

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). It is considered a masterpiece of short fiction, but 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 has come to pay his respects to the grieving widow, Praskovya Fedorovna. He is uncomfortable and looks forward to leaving the wake. Gerasim, Ivan's loyal manservant, reminds him that death is a fate for us all. We then start at the beginning and meet Ivan Ilych at dinner with his wife and son, Vladimir. Ivan 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 is now forced to spend his days in bed, but Gerasim continues to be his comfort. It eventually becomes clear when Ivan's condition worsens that it's now become terminal. At first, Ivan 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 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 appearances, and enduring an unhappy marriage. Ivan realizes his life is of his own making and asks his wife Praskovya for forgiveness. They both reminisce about their courtship and 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 doctor reminds Praskovya that her husband is indeed dying. Ivan begins to understand his artificial life of self-interest masks the true meaning of life and makes one fearful of dying. As death approaches, Ivan asks for forgiveness from his wife and is filled with compassion for his family. He hopes his death will bring a release, and in doing so, terror leaves him. He says good-bye to his son and Ivan Ilych embraces the bright light and finally dies in peace.

Duration: 85 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 looks eight-years old)

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

Current Development: Full score, piano reduction and instrument parts are complete. The premiere is scheduled for September 2021 with Thompson Street Opera in Chicago.