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Numerical Symbolism in the Musical Dramaturgy of *The Queen of Spades* by Pyotr Tchaikovsky

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Abstract. Hermann's obsession with the three, seven and ace of cards, which "never left his head and moved on his lips," "haunting him in his sleep, taking on all possible forms," is one of the most striking and memorable artistic discoveries in Pushkin's story. Perhaps it was this idea, successfully picked up by Modest Ilyich Tchaikovsky and developed in the original version of the libretto, that so inspired his brother, the composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, with the plot of *The Queen of Spades*. The individual observations accumulated over the past years on the reflection of number symbolism in the literary and musical language of *The Queen of Spades* pose the question to the researcher: to what extent was the unfolding of this process in the composer's consciousness rational. It is precisely the totality of the manifestations of this plan, its action in musical dramaturgy

at the level of *rhythm* (rhythmic patterns and figures that form groups of three, seven and twelve durations), *metre* (the most indicative is the choice of the rare time signature 12/8 and giving it leitmotiv status in the part of the Countess), *harmony* (three-chord chains), *mode* (the use of whole-tones not only brings in a rich colouring, but also becomes one of the “building blocks”), *tonal plan* (*h/H* as the most important tonal centre), *musical syntax* (“tripleness” in the organisation of motives and phrases), *melody* and — more broadly — *thematics*, as well as *composition* convinces us that before us lies a complete system that has been reproduced probably for the first time in world opera literature.

Keywords: *The Queen of Spades*, opera, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Modest Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Alexander Pushkin, number symbolism, musical dramaturgy, composition, libretto

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Музыкальный театр

Научная статья

**Числовая символика в музыкальной
драматургии «Пиковой дамы» П. И. Чайковского**

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Аннотация. Одержимость Германа карточными тройкой, семеркой и тузом, которые «не выходили из его головы и шевелились на его губах», «преследовали его во сне, принимая все возможные виды», — одна из самых ярких и запоминающихся художественных находок в пушкинской повести. Возможно, именно эта идея, удачно подхваченная М. И. Чайковским и развитая уже в первоначальном варианте либретто, помогла композитору горячо увлечься сюжетом «Пиковой дамы». Накопившиеся за прошедшие годы отдельные наблюдения над отражением числовой символики в литературном и музыкальном языке «Пиковой дамы» ставят перед исследователем вопрос: насколько рационален был этот процесс в композиторском сознании П. И. Чайковского. Именно совокупность проявлений этого плана, его действие в музыкальной драматургии

на уровне *ритмики* (ритмических рисунков и фигур, образующих группы из трех, семи и двенадцати длительностей), *метрики* (наиболее показателен выбор редкого размера 12/8 и придание ему лейтстатуса в партии Графини), *гармонии* (трехаккордовые цепочки), *лада* (целотонность не только вносит фантастический колорит, но и становится одним из «строительных элементов»), *тонального плана* (h/H как важнейший тональный центр), *музыкального синтаксиса* («троичность» в организации мотивов и фраз), *мелодики* и — шире — *тематизма*, а также *композиции* убеждает в том, что перед нами — целостная система, в таком масштабе, вероятно, впервые реализованная в мировой оперной литературе.

Ключевые слова: «Пиковая дама», опера, П. И. Чайковский, М. И. Чайковский, А. С. Пушкин, числовая символика, музыкальная драматургия, композиция, либретто

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Introduction

The study of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* in terms of poetics, semantics, symbolism of various genesis, and the irrational is a clear trend in the opera research literature in recent decades. This can be seen as a reaction to the fact that for a long time the gaze of musicologists was focused on the “material” side of Tchaikovsky's brilliant work — the plot and heroes of the opera, the relationship between the libretto and the literary source, the features of the composition and dramaturgy, the original stylistic means,¹ etc. Meanwhile, back at the beginning of the 20th century, Alexander Alexandrovich Blok articulated a different perception of *The Queen of Spades*: “The ‘Apollonian’ Pushkin flew into the abyss, pushed there by the hand of Tchaikovsky — *the magician and musician*” (letter to Pyotr Petrovich Pertsov dated January 31, 1906).² Alexander Nikolaevich Benois, who attended the premiere of the opera, summed up his impression and subsequent effect in a similar vein: “Personally, *The Queen of Spades* literally *drove me crazy*, turned me into a visionary for a while [...] The music of *The Queen of Spades* acquired for me the power of some kind of spell, with the help of which I could penetrate into the world of shadows that had long attracted me.”³ However, this shift in focus from the “external” (visible) to the “internal” (hidden) does not at all imply a rejection of the melody, harmony, orchestration, and plot logic of the libretto; on the contrary, it is precisely with the help of specific elements of the text of *The Queen of Spades*, both literary and musical, that the “complex multidimensional whole, not amenable to analysis using one or two dimensions” [3, p. 149], about which Maurice Shlemovich Bonfeld wrote, is illuminated and revealed.

¹ The search for more and more new approaches to interpreting the plot of *The Queen of Spades* is evidenced by articles of recent years, e.g., Vladimir A. Afanasyev on demonism in Pushkin's story from the point of view of the semiotics of a card game [1] and Vera V. Sadokova on the connection of the opera with the poetics of the funeral rite [2].

² Blok, A. A. (1963). *Collected Works*. (In 8 Vols., Vol. 8). State Publishing House of Fiction, p. 150.

³ Benois, A. N. (1990). *My Memories*. (In 5 books, Vol. I., Books 1, 2, 3.). Nauka, pp. 652–653.

*Interpretation of the “Faustian” Plot:
Reflections after Reading the Article by Natalia V. Korolevskaya*

One of the most recent experiments in “diving into the mysterious depths” of *The Queen of Spades* is set out the article by Natalia Vladimirovna Korolevskaya entitled “Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades* as a ‘Faustian’ Plot: on the Problem of the Intertextual Content of the Opera” [4], published in the last issue of the journal *Contemporary musicology*. The persuasiveness of its main provisions provokes another look at the artistic text of *The Queen of Spades* from the proposed research perspective and, in some ways, even to supplement the arguments presented by the researcher. In the context of the “directing” role of Tomsy-Mephistopheles, one can venture to correct the thesis that this character (after disappearing from view) “returns in the finale as an outside observer.” The compositional structure of the beginning of the seventh scene (the choir of players, the dialogues of the characters, Tomsy’s song) is noteworthy, acting as a compressed reprise of the first scene. The impression of reprise is enhanced by the content of the dialogue between Tomsy and Yeletsky, which is preceded by remarks from Surin and Chekalinsky. It is Tomsy, in the role of an interested and sympathetic friend, who, as before from Herman, receives the prince’s recognition (in the first scene he similarly learns the name of Yeletsky’s bride, and also, according to the stage directions, conducts tête-à-tête conversations not only with Herman, but also with the Countess), which further emphasises his position as the “manager” of the entire story. And it is Tomsy who readily (“Trust in me!”) agrees to become the prince’s second in the planned duel with Herman (No. 24).

Perhaps Tomsy’s “song,” which Korolevskaya evaluates as “an expression of a cynical Mephistophelian smile” [4, p. 69], in its combined unity with the chorus of guest players, contains additional “Mephistophelian” arguments, referring to the famous scene in the cellar from the second act of Gounod’s *Faust* (the chorus of students and other visitors⁴). The “leitmotif” of the beginning of the seventh scene, “Let us drink and be merry!” (the final remark of the scene with the players is also characteristic: “whistles, shouts and dancing”) characterises the emotional

⁴ “...Let’s drink together, so that we can be more cheerful, friends!”, “And we’ll sing a song more cheerfully, more cheerfully!” etc. The song (verses) of Mephistopheles in the same scene with its conclusion — “People die for metal!” — can generally be considered a kind of intertextual epigraph to the opera.

atmosphere of the finale with its “directed” (again, largely by Tmsky) polarity to Herman’s dramatic line.

Another critical moment concerns the assessment of the melody of the duet between Lisa and Polina, the second motive of which is derived from the theme of the slow movement of Liszt’s *Faust symphony* (example 3 in the article [4, p. 65]). This motif is considered by Korolevskaya as falling “out of the general intonational context of the opera” [Ibid.]. It is reasonable to doubt this claimed “dropping out” of one of the elements of the tightly knit intonation whole by the composer: indeed, it is worth adding the sound “la” at the lowest point of the motive, by dint of which the full melodic contours of the motive “three cards, three cards, three cards!” will immediately appear.

*“The Queen of Spades” and Number Symbolism:
Opinions of Musicologists*

From reflections on Korolevskaya’s article, two interrelated theses clearly emerge: the highest degree of unity of the artistic text of *The Queen of Spades* and the absence in it of not only anything “random” or “passing,” but even anything “autonomous,” which is confirmed by observations by other researchers. From this point of view, the publication of Antonina Leonidovna Makarova’s *Number Symbolism and the Irrational in “The Queen of Spades”* [5], which directly touches on the topic of this article, is of great interest. Although only about a third of the work is devoted to number symbolism itself, which is based on the material contained in the fifth scene of the opera, the author comes to extremely important conclusions. First of all, it considers the mystical sphere in the dramaturgy of *The Queen of Spades* through the number symbolism derived from the card game, which is realised mainly in rhythm — through triplets, septuplets, groups of durations equal to or multiples of 12 — and, in fact, the measure of 12/8. In this way, a direct projection of the numerical values of the cards (respectively, three, seven, queen and ace⁵) is revealed on the rhythmic plan of the opera.

Makarova connects the discovered facts with the extraordinary emotional and psychological situation of the fifth scene (the appearance of the ghost): thanks

⁵ In the music of the scene of Herman and the Countess’s ghost (No. 19), A. L. Makarova also establishes a connection between a single long sound and the numerical value of the ace — 1.

to a unique “symphony of motives” in the orchestra, “the mathematical scenario of Herman’s game and the fatal substitution of the last lucky card is ‘programmed” [5, p. 360]. But then the fair conclusion that “Hermann (and after him the listener) [...] cannot suspect the existence of an unconscious, but objectively existing visual code in the score” [Ibid.], leads the author of the article to the idea of the impossibility of this kind of semantically significant information reaching “the level of consciousness of the listener in the auditorium” [5, p. 361]. Indeed, the auditory “perception of the viewer is unable to differentiate the grouping of durations and the change in time signature due to the rapid tempo” [Ibid.], but what if the conditions were different? If the same 12/8 time signature and other “numerical” elements, both rhythmic and other, sound in the “zone of distinct perception” (for example, in the Introduction)?

The most important of these discovered facts directly testifying to the significance of number symbolism in the musical text and, more broadly, the musical dramaturgy of the opera, are considered by Makarova as if in isolation, i.e., only in relation to the special circumstances of the fifth scene. Meanwhile, the above-mentioned theses about the “totality” of the artistic organisation of *The Queen of Spades* that bear witness to the consistency of *all* its elements throughout the *entire* opera, pose the task of examining the problem of number symbolism in the opera in an equally comprehensive manner.⁶

It has repeatedly attracted the attention of researchers, primarily due to the specific nature of the plot of Pushkin’s story and the theme of the card game in it, representing the most important role of the symbolic plan in the dramaturgy of the opera. These themes received an original interpretation in the works of Elena Vladimirovna Ponomareva, who connects the “mythopoetics” of the *The Queen of Spades* with the Arcana of the Tarot and their reduction in the form of fortune-telling Tarot cards. In one of her most recent articles, the author combines the semantics of fortune-telling and playing cards (their “numerological codes”),

⁶ The following reflections are the result of the present author’s many years of observations on the role of number symbolism in Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades*, which have been presented more than once as part of the lecture course “Musical Dramaturgy of Opera” given at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

examining it in the aspects of the leitmotif system, tonal plan and form-building of the opera [6].⁷

In general, the study of the literary and musical language of *The Queen of Spades*, especially the themes of the opera in its symphonic development, has yielded a whole series of observations in the field of numerical symbolism — from ternary constructions in the libretto (like “Beauty! Goddess! Angel!” and its “antipode” “Monster! Murderer! Fiend!”) to a composition in which, along with the “troika” (3 acts) and “seven” (7 scenes), there is also an “ace” (“one,” in the form of the Introduction). In connection with the latter, we note the persistence with which Tchaikovsky defended the structure of his opera. For example, he did not yield to the proposal to exclude the sixth scene, nor to the persuasion to turn the first and second scenes into actions, based on scenic considerations. “In my piano score, the opera will be divided into three acts. “And there you can divide it as you wish...,”⁸ he writes to Modest on March 9, 1890. One of the most complete collections to date of the manifestations of number symbolism discovered in *The Queen of Spades* is given in the monograph by Galina Ionovna Poberezhnaya “Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky”.⁹ Among the examples, the author particularly notes those in which a kind of multiplication (doubling or tripling) of symbolism occurs, such as the threefold repetition of the words “three cards” and their implementation in the Ballad and in the ghost of the Countess, as well as Hermann’s threefold exclamation “Beauty! Goddess! Angel!” which sounds three times in the Scene Two. One of the most striking examples is the most important leitmotif of the “three cards,” consisting of three sounds, three links of the sequence, and containing

⁷ In the same article, examining the number symbolism of the queen of spades, the author writes: “*The Queen of Spades* that fell to Herman is, by its ordinal number, the thirteenth in the suit of spades” [6, p. 53], on this basis linking it with Arcanum XIII — Death, which seems incorrect, since the denomination of this card is 12.

⁸ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4067 to Modest Tchaikovsky (B. Langston, Trans.). In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4067

⁹ Poberezhnaya, G. I. (1994). Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Vipol.

(in the basic version) three ascending tones.¹⁰ According to the author, the composer “controlled all these moments with consciousness”.¹¹

In parallel to the last example, we may adduce another one, which is connected with the sound of another important theme — *love*. It also includes three links of the sequence, each link of which based on three-part motifs; and this theme itself in the final scene of the Scene Two sounds exclusively in “triples” (c. 180–210). The *stability* of Hermann’s arioso melody, its complete syntactic and almost complete melodic *repetition* (only the position in the orchestra or the vocal part changes, while the instrumentation remains almost constant) is amazing for the situation of a passionate declaration of love and Tchaikovsky’s operatic-symphonic style. One can see in this the latent influence of a more powerful, supra-personal force that subjugates the passion of love, bringing into it a shade of incantation, which, on a different — non-event — level, again brings the theme (and idea) of love closer to the theme of the three cards. We may recall the beginning of the 6th chapter of Pushkin’s story, which describes the displacement of Hermann’s love feeling by the obsession with the secret of the three cards: “Two motionless ideas cannot exist together in moral nature, just as two bodies cannot occupy the same place in the physical world.”¹²

While sharing Poberezhnaya’s conclusion on the main point, I.e., the existence of numerical symbolism in *The Queen of Spades* “not only in its plot-plot sphere, but also in the musical one”,¹³ at the same time, we note that all the examples given by this researcher are only *moments*, not forming a coherent system. It is significant that Poberezhnaya writes only about the “idea of ‘three’”: “Of course, Tchaikovsky could not embody Pushkin’s entire system of numerical notations in the opera, but [...] he managed to grasp the main grain — the motif of three cards, and, therefore, the number ‘3’ — and gave this number a hidden

¹⁰ In turn, Boris Mikhailovich Yarustovsky also identified “three *main* varieties” of this leitmotif, which he called the theme of the “secret of the three cards” (Yarustovsky, B. M. (1947). *Tchaikovsky’s Operatic Dramaturgy*. State Musical Publishing House, p. 74). In this sense, we can already talk about a “quadrupling” of numerical symbolism.

¹¹ Poberezhnaya, G. I. (1994). Op. cit., p. 279.

¹² Pushkin, A. S. (1961). *Selected Works*. (In 2 Vols., Vol. 2.). Lenizdat, p. 616.

¹³ Poberezhnaya, G. I. (1994). Op. cit, p. 278.

symbolic interpretation in his work”.¹⁴ The expansion of the numerical series itself, as well as the attempt to expand the scope of the action of musical symbolism to *all* the main parameters of the artistic text of the opera, again forces us to return to the question of the *rational* and that of the *intentional*.

*Number Symbolism as the Basis of the Musical Organisation
of “The Queen of Spades”: Introduction*

Let us therefore try to look at the problem of the place and role of numerical symbolism in the dramaturgy of *The Queen of Spades* in a comprehensive manner, i.e., in the logical interconnection of all its elements, both those already discovered by researchers and those presented in this article. The verification of the hypothesis that numerical symbolism represents a complete system and, perhaps, even the very foundation of the musical organisation of *The Queen of Spades* should begin with the Introduction. Before *The Queen of Spades*, some operas of the second half of the 19th century already had examples of achieving the highest musical-semantic concentration in the orchestral introduction (an outstanding case is the Prelude to Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*). Tchaikovsky finds a completely original solution in the Introduction, while preserving recognisable traditional features: the presence of several key themes representing the most important ideas of the opera, along with the aphoristic nature of the presentation. An important circumstance is that the composition of the orchestral introduction took place simultaneously with the final scene: the end of the Introduction was the very last thing the composer worked on in the sketch of *The Queen of Spades*. Thus, it can be assumed that here Tchaikovsky had the opportunity to concentrate his idea in the most complete and finished form.

Let us first list what researchers have already identified. The introduction consists of three sections, in which three major themes are presented in three keys; the first section is in 12/8 time, referring to the numerical symbolism of the queen of cards (12); in addition, according to Poberezhnaya’s observation, it is “permeated from beginning to end with a motif of three chords”.¹⁵ Let us add: this motive is “tripled” (three links of the sequence) at the first presentation. In the above

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Poberezhnaya, G. I. (1994). Op. cit., p. 279.

discussion, we mentioned the three-sound basis of the motives that make up the theme of the three cards and the theme of love. It should be noted that the syntactic structure of the first theme of the Introduction is also determined by motifs of three sounds, and that this property is preserved in Tchaikovsky's ballad, where the theme is given in 4/4 time. Such a concentration of ternary elements in the Introduction is unprecedented in Tchaikovsky's work. In addition to this, the presence of the number "7" is also revealed: the theme of three cards (Countess) is exposed by the double presentation of a phrase of seven sounds.

Of no less interest is the symbolism of the number "12" (Queen of Spades).¹⁶ 12/8 is a very rare time signature. In Tchaikovsky's previous operatic works it was used only once, in *The Enchantress* — in the final scene of the Prince's madness and death. In the context of the semantic relationship of this fragment with many episodes of *The Queen of Spades*, the appearance of 12/8 is, of course, not accidental. However, in the slow movement of the *Fifth Symphony*, where this metre is also used, such parallelism as is found in the opera is no longer present (although an associative connection may arise in the tonal relationship: the beginning in *B minor*, the main part in *D major*). Let us add here the *Adagio* from *Pas d'action* of the first act of *The Sleeping Beauty*, the intermission and scene No. 14 of the second act of the ballet. The examples given show that before the creation of *The Queen of Spades*, Tchaikovsky turned to the twelve-note metre in isolated cases, which were generally of different nature and did not play any noticeable role in musical dramaturgy. After *The Queen of Spades*, 12/8 appears in *Iolanta's* arioso in the first scene of the opera and at the beginning of the fourth — rather as an "echo" of *The Queen of Spades* (such references are easily found in the orchestration, melody and harmony of Tchaikovsky's last opera).

While the fact that Tchaikovsky changed the metre of the ballad theme in the Introduction is in itself significant, moving it to the "foreground" of the opera's music (as a demonstration of not just the titular, but also the main hero) clearly demonstrates the *intentionality* of such a decision.¹⁷

¹⁶ The number "12" appears to the listener in an accentuated form at the beginning of the sixth scene, when 12 bell strikes sound.

¹⁷ In his article *Stages of P. I. Tchaikovsky's Creative Work on Oeuvre of the 1890s*, Yuri V. Vasiliev analyses the very first sketches for *The Queen of Spades*, which pertain to the beginning of the fourth scene, dating them to January 18–20, 1890 [7, p. 83, 114]. It is indicative that in his notebook and sketchbook for the opera, Tchaikovsky writes down material in triplets and sextuplets in 4/4 time, but in the score it is already formatted in 12/8.

In total, the twelve-beat metre is used on no less than 12 separate occasions in *The Queen of Spades*. After the Introduction, it appears in the thunderstorm episode and in Herman's oath at the end of the first scene; in Herman's last words ("Madman, madman I am!") before the Interlude in the third scene; in the fourth scene — at the very beginning and in the episode by the Countess's portrait, then twice in the scene between Herman and the Countess; then in the fifth scene — in the orchestra at the moment when the ghost enters, and in his vocal part; in the sixth scene — in the scene between Lisa and Herman ("There lie heaps of gold"). The last appearance of 12/8 metre is in the opera's final scene, where it accompanies the ghost of the Countess. Thus, 12/8 becomes not only her leitmotif, but also symbolises the mystical presence of the heroine (including in the guise of a ghost) and her fatal secret in the semantic space of the opera.

From this weight of evidence, it can be assumed that everything else will, to one degree or another, embody the symbolic dramaturgical plan. *The Queen of Spades* opens in the key of *B minor*. Considering that it appears in the opera in significant moments of the form three times (which, in our opinion, correlates with the dominant meaning of the symbolism of the number "3") — in the Introduction, in the Countess's song (the heroine's only extended solo statement) and in the episode of her death in the fourth scene — the leitmotif of this tonality is beyond doubt.

In article *The Expressiveness of Tonal Structures in P. I. Tchaikovsky*, Yuri Nikolayevich Kholopov advances the hypothesis that *Eugene Onegin* embodies a "system of tonal repetitions that has a certain dramatic role" [8, p. 95]. The researcher's next thought can be fully applied to *The Queen of Spades*:

And regardless of whether this was part of a conscious plan (which seems unlikely) or was an intuitively obtained necessary means of expression (which is much more likely), the very fact of the systematic and entirely logical use of tonal relationships between elements separated by enormous distances gives us reason to confidently rely on connections of this kind to reveal the main musical ideas of the opera [8, p. 93].

The main difference is that in *The Queen of Spades* the tonal system is further complicated by numerical symbolism — and it is precisely this, as it seems, that determines the choice of *B minor*: in a twelve-tone scale $h = 12$.

In this same system *D* is 3. In *The Queen of Spades D major*, parallel *D minor* is a truly parallel world, a world of bright feelings, love, another reality, where the happiness impossible for Hermann and Lisa could turn out to be quite possible (later, in the first, second parts and finale of the *Sixth Symphony*, the same role will be played by *D major* of the secondary part and the waltz). The tonality acts as an antipode to *B minor*, symbolising the triad: Countess — Queen of Spades (fate) — Death. It is no coincidence that *D major* starts beginning of the First Scene of the opera, where the overarching theme of a walk (promenade) is exhibited, as is the beginning of the Interlude and the final chorus of the third scene. It is also no coincidence that *D minor* of Hermann's first arioso ("I don't know her name") is a dark "double" of *D major* (just as *B major* of Hermann's last aria acts as a "false double" of *B minor*).¹⁸

Libretto and novella

Let us try to articulate a preliminary conclusion. The introduction, as the semantic "gate" of *The Queen of Spades*, clearly demonstrates an extraordinary concentration of elements related to metre, rhythm, tonal plane, musical form, melody and harmony, while at the same time being consistent with the numerical symbolic plane of musical dramaturgy. It will be revealed on an even larger scale in the main space of the opera, including the literary text.

¹⁸ Let us recall that the other versions of the *brindisi* included in the publications of the piano score and the score of the opera — in *B-flat major* and *A major* — appeared exclusively against Tchaikovsky's will, at the urgent request of the first performer of the role, Herman N. N. Figner. In letters to Modest Tchaikovsky (dated July 10, 1890) and E. F. Napravnik (dated August 5 and 25 of the same year), the composer commented very emotionally on the forced transposition of the aria: "One thing upsets me: he demands a transposition of a whole tone..." (Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4169 to Modest Tchaikovsky (B. Langston, Trans.). In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4169; "I had to, to my great chagrin, transpose *brindisi* for Figner..." (Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4194 to Eduard Nápravník (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4194); "It was very, very sad for me to transpose *brindisi* for Figner..." Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4206 to Eduard Nápravník (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4206. It seems that such a reaction was caused not only by the author's well-understood reluctance to change anything in the fully formed whole, but also by the damage that the transposition of the aria caused to the musical dramaturgy and its symbolic component.

In fact, it was in it (Pushkin's story and the original libretto by Modest Tchaikovsky) that the composer first encountered number symbolism, thus receiving the necessary impetus for its musical embodiment.

In Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*, the secret of the three cards took the form of a psychological revelation in terms of the influence it had on Hermann's psyche. Let us recall two fragments from the sixth chapter and the Conclusion of the story.

The figures of three, seven and ace soon obscured the image of the dead old woman in Hermann's imagination. Three, seven, ace — they kept running through his head and moving on his lips. Seeing a young girl, he said: "How slender she is!.. "The real three of hearts." They asked him: "What time is it?" He answered: "Five minutes to seven." Every pot-bellied man reminded him of an ace. Three, seven, ace — haunted him in his dreams, taking on all possible forms: three blossomed before him in the form of a lush grandiflora, seven seemed like a Gothic gate, the ace like a huge spider. [...]

Hermann goes crazy. He sits in the Obukhov hospital in room 17, does not answer any questions and mumbles unusually quickly: "Three, seven, ace! "Three, seven, queen!.."

Hermann's obsession with the three, seven and ace is one of the most striking and memorable artistic finds in the story. This is the key not only to the image of Herman (even more operatic than literary), but also to the entire dramaturgy of the opera. As is well known, it was the character of Herman who became the main reason for Tchaikovsky's agreement to work on the plot of *The Queen of Spades*; during the writing of the opera, the composer increasingly began to identify himself with him. The idea of Hermann's obsession in Pushkin, picked up by Modest Tchaikovsky and developed already in the original libretto intended for Nikolai Semyonovich Klenovsky ("very successful," according to Tchaikovsky), probably became the guiding principle in the composition of the opera's music. As in the story, the three, seven, ace and now the queen — but already in a musical embodiment — were supposed to "haunt" Herman (and the opera's listeners), "taking on all possible forms." The embodiment of this idea required that very "totality" that was discussed earlier, otherwise the necessary artistic effect and psychological impact would not have been achieved. The most important difference between the opera and the story is the atmosphere of "obsession," the ubiquitous presence of numerical symbols reflected in words and music that arises (at first latently in an implicit form) from the very beginning.

Even in the original libretto of the first scenes, the composer could not help but notice the idea of trinity (semantic “triples” of words and phrases), so diversely developed by Modest Tchaikovsky. Already in the very first stage directions there are “nannies, governesses and wet nurses” and three games: children “play tag, jump ropes, throw balls.” The very first vocal utterance (the girls’ choir) ends with the words “one, two, three!” and the stage direction: *laughter, exclamations, running*. It should be noted that in ethnographic publications of this famous children’s counting rhyme we encounter only “One, two!” In one space the librettist collects both the lullaby (in the version of the triple “Bayu, bayu, bay!”), and the triple “Hurray” in three verses of the boys’ marching song, and many other similar ternary constructions. In another situation and taken separately, they would hardly have attracted attention, but in the conditions of contrasting genres collected together and almost “compressed” in the first scene (the “artificiality” of their joint sound is indicated at least by the unchanging, identical tempo for all *Allegro*) such a trinity is unlikely to arise by chance.

However, verbal constructions similar to the phrase “Beauty! Goddess! Angel!” are much clearer for perception when reinforced by the corresponding musical embodiment. Moreover, they can have a more detailed form, such as, for example, “How graceful, how beautiful, how lovely!” in the Chorus of Strollers (No. 3) or “Leave me! Who are you? I don’t know you!” by Herman at the end of the sixth scene. Such “triplets” are usually highlighted in the musical fabric and are, from the point of view of form, in the zone of distinct perception — like Hermann’s hymn exclamation or, for example, the final phrase of the Quintet (No. 4) “I’m scared! I’m scared! I’m scared!” (another case of tripling a semantically expressive word is “die,” which Hermann pronounces three times). An even greater effect in terms of perception occurs when the “troikas” are embodied at different levels: such is Hermann’s death oath “Thunder, lightning, wind!”, which sounds after three claps of thunder in the final scene of the Scene One.

Another of Modest Tchaikovsky’s ideas, which arose in the original libretto, is connected with metre. Let us recall Pushkin’s lines: “That same evening, grandmother appeared in Versailles, au jeu de la Reine.” In the libretto, the text is already rhythmic: “Once upon a time in Versailles au jeu de la Reine...” and in a tetrameter amphibrach: U — U | U — U | U — U | U — U, giving a total of 12 syllables.

Perhaps it was while reading this fragment that an important dramatic and constructive idea related to the embodiment of numerical symbolism arose in the composer's mind. Let us also recall that the very first sketches for *The Queen of Spades* also include the theme of three cards (Countess).

In general, the idea of numerical symbolism is sometimes hidden, sometimes clearly present in the stage action (three appearances of the Manager in the third scene and the ghost of the Countess in the fifth, three times Surin and Chekalinsky =tease Herman, etc.) and the libretto throughout the opera.

Score

Let us now turn directly to the music. The analysis shows that numerical symbolism is embodied in the musical text in a multifaceted and, importantly, consistent manner: at the level of *composition* the whole and individual parts and sections (which was already noted above), *tonal plan*, *thematics* (primarily, in *melody* and *musical syntax*), *rhythm*, *metrics*, *harmonies*, *modal organisation*. In terms of musical embodiment, it is also necessary to take into account convenience (practicality): the “ace” in the form of a unit is almost impossible to implement, unlike, for example, numerous “variations” on the number “3.” Thus, the “ace” is only called by the Countess, then this word is repeated by Herman, but in the semantic and actual musical space of the opera, the ace is replaced by the queen of spades. Let us briefly dwell on some parameters of the musical fabric.

Along with the keys *B minor* (12) and *D major* (3), *F-sharp minor* plays an important role in the musical dramaturgy of *The Queen of Spades*. In the 12-tone row, it corresponds to the number “7.” *F-sharp minor* is used in the opera seven times¹⁹: in the first scene (at the moment of the Countess's appearance and the subsequent quintet); in the second scene (in Hermann's arioso “Forgive me, heavenly creature” and in the Countess's recitative after Lisa's appearance in the bedroom); in the introduction; at the end of the fourth scene; at the end of the sixth scene (Lisa's death); in the seventh scene (in the episode of the appearance of the Countess's ghost

¹⁹ A necessary explanation of the calculation method: the tonalities of the numbers and scenes were taken into account, as well as significant extended fragments of scenes, such as the introduction or conclusion, which are important from a semantic point of view. Short deviations, tonalities of small sections of the form, and those occurring in the modulation movement were not taken into account.

and Hermann's suicide). Boris Mikhailovich Yarustovsky designated *F-sharp minor* as the main key of the "fate complex."²⁰

In the field of musical syntax and melody, as in rhythm, the influence of numerical symbolism manifested itself to the maximum extent in the extraordinary density and concentration of the corresponding elements in the score. First of all, it reveals itself in the "trinity" in the organisation of motives and phrases. Often, three-part motifs and figures occur together, including doubled, tripled, in a chain or sequence, as well as in frequent counterpoints — that is, both horizontally and vertically. They are often combined with textural and rhythmic ostinato. For example, the number 12 is embodied not only in the metre directly, but also in various variants of rhythmic pulsation (groups of 12 durations, doublings up to 24 are possible). A characteristic feature of such rhythmic patterns (thanks to which they are perceived as a relief part of the musical material) is repetition, often turning into ostinato. Such groups arise within the 3/4 and 4/4 measures. Situationally and in the verbal text, they are also associated with the Countess, her appearances or mentions (including in connection with the mystery of the three cards), as well as with the motive of death. This distinguishes such rhythmic patterns from a large number of other stable rhythmic formulas (researchers even distinguish *leitrythms*), which are, in general, extremely characteristic of the music of *The Queen of Spades*.

In the modal sphere, the whole-tone scale that accompanies the appearance of the Countess's ghost is associated with numerical symbolism. Let us note here, however, that the whole tone not only brings in a fantastic flavour, but also becomes part of the ghost theme. It is significant that both of its performances — in the Scene Five (for the first clarinet) and in the Scene Seven (for two clarinets and the first bassoon) — contain exactly 12 sounds. In this way, the traditional means of "neutral" fantasy is included in the number-symbolic system of opera.

A striking example of the influence of number symbolism on melody and rhythm arises in connection with the Countess's incursion in the scene of Lisa and Herman in the Scene Two. After a knock on the door, a strident octave-like two-note motif runs through the flutes, oboes, bassoons and French horns. Its conclusion — a distorted "echo" in the Countess's part — also enters stretto, bringing the numerical series to 12. Then, in the clarinets and oboes, based on the motif from the theme of the three cards, a sequence of 12 sounds arises, united in triplets (*Example 1*).

²⁰ Yarustovsky, B. M. (1947). *Tchaikovsky's Operatic Dramaturgy*. State Musical Publishing House, p. 93.

Allegro vivo [290]

Picc.
Fl.
Ob.
Cl.
Fg.
Cr.
Trb.
Trbn.
e
Tb.
Tr.
Лиза
Графиня
Гра.
Arch.
div.

(muta G in B)

(в смятении)

(за дверью)

(Шум шагов и стук в дверь)

Ли - за, о тво-ри!

[290]



Example 1. Pyotr Tchaikovsky. *The Queen of Spades*, No. 10, mm. 287–295

Right up until the end of the episode with the Countess, the musical fabric is literally oversaturated with various variations of melodic and rhythmic motifs and sequences that embody the numbers three and twelve.

Of course, it would be a mistake to consider any three-note motif, triplet or other rhythmic sequence that is a multiple of three as a manifestation of numerical symbolism in *The Queen of Spades*. However, it is the frequency of their use and concentration on small areas of the form that play a decisive role. The context is also significant — situational and intonational (it is obvious that all such melodic-rhythmic motifs and figures, derived from leitmotifs, for example, from the theme of the three cards, are included in the symbolic plan).

In the area of *sub-themes*, which does not have sufficient relief for memorisation and recognition, it is more difficult to trace the action of numerical musical symbolism. Thus it is its total character, conditioned by the embodiment of the super-idea of *The Queen of Spades* — the psychological “obsession” with the secret of three cards that have a fatal meaning — that suggests the presence of similar elements here too. Let us highlight two of them. The first, descending motif of three notes, is first heard in the strings at the beginning of the Introduction (*Example 2*).

Andante mosso

Violini I

Violini II

Viole

Violoncelli

Contrabassi

Example 2. Pyotr Tchaikovsky. *The Queen of Spades*, Introduction, mm. 2–4

Its development is continued in the orchestra with the appearance of Herman (it sounds four times during the presentation of the theme “I don’t know her name”) and in the arioso itself (on the word “to recognise”). An interesting example of the accentuation of this motif, its brief prominence in the foreground, is at the beginning of the Final Scene of the Scene Four (No. 17), where it is combined horizontally with the motif of “three cards, three cards, three cards!” (*Example 3*). The initial semantic correlation with the words “I don’t know,” “to find out,” connected with the image of Lisa, is here replaced by another secret, i.e., that of the three cards, bringing to the surface one of the many intonational threads that connect the themes of both the first and even the second plan of the opera into an inseparable whole.

It is no longer surprising then that the whole-tone theme of the Countess’s ghost described above, as if closing this semantic series, also consists of descending three-sound motifs-links. In this way, such melodic-syntactic units can acquire temporary autonomy and semantic content within the boundaries of the opera stage and even on the scale of the entire opera, and be justified for inclusion in the symbolic plane.

The second example of a sub-thematic element is a second three-note motif, usually found in extended themes: it begins the arioso “I don’t know her name,” the motif “three cards, three cards, three cards!”, the quintet “I’m scared,” the Countess’s song; in Herman’s arioso “You don’t know me!” from the first scene,

Fig. (Герман выходит и становится против Графини.
Она просыпается и в немом ужасе беззвучно шевелит губами)

Fig.

Archi

unis.

divisi

f

mf

p

Герман

ff

mp

mf

pp poco creso.

ff

Нецц

127

Thus, the totality of manifestations of the plan of numerical symbolism, its action in musical dramaturgy convinces us that before us is a system embodied consistently, at different levels, which has no precedents in Russian or even world opera.

Rational and Irrational

The question naturally arises: did Tchaikovsky do all this on a rational level? At one time, reflecting on the complex system of themes in *The Queen of Spades* and its continuous development, Yarustovsky asked himself this same question. And he immediately answered: “Obviously not!”²¹ However, the scholar then writes about the process of gradual *awareness* and embodiment by Tchaikovsky of the main intonational ideas of the opera, which seems to correct what was said earlier. And this again brings us back to the problem of the irrational, expanding it from the perception of the character *inside* the opera and the listener *outside* it to include the consciousness of the composer himself. Tchaikovsky’s confession that Herman, during the composition of the opera, was “all the time a real, living person”²² is widely known (letter to Modest Tchaikovsky, March 3, 1890). In another letter (dated August 5, 1890 to Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich Romanov) the composer reported: “I wrote it with unprecedented fervour and passion, vividly suffered and felt everything that was happening in it (even to the point that at one time I was afraid of the appearance of the ghost of *The Queen of Spades*) and I hope that all my authorial delights, excitement and passions will resonate in the hearts of responsive listeners.”²³ The posed problem of the rational (conscious) and irrational (unconscious) in the context of Tchaikovsky’s recognition and the idea of “persecution,” “obsession” of the opera’s protagonist can be reformulated as follows: how did it influence the composer? Could the process of experiencing it have had an additional psychological impact on Tchaikovsky, in turn contributing to an even deeper embodiment of numerical

²¹ Yarustovsky, B. M. (1947). *Tchaikovsky’s Operatic Dramaturgy*. State Musical Publishing House, p. 99.

²² Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4058 to Modest Tchaikovsky (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4058

²³ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4195 to Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4195

symbolism in the opera's music? It seems that the answer may be affirmative. Let us present some evidence about how the composition of the opera proceeded.

...Today I wrote the scene when Herman comes to the old woman.... It was so scary that I am still under the impression of the horror²⁴ (letter to Anna Petrovna Merklings, February 7, 1890).

I experience in other places, for example, in the 4th scene, which I arranged today, such fear, horror and shock, *that it cannot be* that the listeners do not feel at least a part of this²⁵ (letter to Modest Tchaikovsky, March 19, 1890).

Now (at half past midnight) they have been ringing furiously for half an hour. What does this mean?²⁶ (Diary. February 6, 1890)

Didn't sleep well. I even had a terrible nightmare at the beginning of the night (rustling paper and movement in my room).²⁷ (Diary. March 1, 1890)

The last quote directly refers to the beginning of the fifth scene! On February 7, Tchaikovsky makes the following entry in his diary:

I was very nervous from work... Probably because of this, during the walk I felt a strong pain near my heart, which I had already felt to a weak degree the day before. It's curious how I experience inspiration to the point of madness and difficulty.²⁸

The author's testimonies cited here, which characterise the general psycho-emotional atmosphere of the composer's deepest involvement both in the process of composition and in the artistic space of *The Queen of Spades*, can be supplemented by entries from the diary of his servant Nazar Litrov, with whom Tchaikovsky lived in Italy during the creation of the opera. In them, as in the letters

²⁴ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4028 to Anna Merklings (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4028

²⁵ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4072 to Modest Tchaikovsky (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4072

²⁶ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Diaries (February 1890). (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Diaries_February_1890

²⁷ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Diaries (March 1890). (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Diaries_March_1890

²⁸ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Diaries (February 1890). (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Diaries_February_1890

of this time, even the everyday space around the composer, the most ordinary situations, are almost mystically coloured in the tones of *The Queen of Spades*.

Tchaikovsky settled in Florence in three rooms and occupied “an entire floor of a narrow house with only three windows,”²⁹ in his new *permanent* daily routine the numbers 3, 7 and 12 appear: “I don’t get up at 8, but for some reason Nazar wakes me up at 7:45; however, by the time he appears I am always already awake. [...] Then I work until 12:30 [...] I come back at 3 o’clock... I work from 4 to 7. At 7 I go to dinner”³⁰; “I do not deviate from the established order even by a hair,”³¹ — the composer reported in letters to his brothers Modest and Nikolai, not failing to emphasise in the text that Nazar had precisely “*three* Russian friends”; on a walk Tchaikovsky bought precisely *three* vases; and in N. Litrov’s Diary only and exclusively *the third* cup of tea served to Pyotr Ilyich appears.

Even the completion of work on the opera is dated third day of the third month! Tchaikovsky sent a letter about this *three hours* later (informing Modest about this, but forgetting to record the time of the letter itself). Before this, the composer sent Nazar to send a telegram to Modest — and it is no longer surprising that “troikas” appear in it again — this time in phrases of three French words: *Composition opéra terminée, demain commence arrangement*.³² On March 27, 1890, Tchaikovsky informed his nephew Vladimir Lvovich Davydov from Rome that “*The Queen of Spades* has been created, although not yet completely, since the instrumentation will take about three months.”³³ And already as a kind of “echo” of that special state in which the composer found himself while working on the opera —

²⁹ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4046 to Nikolay Tchaikovsky (J. Laukhina, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4046

³⁰ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4012 to Modest Tchaikovsky (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4012

³¹ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4046 to Nikolay Tchaikovsky (J. Laukhina, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4046

³² Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4056 to Modest Tchaikovsky (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4056

³³ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4080 to Vladimir Davydov (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4080

obsession, obsessive idea, — Merklings confession in a letter dated June 12, 1890 sounds: “I’ll work, get rid of that *obse[ssion]* which *The Queen of Spades* [...] exercises on me.”³⁴

Conclusion

Let us summarise as follows. The multifaceted embodiment of number symbolism became the unifying factor and key to understanding the dramaturgy of *The Queen of Spades*. Probably, not everything stated above was done by the composer with preliminary calculation. Let us not forget about the kind of spontaneous generation of intonation, rhythmic and so on elements in the already formed artistic space of the composition, when more and more new elements appear in harmony and in continuation of those already found. “Like attracts like.” At the same time, in the embodiment of numerical symbolism, Tchaikovsky never crosses that fine line after which there would be a risk of mechanicalness and artificiality in the organisation of the artistic fabric. By involving in the process of its creation both the usual for the listener and new means of expression, as well as obvious elements lying in the foreground of perception, and those acting latently, on the unconscious level, the composer creates in the music of *The Queen of Spades* an equivalent of that very obsession of Pushkin’s hero and, at the same time, the mysterious mystical atmosphere of the story.

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³⁴ Tchaikovsky, P. I. (1890). Letter 4143 to Anna Merklings (B. Langston, Trans.) In *Tchaikovsky Research*. Retrieved March 6, 2025 from https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_4143

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