

DEATH OF IVAN ILYCH

A Full-Length Chamber Opera in One Act

This opera is based on *The Death of Ivan Ilych* by Leo Tolstoy (1886). While it is considered a masterpiece of short fiction, for the composer, this story is personal. In 2010, John Young was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Once a promising opera tenor, John lost his singing voice from the cancer treatments. The musical themes found in this opera are from a musical suite for piano and oboe, composed when he was facing his own mortality. John was treated successfully and continues to be cancer free. This opera asks: If death is a certainty, how do we want to live our life today?

Creative Team:

John Young: Composer, Alan Olejniczak: Libretto, Amanda Clup: Dramaturgy

Synopsis:

We are at the end. Pyotr Ivanovich is at the wake of his colleague, Ivan Ilych. He is looking forward to leaving, but must first pay his respects to the grieving widow, Praskovya Fedorovna. She presses Pyotr Ivanovich to help her with a grant of money, but he feels he is not the one to ask. Gerasim, Ivan's loyal manservant, reminds him that death is a fate for us all. We then start at the beginning and we meet Ivan Ilych with his wife and son, Vladimir. Ivan Ilych is pleased with the new décor of his home and unexpectedly seizes in pain. He fell from a ladder some time ago and has hurt his side. His wife insists he visit a physician, but the doctor cannot find the source of his ailment. The pain continues and Ivan Ilych is now forced to spend his days in bed and Gerasim continues to be his comfort. It eventually becomes clear when Ivan Ilych's condition worsens that it's now become terminal. At first, Ivan Ilych is resentful, believing he does not deserve his suffering because he lived a good life, so pain and death are senseless. He continues to blame God, but Ivan Ilych begins to question his comfortable existence and comes to realize his life was indeed most simple, most ordinary, and therefore the most terrible. Ivan Ilych spent his life working at a job he disliked, fruitlessly seeking social status, and enduring an unhappy marriage. Ivan Ilych realizes his life and marriage is of his own making and he asks his wife Praskovya Fedorovna for forgiveness. They then both reminisce about the time they fell in love. She admits she pursued him and fell in love with him for his dancing. Why did they ever stop? The couple becomes hopeful and consider their new life together, but the pain returns and the doctor reminds Praskovya Fedorovna that her husband is indeed dying. Ivan Ilych begins to understand his artificial life masks the true meaning of life and makes one fearful of dying. As death approaches, Ivan Ilych hopes his death will bring a release, and in doing so, the terror leaves him. Ivan Ilych embraces his death and finally dies in peace.

Duration: 80 minutes

Style of Music: Neo-Romantic

Language: English

Casting (Five principals with one non-singing role for a child)

IVAN ILYCH, *Lyric Baritone* (forties) PRASKOVYA FEDOROVNA, *Soprano* (thirties)

GERASIM *Tenor* (twenties) PYOTR IVANOVICH / PRIEST *Bass-Baritone* (forties)

DOCTOR *Bass* (older than forty) VLADIMIR *Non-Singing Role* (boy who looks eight-years old)

Instrumentation: Two violins, viola, cello, double bass, piano, and oboe

Co-Premiere Partnership: Orlando Opera, February 2021 and Thompson Street Opera Company in Chicago, September 2021