

# SERGEI PROKOFIEV

(1891–1953)

## The Gambler

*An opera in four acts and six scenes*

### • ACT I – *The garden of a grand hotel in Roulettenburg*

Alexei, tutor to the family of an indebted General, returns from the casino and tells Polina, the General's stepdaughter, that he has lost the money she entrusted to him. She had asked him to gamble discreetly on her behalf, without revealing the true reason for her desperate need of money. Alexei suspects that the Marquis is involved. Meanwhile, all attention in the hotel is fixed on news from Moscow: General is awaiting the death of his wealthy aunt, familiarly called Grandma, whose inheritance would allow him to pay his debts and marry Blanche. Alexei scorns a world in which love, honour, and status are measured by money, and promises Polina the winnings he is certain to secure if he gambles for himself.

His love for her, however, is bound up with humiliation and obsessive devotion. When he declares he would do anything for her, Polina cruelly tests him by ordering him to impolitely address Baroness Würmerhelm. Alexei obeys, provoking a public scandal.

### • ACT II – *The entrance hall of the grand hotel*

The General reproaches Alexei for the incident and, at the Baron's urging, dismisses him from his service. Alexei, however, threatens to demand an explanation from the Baron. The General, terrified of further scandal, stresses how important it is for him to preserve discretion until the wedding. Mr. Astley reveals to Alexei part of Blanche's past, as well as the true reason for the General's anxiety. The Marquis attempts to intimidate Alexei, but succeeds only when he hands him a message from Polina. Alexei submits to her command immediately and becomes acutely aware of the power the Marquis holds not only over the General, but over Polina as well.

The General, the Marquis, and Blanche cling to the hope that news of Grandma's death will finally arrive from Moscow. But instead of a telegram, Grandma herself appears alive, healthy, and in high spirits. At once she sees through the false concerns, sarcastically commenting on the General's debts and Blanche's pretence, while showing genuine affection only to Polina and Alexei. She then decides to inspect the roulette tables and makes it perfectly clear to the General that he will receive no money from her.

• INTERVAL •

• **ACT III – *A drawing room adjoining the gambling room***

Grandma becomes consumed by gambling, while the General watches in despair as her losses mount and his hopes of inheritance disappear. The Marquis and Blanche urge him to intervene, but no one can stop her. In desperation, the General even speaks of the police and an asylum, exposing his helplessness. Since Grandma trusts Alexei, everyone turns to him, pleading with him to draw her away from the table or at least limit the losses. Alexei, however, takes a certain pleasure in their panic. Blanche loses interest in the General and deftly attaches herself to Prince Nilsky. At last, Grandma returns from the gambling room exhausted and disillusioned. She has lost everything she brought with her, but has realized that it is time to return to Moscow. She offers Polina a life of comfort with her, but Polina refuses. The General is left financially ruined, without Blanche and without his last hope.

• **ACT IV – *Alexei's room, the gambling room, and Alexei's room again***

Polina comes to Alexei and tells him she wants to stay with him. She shows him a letter from the Marquis, who announces his departure and coldly writes off the sum the General had lost from Polina's dowry against the General's debts. Humiliated, Polina feels she must repay him. Alexei, elated that she has finally turned to him, rushes to the casino to win the money himself. At the roulette table he plays with feverish confidence. Betting again and again on red, he wins repeatedly, drawing the attention of the entire casino, until his run of luck turns into obsession and he breaks the bank.

He returns triumphant, burdened with money, and offers Polina the sum she needs. She rejects it, seeing in his gesture not kindness but another humiliation, as though he too wished to buy her. Hope for a happy ending quickly fades away. She throws the money in his face and flees. Alexei is left alone, consumed by roulette and the winning streak of red.