



VICTORIAN
OPERA

KATYA KABANOVA

WRITTEN RESOURCE

COMPILED & CREATED BY KATHERINE NORMAN

Victorian Opera respectfully acknowledges the people of the Eastern Kulin Nation, the Traditional Owners of the unceded land upon which we work and create.

We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the custodians of the lands and waterways across the Australian continent and their continuous connection in Caring for Country.

We reflect on our shared responsibility to honour and respect this land and its stories, and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

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This production contains sensitive themes, including suicide, domestic abuse and mental illness. If you or someone you know is struggling, you can contact Lifeline at 13 11 14 for confidential support.

Victorian Opera believes passionately in life-long learning. This resource is intended to provide further information to anyone wishing to know more.

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ABOUT US

Victorian Opera is Victoria's state opera company. We honour the centuries-old history of opera's boundless creativity while captivating audiences with relevant, creative and accessible work.

We create productions that inspire, challenge and stir the soul. Since our inception in 2005, our annual commission program has seen more than 40 new Australian works written, produced and performed.

In 2021, Victorian Opera was admitted to the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework in recognition of our outstanding contribution to Australia's artistic landscape. This acknowledgement and added financial investment enable us to deepen collaborative ties throughout the industry, and stage productions across the state, the country and beyond.

In 2026, our 21st anniversary, we are delivering more productions and concerts that showcase and promote Australia's vibrant performing arts scene. We employ hundreds of singers, instrumentalists, theatre-makers and technicians to bring our creative vision to life, and engage audiences with this glorious art form.

A key focus of our organisation is to uncover and develop the talent of emerging artists, both on-stage and behind-the-scenes. From singers to prop makers to costumiers and everyone in between, artists work on productions with Victorian Opera to enrich their career. We delight in the hunger of these practitioners to learn and, ultimately, give back to the future of opera and music theatre.

Our community of Patrons, funding partners and creative industry professionals is truly remarkable. This vibrant network continues to champion Victorian Opera's artistic vision in its vital role sustaining and advancing our creative practice.

We invite you to join Victorian Opera in 2026. Step through the door, anything can happen...

And please, come as you are.



MEET THE CREATIVE TEAM



ALEXANDER BRIGER
CONDUCTOR



HEATHER FAIRBAIRN
DIRECTOR



SAVANNA WEGMAN
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER



NIKLAS PAJANTI
LIGHTING DESIGNER



ROBERT BROWN
VIDEO DESIGNER



BEN SHEEN
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
& CAMERA OPERATOR

MEET THE CAST



DESIREE FRAHN
KATYA



ANDREW GOODWIN
BORIS - KATYA'S LOVER



ANTOINETTE HALLORAN
KABANICHA - KATYA'S
MOTHER-IN-LAW



MICHAEL PETRUCCI
TICHON - KATYA'S
HUSBAND



ADRIAN TAMBURINI
DIKOJ - BORIS' UNCLE



EMILY EDMONDS
VARVARA - AN ORPHAN



DOUGLAS KELLY
KUDRJAŠ - THE SCHOOL
TEACHER



BAILEY MONTGOMERIE
KULIGIN - KUDRJAŠ' FRIEND



MICHAELA CADOGAN
GLASCHA - A SERVANT

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OPERA AND OPERA SINGING

Opera is a complex European art form that has been around since the early 17th century. It was very popular in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Simply, an opera is a play that is almost entirely sung. Music theatre, on the other hand, is a play that includes music, but is mostly spoken. Both also often include dance and theatrical elements such as a set, costumes, props, makeup, lights and sound. Music theatre exists in most nations, but traditions differ around the world.

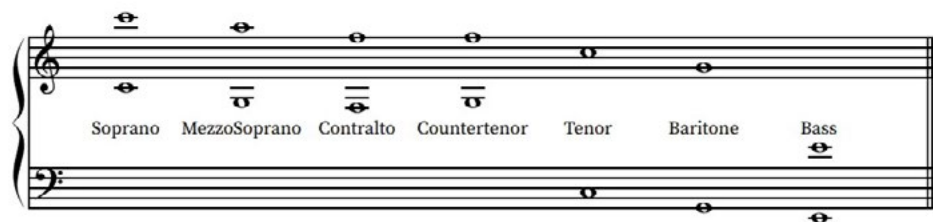
The countries in which opera first developed are Italy, France, Germany and England. Therefore, the main four languages of opera are Italian, French, German and English. As the art form evolved over centuries, other countries have also become significant in the opera world, such as the Czech Republic.



THE COMMON VOICES AND VOICE TYPES IN OPERA

The composer will often choose different voice types to highlight different roles in an opera. There are seven types of voices in opera and music theatre. These are defined by the range of notes they can sing and their vocal quality. There are three categories of female voices, although most operas have only soprano and mezzo soprano roles. There are four categories of male voices.

- **Soprano:** the highest sounding female voice
- **Mezzo-Soprano:** the middle-sounding female voice
- **Contralto:** the lowest sounding female voice
- **Countertenor:** the highest sounding male voice, usually used only in Baroque operas
- **Tenor:** a high-sounding male voice
- **Baritone:** the middle-sounding male voice
- **Bass:** the lowest sounding male voice



There are further categories defining a voice's quality and the type of music the performer can sing. These include:

- **Coloratura:** a very high range with the ability to sing complicated, agile parts
- **Dramatic:** a heavy sounding, powerful voice
- **Lyric:** an average-sized voice with the ability to sing long, beautiful phrases
- **Heldentenor:** a powerful sound for a big role, usually a heroic tenor

Here are some examples of what these voices sound like – follow the QR code to the YouTube link.



Classical Female Voices



Classical Male Voices

SYNOPSIS OF KATYA KABANOVA

In a provincial town by the River Volga, Katya lives under the suffocating rule of her domineering mother-in-law, Kabanicha, and a husband too weak to defend her. Denied independence and silenced at every turn, Katya dreams of freedom.

On her way home from church she encounters Boris — a man who, like her, is trapped in the town by family obligations. With the encouragement of her foster sister Varvara, Katya dares to imagine a different life.

What begins as a stolen glance grows into a romance that awakens Katya's passion and her hunger for self-determination. But when her husband Tichon returns, Katya is torn between her right to happiness and the crushing expectations placed upon her.

As the townsfolk gossip and judge and Kabanicha tightens her grip, Katya finds herself trapped in a dangerous struggle between her inner truth and a society determined to keep her in her place.





AN INTRODUCTION TO THE COMPOSER

At the turn of the 20th century, amid the political turmoil and hard-fought revolution that would one day lead to the formation of Czechoslovakia, a Czech composer was carving astonishing new depths in opera: Leoš Janáček.

His first opera *Jenůfa* had a patchy journey to success. Written and performed in the early 1900s in Brno, Janáček's home and a city outside Prague, *Jenůfa* featured dark themes of betrayal and infanticide. Janáček dedicated the opera to the memory and suffering of his own daughter Olga who died a year earlier.

With unconventional melodies and strong folk music influences, *Jenůfa* initially struggled to appeal to audiences. This problem was compounded by Janáček's personal rivalries and professional criticism of contemporaries – an unwise move against the very people who could boost the profile of his work.

It took over a decade for a revised version of *Jenůfa* to be staged in Prague's National Theatre and, at last, Janáček received critical acclaim, just shy of his 62nd birthday.

Alexander Briger AO, Conductor and Janáček specialist, says *Jenůfa* is a harbinger of the distinctive style his operas would go on to possess: unvarnished realism, drawn from love, loss and desire in his own life.

"For me, Janáček is one of the top three opera composers to have ever lived," Alexander says.

**"I THINK HIS WORKS ARE WHAT OPERA SHOULD BE:
RELATABLE, AND ACCESSIBLE TO AUDIENCES."**

JANÁČEK'S MUSE AND MUSIC

It was around this time – when Janáček was thrown into national acclaim after 1916 – that the composer became infatuated with a much younger, married woman named Kamila Stösslovà.

Despite the 38-year age gap and being already married, he dedicated much of the rest of his life to this emotional affair, dedicating many of his works to her and writing her hundreds of love letters.

"All his operas are about her, in a way," Alexander says. "And she couldn't have cared less about classical music. She didn't care about him at all! He was this old man who was obsessed with her, a woman who has no interest in him and his great passion."

Katya Kabanova was one such Kamila-inspired piece, and is considered one of Janáček's best works. Based on *The Storm*, a play by Alexander Ostrovsky, *Katya* is a tragic fable of love and longing set in a rural Russian town.

Janáček dedicated *Katya Kabanova* to Kamila Stösslovà and filled the opera with the same passion that tortured Janáček himself. This spills into the love duet between the heroine Katya and her lover, Boris.

The score is a perfect example of the distinctive, punchy style his operas are famous for. This style incorporates “speech melodies”, based on inflections of Czech speech over somewhat sparser orchestrations than many of his contemporaries.

This clipped manner of speech allegedly imitates how Janáček himself would speak with former students.

Desiree Frahn is the soprano taking on the titular role of Victorian Opera's production of *Katya Kabanova*. She says Janáček writes music “that flows like natural speech”.

“There are no set arias or repeated choruses, no backtracking. The story moves forward with the music, and the score adds emotional depth and nuance to the text that wouldn't be possible on its own,” she says.

“IT FEELS LIKE HEIGHTENED DIALOGUE, SHAPED BY THE CHARACTERS' INNER LIVES.”

SCRIBBLED NOTES, IMPOSSIBLE KEYS

Janáček was a difficult man in life, and this difficulty carried over into his composing style. Alexander Briger says the original manuscripts are “like Beethoven's, with scribbles everywhere, all over the place”.

“You can't tell if it's a double sharp, or one sharp, there are impossible keys and tempo changes,” he says.

Janáček wrote extensively on musical principles of his own design, many of which informed his less conventional methods of composing. Alexander likens understanding the music Janáček wrote as an act of interpretation.



Leoš Janáček and his wife Zdenka Schulzová in 1881. Photo: Department of Music History of the Moravian Regional Museum in Brno/Wikimedia Commons

“YOU’VE GOT TO SIT DOWN AND WORK IT OUT. HE’S CONSTANTLY CHANGING METER, ALMOST LIKE HE JUST FORGOT WHAT HE WAS DOING THE NIGHT BEFORE, THEN CAME BACK IN THE MORNING TO START AGAIN, DOING SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT.”

“You have to work out how this tempo relates. And it does! But it’s not intuitive.”

Performing Janáček to modern audiences has become possible due to the hard work of Australian Conductor Sir Charles Mackerras. Noting that many of the published versions of Janáček’s operas in circulation were revisions or adaptations by other composers, Sir Charles spent much of his life piecing together the original manuscripts.

Alexander Briger is Sir Charles Mackerras’ nephew. He says Sir Charles republished many restored parts and adapted them into more modern notation methods. These now form the basis for any modern performances of Janáček’s work.

Alexander expresses his uncle’s significant legwork. He says: “if you don’t have [Charles’] parts, when you get to that first rehearsal, you won’t even get to conduct! All you’ll be doing is explaining Janáček’s notes and it becomes a nightmare.”

RELATABLE, BEAUTIFUL, MOVING

Part of the enduring legacy of Janáček as a composer is the relatability of his works. Dealing with grounded, tragic events and focusing on people

with relatively low social status gives his work an approachability that many, more fanciful operas of the previous centuries were unable to tap into.

His operas were also quite well paced – often around 90 minutes long. With real, stark, human stories at the fore, it’s no wonder these works have managed to capture hearts around the globe.

“The stories are incredibly intense, really involved, and they also relate to us as human beings. You can actually imagine these stories happening,” Alexander says.

With such universal themes, rich music, and weighty inspirations, Janáček’s work is an important part of opera’s cultural history that will continue to grace stages the world over.







Victorian Opera’s production of *Katya Kabanova* is one more note in this symphonic legacy.

Alexander Briger AO is the Conductor of Victorian Opera’s *Katya Kabanova*

Written by Ben Minarelli

Source: victorianopera.com.au



SUMMARY OF THE WORK, KEY THEMES AND SCORE ANALYSIS – KATHERINE NORMAN

KEY	LIBRETTO	LISTEN	MUSIC	HISTORY	QUOTE	DATE
ICON						


KEY DATES – LEOŠ JANÁČEK

-  **1854** born 3 July in Hukvaldy (a town once part of the Austrian Empire)
-  **1881** returns to Brno. Founds and directs the Brno organ school
-  **1881** marries former student Zdenka Schulzová. They have two children, Vladimir and Olga. Vladimir dies age 2
-  **1890** Janáček leads the mainstream of folklorist activity in Moravia and Silesia
-  **1903** Olga Janáček dies age 20. Leoš and Zdenka struggle with their grief, leading to marital challenges
-  **1904** Janáček expresses his grief for Olga in his new opera Jenůfa, which premieres in Brno 21 January
-  **1914–1918** World War I
-  **1916** Jenůfa (Kovařovic version) premieres in Prague on 26 May to critical acclaim. Remains Janáček's most popular opera
-  **1916** starts long professional relationship with theatre critic and German translator Max Brod
-  **1916** starts affair with singer Gabriela Horváthová.
-  **1917** meets Kamila Stösslová, a young married woman 38 years his junior, who inspires him for the remainder of his life
-  **1918** Czechoslovak Declaration of Independence on 18 October 1918
-  **1919–1921** composes Katya Kabanova. It premieres in Brno on 23 November 1921
-  **1924** The Cunning Little Vixen premieres in Brno on 23 November 1921
-  **1928** dies age 74 in Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, 12 August. Buried in Brno Central Cemetery, in the Circle of Honour



ORIGINAL PLAY & LIBRETTO

-  Based on Ostrovsky's *The Storm* (1859), translated into Czech by Vincenc Červinka (1918). Janáček adapted this into the libretto for *Katya Kabanova*.
-  Director Heather Fairbairn refers to *The Storm* as one of the first naturalist plays – a pioneer in this area of literature.


HISTORICAL CONTEXT

-  Janáček was born in a region called Moravia, which was part of the Austrian Empire. In 1918, at the end of the First World war, this region became part of a new, independent Czechoslovakia. The Czech Republic wasn't established until 1993.



MORAVIAN FOLKLORE

-  Janáček was passionate about Moravian folk music.
-  Czech musicologist Jiří Plocek, describes Moravia as where the European East musically meets the West.

THROUGH COMPOSED/SPEECH MELODIES





-  *Katya* is entirely through composed and written using Czech speech melodies. This means new music is continually introduced in the opera, with little repetition of earlier sections. There are no arias.

JANÁČEK'S CAREER DEVELOPMENT

-  Janáček's was a late bloomer, with *Jenůfa* premiering in Prague when he was 62.
-  The last decade of his life was, by far, the most fruitful. It

included four major operas and other substantial works such as the *Sinfonietta*, the *Glagolitic Mass* and the two string quartets *No.1* and *No.2*.

THE SCORE

-  Janáček's mastery of orchestral composition is striking in *Katya Kabanova*.
-  Many locals in Brno would have recognised much of the local folk music when the opera premiered. You can hear this music interwoven in the score. This is especially prevalent during the scenes between the lovers Varvara and Kudrjáš.
-  Janáček has a huge number of tempo changes throughout the score. This is an incredibly effective way of making you feel on edge throughout the whole work. You literally don't know what is coming next – you can never get comfortable. It's a perfect way to maintain a hold over us all. It's gripping, enthralling and terrifying.
-  Each character has their own distinct musical language:
 - **Dikój:** crazy with a musical fervour throughout. His music is weird and wild, set against the beat and very angular
 - **Kabanicha:** Janáček's most evil female portrait. There is literally nothing redemptive about her. She is a despot, and every scene and musical line portrays this perfectly. Listen for staccato strings, quick changes of tempo and constantly changing time signatures.
 - **Boris:** a weak man, but Katya's main love interest. So here, Janáček writes the music similar to love duets by the famously lyrical composer Puccini.
 - **Katya:** often soft, gentle, yet soaring, showing her inner strength.
 - **Kudrjáš:** has the most melodic passage towards the middle of the opera in the love scene set in the garden.



KÁŤA KABANOVÁ

JEDNÁNÍ I

Veřejný sad na vysokém břehu Volhy; daleký výhled do kraje. Vpravo dům Kabanových. Lavičky na cestě sadu. Keře. Odpolední slunce.

KATJA KABANOWA

I. AKT

Park am Steilufer der Wolga. Weiter Ausblick in die Landschaft. Rechts das Haus der Familie Kabanoff. Auf dem Parkweg Bänke, Gesträuch. Nachmittagssonne.

LEOŠ JANÁČEK
(1854-1928)

Moderato, $\text{♩} = 48$

Tromboni e Tuba

con sord. 1° 2° *ppp*

con sord. 3° *ppp*

Timpani

p

Viola

pp

con sord. *pp*

Violoncelli

pp

Contrabbassi

pp



Overture – Lush opening

Cl. (si^b)

1^o

2^o

Cor. (fa)

1^o+2^o

fp

Kab.

že je ti že - na mat - ky mi - lej - šil Už od těch dob, co jsi se o - žc - nil, ne - po - zo - ru - ji
 daß du dein Weib der Mut - ter vor - ziehst? Ja ich be - merk' es: seit du ver - mählt bist, ist dei - ne Lie - be zur

Vl. I

Vl. II

Ve.

Vc.

🎵 Kabanicha – Spiky and jumpy lines with tempo changes and fast unsettling passages in the strings

192

4 Allegro [♩ = 88]

Cor. (fa) *mf* *1^o 2^o* *a 2* *3^o* *mf*

Arpa *mf* (určitě - deutlich)

Ku. *8*

Po za - hrád - ce dě - vu - cha již rá - no se pro - chá - ze - la,
 2 Früh am Mor - gen geht die Schö - ne in den Gar - ten mun - ter,

4 Allegro [♩ = 88]

Vl. I pizz. *mf*

Vl. II pizz. *mf*

Ve. pizz. *mf* arco (pizz.) *f*

♪ Kudrjáš Folk Song – simple melody, easy to follow – makes you feel at home

(v zanícení)
(ekstatisch) *f*

Kat. Vy vě - try buj - né!
Ihr wil - den Lüf - te!

4/*2* Maestoso [lo stesso tempo]

rit. *[ten.] p* *[molto]* *[uniti] f*

[ten.] p *[molto]* *mf* ****)* *[24]*

[ten.] p *[molto]* *mf* *[3]* *[3]* *[3]* *[3]*

[ten.] p *[molto]* *mf* *[div.]* *[24]*

[molto] *mf* senza sord.

mf

🎵 One of Katya's beautiful soaring solo lines, as she is closer to choosing her fate



DIRECTOR'S INSIGHTS – HEATHER FAIRBAIRN

Director Heather Fairbairn is at the helm of our upcoming production of Leoš Janáček's *Katya Kabanova*. Here, she describes her cinematic approach to the opera and the composer's hauntingly beautiful score.

HOW DOES JANÁČEK'S MUSIC MAKE YOU FEEL?

Janáček's score gets right under the skin. It feels raw and tender, folkloric and romantic — like eavesdropping on Katya's most private thoughts. The music surges with desire, fear, and longing, and it never lets you sit comfortably; it makes you live inside her vulnerability. As a director who works in both theatre and opera, I'm also drawn to the libretto's naturalism. It doesn't split into recitatives and arias but flows more like a play — unsurprising, since it's based on Ostrovsky's *The Storm*. Janáček weaves the rhythms and inflections of Czech speech into the vocal lines, creating a kind of 'speech melody' that feels startlingly alive and contemporary.

WHAT MAKES THIS PRODUCTION UNIQUE?

Instead of treating *Katya Kabanova* as a social drama in a specific town, we step inside Katya's psyche. The staging — especially the live-capture video — is a reflection of her inner life: fractured, layered, and slowly collapsing. The camera puts us inside Katya's point of view, so we experience the world as she does. That keeps her story intimate and urgent, even in the vast space of the Palais Theatre.

WHAT EXCITES YOU MOST ABOUT THE PRODUCTION?

I'm excited by the interplay between opera and cinema. The Palais once functioned as a cinema, so using video and projection lets us embrace that history while using the space for live opera. I'm also fascinated by the way the production slowly disintegrates around Katya — it's like watching her world implode in real time, which feels devastatingly truthful.

HOW DO YOU HOPE THE AUDIENCE WILL FEEL WHEN THEY LEAVE?

I'd never presume to tell anyone how to feel — art is subjective. But Katya's story is deeply moving: one of suffocation and erasure, but also of extraordinary courage. I hope the audience feels the force of her defiance, even if it costs her life.

**FOR ME, THIS OPERA IS ABOUT VISIBILITY. KATYA IS
CONSTANTLY SILENCED, CONTROLLED, AND DIMINISHED
— YET THROUGH JANÁČEK'S MUSIC AND THIS PRODUCTION'S LENS, SHE BECOMES IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE.**

Heather Fairbairn, Director of Victorian Opera's *Katya Kabanova*

Compiled by Anthea Batsakis

Source: victorianopera.com.au



INTERVIEW: DESIREE FRAHN ON CAPTURING JANÁČEK'S TRAGIC HEROINE

Katya Kabanova tells the story of Katya, played by Desiree Frahn, who falls deeply in love with another man while navigating the oppressive household she shares with her cruel mother-in-law.

Set in a stark, Russian village, the opera oscillates between the light of passionate romance, and the darkness of moral accountability. The score is lyrical, peppered with Slavic folk music, and sung in Czech – a language unfamiliar to many opera singers, including Desiree.

In this interview, she explains her approach to singing in a new language, the journey of her character, and why all of us can empathise with *Katya Kabanova*'s heavy themes.

"We are all, at some point, torn between what we want, what we need, and what we believe is right – or best – for ourselves and others," she says. "That tension is especially powerful when it comes to love."

TELL US ABOUT YOUR CHARACTER

Katya is a deeply complex and tragic character. She was once a whimsical and carefree young woman, but she's now trapped in a stifling, childless marriage within the rigid confines of the merchant class.

Her husband, Tichon, is not unkind – he's polite and loves her in his own way – but he is passive and emotionally unavailable. He often escapes the oppressive household run by his domineering mother, Kabanicha, using drink and business trips. In his absence, Katya is left alone to endure the cruelty of Kabanicha, who torments her out of jealousy and resentment.

Kabanicha sees Katya as a rival for her son's affection and asserts her control by belittling and bullying her.

Katya lives in emotional and spiritual isolation. Her only sources of light are the solace she finds in church and prayer, and a forbidden love she harbours for another man. She is torn between her strong sense of moral duty and a desperate longing for passion and freedom.

There's a powerful line from the play that encapsulates her reality: "When a woman's married here, she might as well be buried."

That sentiment really defines Katya's experience – she is a woman suffocated by her circumstances, desperately reaching for some form of life, even if it means destruction.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE KATYA'S JOURNEY ACROSS THE OPERA?

Katya's journey is one of inner conflict, between desire, duty and conscience. At the beginning of the opera, she's already emotionally isolated, trapped and feels a dark end coming for her if she continues this life. She longs for beauty, meaning and love, but her world offers no space for that.

As the door is opened to the possibility of meeting (the other man) Boris, she experiences a brief, intoxicating glimpse of freedom. She knows the weight of this decision. Her guilt isn't just a burden – it reveals how deeply moral and spiritual she is. She doesn't take her choices lightly, and that makes her turmoil all the more painful. Katya knows neither path before her will offer true happiness, but one may offer her the strength to go on.

As the opera progresses, her internal conflict intensifies. Torn between her moral beliefs and her need for connection, she's pushed to the edge. By the end, she sees no path forward that doesn't destroy her.

Katya's journey is tragic not because she is weak, but because she feels so deeply. Her fate is sealed not by her actions, but by the world's refusal to forgive them.

HAVE YOU PERFORMED A JANÁČEK OPERA BEFORE? HOW WILL YOU APPROACH SINGING IN CZECH?

Yes, I have! I played the Vixen in *The Cunning Little Vixen*, although that particular production was in English. So, *Katya Kabanova* is my first time performing Janáček in the original Czech.

Czech is a beautiful but unfamiliar language for many singers, so working with a language coach is absolutely essential, even with the excellent online tools now available. My first step is always to get a feel for the language: exploring the sounds, especially consonants and vowels that don't exist in English or the standard operatic languages such as French, German or Italian.

From there, I work through the libretto as spoken text, almost like dialogue — ideally with a coach — to not only understand pronunciation, but also the natural emphasis, rhythm and emotional tone of the words.

Then, I learn the text with the composer's musical rhythm. The notes themselves actually come last for me! It's all about building a strong linguistic and emotional foundation so, when I do sing, the words feel honest and alive.

WHAT DO YOU MOST ENJOY ABOUT JANÁČEK'S MUSIC?

I love that Janáček's operas are through-composed. He writes music that

flows like natural speech — there are no set arias or repeated choruses, no backtracking. The story moves forward with the music, and the score adds emotional depth and nuance to the text that wouldn't be possible on its own. It feels like heightened dialogue, shaped by the characters' inner lives.

I also really enjoy how his operas are often grounded in a specific musical world. In *The Cunning Little Vixen*, we hear the soundscape of the natural world — chirps, rustlings, birdsong. In *Katya Kabanova*, he draws on Slavic folk music, and you can hear both jaunty and haunting folk-inspired melodies woven throughout the score. They give the piece a deep sense of place and tradition, while still feeling incredibly personal and expressive.

AT THE HEART OF THE OPERA IS A CONFLICT OF DESIRE. DO YOU EXPECT AUDIENCES TO RELATE OR ENGAGE WITH THIS SUBJECT?

This is a universal and timeless theme. As long as we have desires, needs and emotions, there will be conflict. We are all, at some point, torn between what we want, what we need, and what we believe is right — or best — for ourselves and others. That tension is especially powerful when it comes to love.

Katya's situation may be specific to her time and culture, but the emotional core is something I think everyone can recognise. Whether it's the longing for freedom, the pain of repression, or the fear of following your heart, there's something in her journey that reaches into us.

I believe every audience member will see a reflection of themselves somewhere in this story — perhaps in ways they expect, and perhaps in ways they'd rather not admit. That's what makes the opera so moving. It holds up a mirror to our inner lives.

Compiled by Anthea Batsakis

Source: victorianopera.com.au

CZECH LANGUAGE – FROM LANGUAGE COACH ADRIANA HANIC

One of the glorious elements of *Katya Kabanova* is that it's performed in its original language: Czech. Many opera singers throughout their training learn many of the more common opera languages, such as Italian, French and German. The opera singers for *Katya Kabanova* have spent most of 2025 learning to sing in the relatively obscure operatic language of Czech, learning from Royal Opera House Czech language coach.

Recordings of all spoken text have been provided as part of the musical preparation. Local Czech language coach Adriana Hanic also attended many coaching sessions for the singers in the months leading up to our first rehearsals. Adriana spent the first week in the rehearsal room, ensuring the Czech text was accurate.

In honour of celebrating this Czech language learning curve, we thought we'd highlight some simple phrases for you to join in. For those reading this online, follow the QR code and listen to Adriana pronouncing each phrase (a bit like how the singers learnt the text for *Katya*).



ENGLISH	CZECH	ENGLISH	CZECH
Hello	Ahoj	Excuse me	Promiňte
(Good Day)	Dobrý den	Welcome to the theatre	Vítejte v divadle
Please	Prosím	I love opera	Miluji operu
Thank you	Děkuju / Děkuji vám!	I love you	Miluji vás
Thanks	Díky	Have a lovely day	Přeji vám krásný den / M jte hezký den
Yes	Ano	Please come again	Přijďte zase
No	Ne	I'd like to order one beer please	Chtel bych pivo / jedno pivo prosím
Goodbye	Na shledanou! / Ahoj	I'm sorry I don't speak your language well	Lituji nemluvím dobře vaši řeč
I'm sorry	Lituji	Do you speak English?	Mluvíte anglicky?
1	jeden	6	šest
2	dva	7	sedm
3	tr	8	osm
4	čtyři	9	devět
5	pět	10	deset

FIVE FILMS INSPIRING OUR PRODUCTION – SAVANNA WEGMAN

Our production of *Katya Kabanova* is heavily inspired by the Czech New Wave, an important film movement of the 1960s that pushed back against the repressive norms of the communist regime. The films were experimental, darkly funny and deeply moving, with exquisite cinematography and anti-regime themes. Now, we're bringing this movement to the stage in our rendition of Leoš Janáček's opera that blends theatre and live cinema with powerful audio-visual effects.

Below, Set & Costume Designer Savanna Wegman outlines five films — Czech and otherwise — that inspired her approach to *Katya Kabanova*.

FRUIT OF PARADISE (1970)

Cheeky and playful, this Czech film delights me in its use of colour, collage and distortion. It is directed by one of my absolute favourites, Věra Chytilová, and is a luxurious and hallucinogenic retelling of the story of Adam and Eve. The loss of innocence takes on folkloric twists that slide effortlessly between domestic and mythic which reminded me a lot of Katya's distinct poetic voice in the libretto.

MELANCHOLIA (2011)

Melancholia is so rich in its style of visual poetry. I took a lot of inspiration from the way the landscape and the natural (or at times unnatural) world is treated like a part of the main character's soul, responsive to Justine and her experience of depression. It cuts deep into the honest nuances

of hopelessness but expresses them in gestures that are simultaneously bold and grand, yet quiet and powerful.

OUTER SPACE (1999)

Heather Fairbairn, our Director, showed me this short film and it is quite a masterpiece! I think its genius comes from its visual fragmentation and decay — not only of the cinematic image and female subject but of the physical celluloid film itself.

The film destroys itself in multiple layers through tearing and shattering to expose a striking illusory perspective. It provided a stunning reference for how we wanted Katya's inner landscape to implode — melting, ripping, dismantling our dual form inside cinema space and the theatre space.

NOSTALGHIA (1983)

Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia* gave me imagery of winged angels, dilapidated and overgrown cathedrals, and an intense mood of timelessness. I was swooning. It dances from de-saturated colours to black and white, in and out of dream states, and fixates on an indescribable recollection of home that is rich in symbolism and spirituality.

The powerful image of Gorchakov sitting in the front yard of his house surrounded by the ruins of a cathedral was burned into my brain and inspired the arched ruins of Act 3 in *Katya Kabanova* — spiritual worlds within worlds, and unseen layers emerging into being.

THE GARDEN OF DESIRES (1987)

This Soviet film influenced an atmosphere of romance in *Katya Kabanova*. Its pastoral landscapes — gardens, fields and rivers — cover up an underlying darkness: in this case, the impending Great Patriotic War of the 1940s.

The film follows a young girl and her sisters through white summer dresses, foreboding weather and lush cinematography. These have influenced Katya's costume as well as the opera's scene in Act 2 of the lovers in the garden.

Compiled by Anthea Batsakis / Written by Savanna Wegman

Source: victorianopera.com.au



PALAIS THEATRE - A FILM HISTORY OF THE ICONIC VENUE

The **Palais Theatre**, formerly known as **Palais Pictures**, is a historic picture palace located in St Kilda. With a capacity of nearly 3,000 people, it is the largest seated theatre in Australia.

Replacing an earlier cinema of the same name destroyed in a fire, the new theatre, designed by Henry Eli White, opened in 1927. Sitting adjacent to Luna Park, it helped to establish the St Kilda beach foreshore as an entertainment precinct, and remains an iconic landmark in the area. The Palais is included on the Victorian Heritage Register, and in 2015, it was inducted into the Music Victoria Hall of Fame.

The Palais Theatre was developed by the Phillips brothers (Leon, Herman and Harold), who hailed from Spokane, Washington. Their first venture here, with fellow American showman James Dixon Williams, was Luna Park, which opened on the St Kilda foreshore in 1912. Williams left the partnership and returned to the United States in about 1913, leaving the Phillips brothers to expand their entertainment business.

The Phillips' next ventures were a series of dance halls and picture theatres on the 'triangle site', across a small road from Luna Park. They began in 1913 with the first Palais de Danse, on the site of the current Palais Theatre. In 1915, this building was converted into Palais Pictures. In 1919, an arched-truss steel-framed structure that was to be a new Palais Pictures was built over the old Palais, which was then dismantled and relocated next door, to the north, becoming a dance hall again, the twin-towered arched-roofed Palais de Danse. In 1922 the interior of the Palais de Danse was remodelled to a design by the architect Walter Burley Griffin. In 1925, Griffin was again employed to design a substantial remodelling of the Palais Pictures next door; work was nearly complete in 1926 when a fire destroyed the whole building. The Phillips brothers

then commissioned a new architect, theatre specialist Henry Eli White, to build a larger, grander theatre.

This new theatre, with the largest seating capacity outside the main central city theatres, was officially opened by the Mayor of St Kilda on 12 November 1927. The next night the first films screened were *Across the Pacific*, starring Monte Blue, and *Rough House Rosie*, starring Clara Bow, with interval entertainment provided by Harry Jacobs and his orchestra.

When the last of the Phillips brothers died in 1957, the Palais, the Palais de Danse and Luna Park passed to local entrepreneurs. A brass plaque, still in place on the second level of the Palais, bears a tribute to Leon Phillips from members of the American community of Victoria. The theatre, which had operated primarily as a cinema until the 1950s, became increasingly popular as a live performance venue, hosting top overseas stars such as Johnnie Ray, Bob Hope, the Rolling Stones, Tom Jones and many others. At some point in the 1950s, the name was changed from Palais Pictures to Palais Theatre, reflecting its new role.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Palais hosted live acts, films, opera and ballet. The Bolshoi Theatre, the Kirov Ballet and the Stars of World Ballet performed, and it was the Melbourne venue for The Australian Ballet. Joan Sutherland appeared with the Australian Opera in *The Merry Widow* in 1979.

The Melbourne Film Festival was based at the Palais from 1962 until 1982. In 1975, the International Women's Film Festival screened and hosted events at the Palais, coordinated by Suzanne Spinner, founder of *Lip*, a feminist magazine.

Précised from: Wikipedia

PALAIS THEATRE

MELBOURNE

FILM

FESTIVAL

TONIGHT

INTERNATIONAL MELBOURNE FILM FESTIVAL

MELBOURNE FILM FESTIVAL



DESIGN ELEMENTS – SAVANNA WEGMAN

Set & Costume Designer Savanna Wegman answers questions pertaining to her design craft and process.

HEATHER TALKS ABOUT A KEY THEME IN *KATYA* BEING VISIBILITY. HOW DO YOU CONVEY THAT THROUGH YOUR CRAFT?

The visual world for *Katya Kabanova* is an exercise in making the internal, external. A kind of inversion perhaps, to make visible the spiritual, the emotional, the rational and the irrational layers to Katya's multifaceted psyche and letting them all unravel, like threads unwinding.

The design world uses the progression of cinematic forms to make Katya's fragmented psychological point of view physical and tangible – enlarging action and imagery on stage. This is heavily informed the abstracted set design, incorporating large projection surfaces and live video feeds. This allows us to intimately witness Katya and her multiple forking paths of choices and desires that ultimately lead to her psychological implosion.

Screens are collaged together on the stage, placed within an overgrown, abandoned riverscape with towering, oppressive scaffold structures. The world surrounds her with images of her subjectivity and internal world, which then begin to warp and decay as she becomes increasingly morally conflicted.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING ON THIS PRODUCTION?

Heather and I began early conceptual chats in October last year! It has been such a rich and wonderful process that began with many concepts and discussions to understand this blend of stage and screen.

HOW DO YOU GO FROM INITIAL CONCEPT TO THE STAGE?

Early stages will always start with immersing myself in the world of the show. It is very exciting and daunting, where anything is possible and the world is quite mysterious, messy and random. I compile a massive (and chaotic) mood board following any instincts and curiosities that arise, with my main questions interrogating the poetic imprints of the work.

Then, there are many beautiful exploratory discussions with the Director and creative team that both expand and contract the world in many ways. There are several parts to a concept design. Each iteration strengthens the conceit of the world, not just for the design but also for the dramaturgy/context – for example, is it set in contemporary times? Or period?

Then, the design is presented alongside a model box to go into production. This is the exciting part of realising the design, alongside an incredible team of skilled builders, artisans and costumiers.

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES AND HOW DID YOU OVERCOME THEM?

In the early days, a main challenge was integrating the live feed and cinema form into the stage space. It was important that they worked in cohesion and that they could both shift and change to reflect Katya's internal shifts. They needed to speak the same language, and it was both exciting and overwhelming to delve into all the possibilities of such a hybrid form.

We overcame this by returning to our key film inspirations and dreaming of the ways we could translate them into theatrical visuals. Returning to *Outer*

Space (1999) by Peter Tscherkassky solidified the kind of visual language we wanted to extend through operatic and theatrical form. It helped dictate the visual shifts between key moments.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE YOUNG DESIGNERS?

My advice for young designers would be to notice things with a deep sense of curiosity. Notice the way you see things and the way your own taste, perspective and impressions of the world create imprints and leave traces in your imagination.

Trust your eye and the senses of your body, particularly goosebumps. Collect and document all the things that speak to you in strange or beguiling ways. Learn all you can from your mentors and peers, but also trust you will find your own unique process that feels personal and precious to you. And do whatever you can to nurture it.

Try your best to find time to rest (I am very much still learning this). The process for every show is different so surround yourself with a supportive community that you know you can reach out to if your ambitions are larger than your own capacity.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU?

Up next, I am the Set Design Associate to Anna Cordingley for Melbourne Theatre Company's *Much Ado About Nothing*, opening in November, which is super exciting. Next year is also filling up with some really fun projects: 3 remounts, an adaptation, and an intensive development period of a performance work I have been writing called *End Desert Machine*, which also uses a filmic form. But before next year rolls around I'm finally taking some time to travel and experience some of my heritage in Malaysia with my brother. It's been a long time coming.



GLOSSARY & REFERENCES

ARIA: a self-contained musical piece for one voice, with or without instrumental or orchestral accompaniment, normally part of a larger work. The typical context for arias is opera, but vocal arias also feature in oratorios and cantatas, or they can be stand-alone concert arias. The term was originally used to refer to any expressive melody, usually, but not always, performed by a singer.

RECITATIVE: a style of delivery (much used in operas, oratorios, and cantatas) in which a singer is allowed to adopt the rhythms and delivery of ordinary speech. It resembles sung ordinary speech more than a formal musical composition.

SPEECH MELODIES: basing vocal melodies on the patterns, sounds and intonations of speech, rather than on a strictly musical basis.

THROUGH-COMPOSED MUSIC: a continuous, non-sectional, and non-repetitive piece of music. The term is typically used to describe songs but can also apply to instrumental music.

REFERENCES / FURTHER READING

Janáček's creative process: <https://www.leosjanacek.eu/en/how-he-created/>

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Victorian Collections Palais Cinema History video: <https://victoriancollections.net.au/stories/the-palais-theatre>

Victorian Opera Behind the Scenes: <https://www.victorianopera.com.au/behind-the-scenes/>

Wikipedia: [Katya Kabanova](#)

Rehearsal photos: Casey Horsfield

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