Iolanta is possible, but only if she is made aware of her blindness and longs to see the light. The king, however, cannot bear to tell Iolanta the truth and angrily informs the doctor that death is the

penalty for anyone who does so.

In the meantime, the duke and his friend, Count Vaudémont, are on a journey to see the king. Robert hopes that King René will agree to let him back out of the marriage with Iolanta, a woman he has never met and does not love. His affections lie with the passionate black-eyed beauty, Mathilde. Vaudémont, meanwhile, is seeking someone chaste, angelic, and gentle.

By accident, the two wander into a beautiful deserted garden, where Iolanta lies asleep. Vaudémont is instantly captivated by her but Robert, fearing sorcery, departs to find his retinue. As the princess and the count converse, they fall in love. Suddenly, after having asked Iolanta for a white rose and three times received a red one, Vaudémont realizes that she is blind. He reveals to her the

meaning of light, which she has never known and now fears.

When King René enters the garden, he is horrified that Iolanta has been told of her blindness. However, the wise doctor, Ibn-Hakia, sees reason for hope: Perhaps the princess will truly yearn for the light. The king remains firm: Only if the doctor

succeeds in giving her sight will the count's life be spared. Iolanta, now desperately wanting him to live, begs for the sight that will bring her light. The doctor succeeds in his task, Robert returns and is released from his bond of marriage, and all give thanks to Heaven.

when the knight asks Iolanta for a white rose, leading to his and then her awareness of her blindness. As the opera progresses, the music conveys a different princess, one who has emerged from the artificial, pretty world created by her father into the real world, which inspires first fear, then determination in her. At the same time the orchestration gains in harmonic tension and richness and takes on a highly chromatic flavor.

The king is the most complex character in the opera—a man in despair over his

daughter's blindness who is himself blind to the deprivations he has caused her. These characteristics are emphasized in the powerful duet he shares with Ibn-Hakia, the Moorish physician who restores Iolanta's sight. Ibn-Hakia is among Tchaikovsky's most unique characters. He is the catalyst who convinces Iolanta to take the step into the unknown, where darkness—both visual and emotional—will be dispersed, leaving the final transcendent message that love is the healing power.

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PROGRAM NOTES

Reading the libretto of Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta*, one might wonder why the composer ever chose to compose an opera based on it. The story of a blind young princess who has no idea that she is without sight and a controlling father who keeps her prisoner in a false, if lovely, world, *Iolanta* suffers from a lack of action and dramatic tension. It is a tribute to Tchaikovsky that he managed to create a deeply moving opera despite this intrinsic weakness, imbuing the characters with more depth and complexity than they perhaps warranted.

Iolanta came about when Ivan Vsevolozhsky, director of the Imperial Theatres, suggested that Tchaikovsky compose a one-act opera and a two-act ballet that would be performed as a double bill. Tchaikovsky accepted the offer. For the ballet he turned to a story by E. T. A. Hoffmann that greatly interested him; it would become *The Nutcracker*. The opera would be based on a Russian translation of *King René's Daughter*, a one-act play by the writer Henrik Hertz that the composer had seen a few years before. Tchaikovsky's brother Modest, a minor playwright who had written the libretto for one of Tchaikovsky's most successful operas, *The Queen of Spades*, was engaged to take on that responsibility once again.

The composition process was not easy. Tchaikovsky found it difficult to work,

became uncertain about the project, and shifted from opera to ballet and back as he encountered problems with each. *Iolanta* was finally completed in December 1891, and the ballet by April 1892. The premiere took place December 18, 1892, with the tsar, a great admirer of Tchaikovsky, in attendance. Clearly the audience preferred the opera, demanding an encore of the love duet, but the critics were harsh and at least one other composer, Rimsky-Korsakov, criticized the work, claiming that it contained borrowed material and was scored for the wrong instruments. The double-bill lasted for only eleven performances.

Now, of course *The Nutcracker* is a staple of the ballet repertoire while *Iolanta*, despite the championship of composers like Mahler, remains in the shadow of the composer's more famous and admittedly more dramatic operas. This is a pity because Tchaikovsky's musical genius brings the characters to life, and the abundance of melody and superb orchestration are maintained throughout.

The heroine, Princess Iolanta, personifies the youth and vulnerability that Tchaikovsky portrayed so well—such as in *Eugene Onegin's* Tatiana, his greatest female characterization. Like Tatiana, Iolanta matures before our eyes—quite a feat in an opera that is only ninety minutes long. Most touching is the love scene,