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Killing Liza, Resisting Modernity: The Operatic Heroine and Urban Decay in
Chaikovsky's *Queen of Spades* (1890)

Pushkin's "Queen of Spades" (1833) has long been linked to the so-called "myth of St. Petersburg" — the paradoxical nature of the city as both Peter's utopian "window to the west" and the decaying metropolis that inspired countless literary depictions of the city's degeneracy and maudlin gloom. Written over half a century later, Chaikovsky's opera makes several alterations to Pushkin's story that reflect the myth's transformation and growing anxieties about modernity. One such change is his addition of Liza's suicide: rather than leave Hermann to his madness and marry another man, she takes her own life. Scholars have heretofore attributed Liza's suicide to the "fate of the operatic heroine." This, however, overlooks the opera's wider aesthetic as an embodiment of and reaction to perceived modernity in fin-de-siècle St. Petersburg.

Chaikovsky's *Queen of Spades* is more than just what musicologist Richard Taruskin has called "the first symbolist opera." It anticipates the coming symbolist movement in music while simultaneously critiquing modern life in late Imperial Russia and St. Petersburg. This paper suggests that we should read Liza's suicide not merely as operatic convention, but rather as significant to the opera's depiction of modern urban decay. To do so, I incorporate previous work by Mark Steinberg and Susan Morrissey on suicide as a phenomenon of and reaction to modernity in fin-de-siècle St. Petersburg. Similarly, I postulate a theorization of the canal in the context of Walter Benjamin's metropolis. By drowning herself specifically in the Nevsky River, Liza is both figuratively and literally killed by the modern city. In Chaikovsky's opera, the city itself becomes a spectacle — a stage upon which the archetypal characters of modernity danced, sang, lived, and died.