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**Penita la Tragedia**

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Tetyana Kytsenko  
PENITA LA TRAGEDIA  
an opera libretto  
*translated by Nina Murray ©2022*

## **PENITA LA TRAGEDIA**

### **Dramatis Personae**

CELLO – 62 years old, been in jail for 38 (on her fourth sentence), speaks Russian.

VIOLA – a hot-tempered Assyrian, 40 years old, her second stint in jail, speaks Ukrainian.

GOOD VIOLIN (GV) – the most timid of the prisoners, 37 years old, first time in jail, speaks Ukrainian.

BAD VIOLIN (BV) – will take a mile if given an inch, 39 years old, second time in jail, speaks *surzhik*.

*All are doing life sentences.*

CHORUS of men and women, a mob.

*The music is performed by a chamber string quartet: two violins, a viola, and a cello. Each instrument corresponds to one of the characters.*

*Music and the parts sung by the chorus can be pre-recorded.*

### **INTRO**

#### **SCENE 1. THE SANATORIUM.**

*GOOD VIOLIN, like Rapunzel, sits by the window (the glass is painted white) and combs her long braid, waiting for her Prince Charming.*

VIOLA

Still waiting?

GOOD VIOLIN

The sky: it's so pale and so bright.

VIOLA

Covered by clouds?

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GOOD VIOLIN

Or maybe the opposite: not a cloud in it.

VIOLA

It gives me an odd feeling:

I'm scared, but at the same time comforted.

*The iron door creaks as it opens.*

**SONG OF THE IDYLL**

Vivacissimo, happily.

GOOD VIOLIN

The earthly road having traveled half-way

VIOLA

I find myself in here again

BAD VIOLIN

It's quiet here, safe as in the womb

CELLO

And what you need they do provide for you.

THE WOMEN TOGETHER

Come on in, come stop by:

leave your troubles outside.

No way to refuse the invite

to a place as fine. As fine!

CHORUS

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Good will overcome all evil!

And that is why everything's fine here!

GOOD VIOLIN

You can really get some sleep and rest here

CELLO

They give you meat three times a day, *da!*

VIOLA

They'll take you in just as you are, at any time.

BAD VIOLIN

And you ain't got to worry 'bout tomorrow.

THE WOMEN TOGETHER

Come on in, come stop by:

leave your troubles outside.

No way to refuse the invite

to a place as fine. As fine!

CHORUS

Good will overcome all evil!

And that is why everything's fine here!

VIOLA

It's clean, furnished, and has good facilities.

BAD VIOLIN

If you feel like watching TV—be my guest.

VIOLA

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Feel like spitting at the ceiling? Be my guest.

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

A sanatorium!

GOOD VIOLIN

Four rooms

with four persons each;

two rooms

with three people each;

and one room

for two.

CELLO

And the staff here! Sensitive, solicitous. You can talk to them about anything!

BAD CELLO

It's really their vocation!

VIOLA

We are very satisfied.

GOOD VIOLIN

Everything's super!

BAD VIOLIN

*sarcastic*

Maybe we've died and gone to heaven?

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## SCENE 2. LEISURE

### GOOD VIOLIN

We check books out from the library...

I read Paolo Coelho –

*The Alchemist* and *Zair*.

And *The Crossroads*, I don't remember

who wrote it. *The Plan of Your Soul...*

I chose the ones that make you sit with them,  
think about things.

### VIOLA

I do Eastern dancing.

I perform.

I'm a star!

I try to have a different costume

every time,

and to look—

stunning!

### CELLO

I go to the winter garden, *da*.

I'm an amateur gardener.

I like the ficuses:

the old, big ones—

totally overgrown.

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I hug them, talk to them.

VIOLA

It's just a bit boring.

BAD VIOLIN

Monotonous.

CELLO

The deputy director has this rhododendron  
in his office. It's a beauty!

BAD VIOLIN

You and that bloody rhododendron!

GOOD VIOLIN

*To the VIOLA*

Only three weeks left.

Three weeks.

And you?

BAD VIOLIN

Do they make you wait, as a special kind of torture?

CELLO

Aren't we tortured already?

BAD VIOLIN

You've got to fill the time to make it pass.

GOOD VIOLIN

Would you like me to tell you about Prince Charming?

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BAD VIOLIN

*Spasiba.* How about something more lively?

*Picks up a guitar, sits.*

BAD VIOLIN

A song about the ancient Greek heroine Medea who  
helped her beloved obtain the Golden Fleece!

*(explains to the others)*

A kind of magical sheep pelt.

**SONG “MEDEA AND AEETES”**

*BAD VIOLIN sings, and CELLO dances pretending to be a Goddess.*

*Moderato, with spirit.*

BAD VIOLIN

Now Jason was a smart young fellow,  
and wore himself a smart white cap.  
One day he showed up in Colchis  
to steal the magic golden pelt.  
The local king then set him riddles  
to answer which were really traps.  
Our Jason would have been *kaputt*,  
but for Medea's helpful hand.

King Aeetes's daughter  
will save the day.  
For the sake of her love  
she'll throw everything away.  
Na – na – na – na!



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Her Daddy didn't really care,  
he fawned upon his only son,  
and so to pay him back, Medea  
helped Jason grab the fleece and run.  
To slow down the pursuers  
Medea chopped her bro in bits  
and threw them one after another  
for Dad to fish out of the sea.

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

King Aeetis's daughter  
will save the day.  
For the sake of her love  
she'll throw everything away.  
Na – na – na – na!

*BAD VIOLIN mimes throwing pieces of the invisible brother to the invisible father.*

CHORUS

Who raised you like that?

BAD VIOLIN

You did, Daddy!

CELLO

*Breaking an awkward silence, to the audience*

There even put on a comedy night here once! I  
laughed so hard, from the first word to the last—I lost  
my voice!

VIOLA

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And then later, when they showed it on TV, the whole  
village came to watch!

*Everyone hallucinates a rape scene.*

GOOD VIOLIN

Did you see?

VIOLA

Did you hear?

CELLO

What's that stench?

BAD VIOLIN

Did you hear that knocking?

CELLO

That's the heart.

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**ACT I.**

**SCENE 1. CHILDHOOD**

VIOLA

I suddenly dreamed  
that I was happy.

CELLO

*(ironic)*

D'you mean to say you're unhappy here?

VIOLA

When I was little.

CELLO

As if anyone here  
had a happy childhood.

GOOD VIOLIN

You don't choose your childhood.

BAD VIOLIN

I don't know about you lot,  
but I had a normal childhood.

Totally normal.

VIOLA

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We had a record player, the kind you play vinyls on, and I loved to dance. *Our* dances, Assyrian. You hold a coin between your fingers like so, and then at the end you put it down for the musicians. I loved that.

#### GOOD VIOLIN

I have loved rain since I was little. When we lived in Perevalsk, it came down in these big, big drops... Mum would not let us out, but we'd say we're going to see Dad at school—he played volleyball there—and run out in the rain in our T-shirts and skirts...

#### BAD VIOLIN

Father drove a Colchis truck<sup>1</sup>, sold tractor engines  
for panes of glass. To Kherson, to Kremenchug – *da*,  
anywhere if it wasn't far.  
One factory to unload at, the other to load at, easy-peasy.  
We'd go swimming in the Kakhovka reservoir.  
And the best thing about it? No mosquitoes.  
Only the dragonflies – so many.

#### GOOD VIOLIN

Time flies when things are good.

#### CELLO

I was ready to run my own household when I was twelve.  
I could do everything: sewing, spinning, mending, weaving,  
baking, frying, steaming,  
I could plant, I could hoe, I could water.  
Did martial arts too.

#### BAD VIOLIN

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<sup>1</sup> A model of Soviet trailer, KAZ-305, well known for being unreliable.

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I was a fighter. I remember one time, in the market,  
we broke down, the gear box gave out. Daddy had  
gone somewhere and there I was – all of six years old  
– standing guard. Didn't let anyone close to that car,  
did I?

These blokes came, but I was a mean little menace:

I grab the wrench, and say, “You clear off now, or I'll  
hurt you!”

## CELLO

No one spoiled me much. Mother is a closed  
subject. Father took me out of the children's home  
when I was two, *wow!*

And then he died and I went to school.

Step-mother got married again – she had other  
things to worry about.

They sent me to live with grandma – and she was  
eighty-four, so old. Spent whole days in church –  
she was *orthodox*.

## BAD VIOLIN

Dad would go to work, in a factory, says to me, you wait here at the gate.

The guy who manned the gate gave me this huge sweet thing, oh my.

Says, is it good? I says, sure is.

“And what should you say?”— “Give me more.” –

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“Now, that's what I call an education.”

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

Good education  
is the pride of our nation.

CHORUS

A child is like clay.

CELLO

We lived poorly, I worked from the age of eight:  
helped old widows with their vegetable gardens.  
I'd work all summer, and by September save up enough for the school  
uniform, textbooks, and stuff.  
I started in the mines when I was sixteen.

BAD VIOLIN

We were in round-the-clock daycare 'till I was six:  
Dad was on the road, Mum – a lab technician – worked in the district centre.  
Didn't make sense to take us home every day,  
so she'd drop us off Monday, pick us up Friday,  
me and my brother Roma.

I had a normal childhood, I did.

Totally normal.

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VIOLA

When I was ten, they put Mum in jail:  
she killed Dad's mistress.  
It was me and Grandma then. I had clothes, food.  
Never lacked for anything except supervision and a firm  
hand.

GOOD VIOLIN

A fine childhood it was until all this:  
*perestroika*, troubles in the mines,  
the nineties, no one getting paid.  
Father couldn't cope, though he wasn't weak.

GOOD VIOLIN

He started to drink,

BAD VIOLIN

He was a violent drunk...

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

I had a normal childhood, I did.  
Totally normal.

VIOLA

Mama didn't spare the rod – she made me kneel on raw buckwheat!  
When she went to jail, Father had it good,  
lived with other women, like, *wow!*  
Grandma didn't even know when I skipped school.  
Call me cynical,  
but the thought of living with her

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made me sick.

CELLO

I grew up on the streets,  
started smoking when I was eleven.  
Grandma knew.  
“Please, Oryska,” she said, “just  
don't let anyone see you with a cigarette.  
For shame!”

CHORUS

*echoes*

For shame! For shame!

BAD VIOLIN

I got what I deserved. And I deserved a lot!  
Spent lots of time in the corner, I did.  
Father educated me with his belt.  
“Who raised you like this?” he said.

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

I had a normal childhood, I did.  
Totally normal.

BAD VIOLIN  
*lyrically*

Here's a picture, my brother and I –



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blue dress with daisies

hair so short.

That bow on my head like a pancake.

And my little brother—look at his face:

he was crying a minute before...

“Stop that right now,” I said to him,

I did.

### **LIKE CLAY**

Adagio, lyrically  
CHORUS

Childhood is all joy and laughter, why do you cry?

Get over it, turn on your positive attitude. Life is like clay, it's  
OK.

### **ALL WOMEN TOGETHER**

Oh-clay Oh-clay OK-lay OK-lay

### **CHORUS**

You can fix it all, you can always fix everything.

Everyone kneads the clay, kneads and shapes the  
clay of her life.

### **ALL WOMEN TOGETHER**

Oh-clay Oh-clay OK-lay OK-lay

### **BAD VIOLIN**

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I don't see your hands! Put your hands together  
for me!

Come on, everyone, smile!

CELLO

Help me see whose teeth

I'm about to knock out.

Stop that grinning!

## **SCENE 2. MARRIED LIFE**

VIOLA

Then I met my first husband. I was fourteen.

### **A SHORT SONG ABOUT MARRIED LIFE**

Moderato, happily  
CHORUS

When someone asks you to get wed,  
You are so happy you go mad!

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

The most important thing  
in married life  
is not letting the bliss  
just kill you outright.

BAD VIOLIN

I was a grown-up at sixteen.  
Had my Katya at seventeen.

VIOLA

He took me to live in his village.

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Our son was born a year later. That's how it goes.

CELLO

For the first six months he was perfect. Just perfect.  
What a match!

VIOLA

Mother-in-law kept saying,  
“All we do is raise kids. Got our own  
on their own two feet, now there's this one  
to teach.”  
We had our second son.  
I was just happy I wasn't with Grandma.

CELLO

And then it's like, did someone jinx him?

VIOLA

We lived seven years together... then I realized, I  
can't take it any more. First, he was much older.  
And I wanted more freedom: he just wanted to stay  
at home. Couldn't get him out even for a picnic.

GOOD VIOLIN

We started to fight: he was gone all the time.  
Went somewhere, smoked, drank, took every  
drug.

BAD VIOLIN

He hit me. He drank...

CELLO

Showed, as they say, his true colors, he  
did. I never thought I'd see what it's like

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when the husband searches the fridge  
'coz he thinks there's another man in  
there. I learnt the meaning of *delirium  
tremens*. If you saw him sober a couple  
times a month—that was a good month.

BAD VIOLIN

I couldn't take it any more.

CELLO

Divorced him. Seven months pregnant.

VIOLA

Took the children and ran.

### **THE SONG ABOUT A VAGINA WITH TEETH IN IT**

CHORUS

If a husband is cheating,  
if a husband drinks,  
won't do any work,  
or bring home the wage  
clearly, he's got  
a bad lot in his marriage.  
A vagina with teeth  
is a wicked ol' thing!

The vagina with teeth  
bit off his dick,  
took the initiative.  
A good wife  
ought to inspire.

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And be the keeper  
of the home fire.

CELLO

What are you even talking about? Teeth?  
Get the hell out of my face. Everyone has a right  
to be happy.

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

*(echoing)*  
*Life is like clay. Lay. Okay...*

CELLO

Life should be a journey into the unknown!

**SONG OF CELLO**

Vivace, romantic

CELLO

I walk a winding path that roams  
through cornflowers and daisies  
So beautiful, I breathe in deep  
I pick some flowers to keep  
and walk and walk

Under the cliff I see some walrus,  
and stop to look. So big!

When all of a sudden, there's soldiers around me

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pointing their guns.

They've come to arrest me.

I spent two days in the Commandant's office  
in Partizansk. They explained many times  
that while picking the flowers, what I  
did was wander  
almost straight into China!

#### CHORUS

Good God, Orysia!

Can't leave you for a moment! Don't we have plenty of flowers at home?!

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### **SCENE 3. THE DANCE OF FATE.**

*An artistically-metaphorical interpretation of the women's life stories (in which they are not particularly good.)*

Vivace, wild Gypsy-style  
BAD VIOLIN

A-a-a-ah!

VIOLA

Oh, No!

CELLO

Ah-ni-ni-ni-ni!

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

Turn on your positivity,  
shake things off...

You've got to try everything in life!

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

No matter where fate takes you  
believe in yourself and your luck.  
There is still a chance after thirty  
to find your Prince Charming, ha!  
hop-hop-hop

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

*Oh-clay Oh-clay OK-lay OK-lay...*

CELLO

There's always room for serendipity!

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

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Ta-ra-ra, ta-ra-ra-ra. Dee-dah-ree!  
Tir-din-tir-din-tirdin! Dah-dah-ree!

GOOD VIOLIN

I was 29.

BAD VIOLIN

Me, 28.

VIOLA

Me, 24.

GOOD VIOLIN

I believed I would find  
my Prince Charming...  
He was in the aluminum siding business.

#### **SCENE 4. PRINCE CHARMING**

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

That was my great love

that was my great love

that was my great love

I nursed the dream of it,

I rose and went to bed

thinking of it.

The great love

that my heart so yearned for



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How to explain,  
how to explain  
how to explain—this love?

BAD VIOLIN

Did you hear that knocking?

CELLO

That's the heart.

GOOD VIOLIN

Vadym was not like other men,—  
polite but a bit of a rebel.  
We walked around holding hands,  
and gazed at the stars.  
He whispered things about Cassiopeia  
into my ear.  
One time there were roses—  
he'd stolen them from someone's garden.  
A bold robbery done for me—  
that was completely mad!  
It was awesome.

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

I fine choice of a man  
I'd like to have one as my own boy-friend.

VIOLA

Takhir was a Gypsy, but  
he was different:

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good manners, attentive,  
and smart.  
He always paid for my  
train ticket,  
and wouldn't dream of  
tossing an empty cigarette  
pack on the ground.  
His family was good too:  
his Mum dealt in scrap metal  
and owned a mare.  
They'd never stolen a thing.

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

I fine choice of a man  
I'd like to have one as my own boy-friend.

BAD VIOLIN

Andryusha was twenty  
years my senior.  
A dental surgeon.  
I had such hopes  
that this would be  
a new life's prologue.

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

I fine choice of a man  
I'd like to have one as my own boy-friend.

BAD VIOLIN

Sure I did. I really did—

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want to change

my life!

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

That was my great love

that my heart so

yearned for.

How to explain,

how to explain

how to explain—all that?

CHORUS

*Oh-clay Oh-clay OK-lay OK-lay...*

BAD VIOLIN

We lived in the Krasnokutsk district,

in the village of Volodymyrivka—

you might know it.

Where the Natalyevsky park is

and the TB sanatorium...

We had a good time drinking...

*Pretends she has misspoken, laughs*

a good time *living*

together. We had

friends next door.

VIOLA

Gypsies are like other people,

just like other people,

but they have a big heart.

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Always help each other out  
if something comes up.  
They know how to have fun,  
how to throw a party:  
you're never bored in their com-pa-ny.

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

That was my great love!

**SCENE 5. THE CRIME.**

VIOLA

Shink-shink, slice—  
he owed money to other guys.  
He loved to gamble  
at the arcade. Sometimes  
he won,  
sometimes he lost.  
Owed lots to the Gypsies.  
Mother-in-law gave us everything:  
sold the mare,  
emptied the house,  
and we had nowhere to go.

GOOD VIOLIN

I came to see him  
where he lived in Lutygino, no?

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We met in a cafe,  
asked some friends  
to put us up – Vadym's Mum  
is schizophrenic, you see.  
It was about ten  
when off to his friends  
we went. Everyone drank:  
vodka for them,  
“Gorobyna” for me, *yo!*

VIOLA

We were supposed to go steal.  
Mother-in-law said  
the old people had goats,  
showed us where the house was.

I went to read their fortunes  
first, then at night the three of us came.  
Who knew the old people  
would be stupid enough  
to come out in the yard?

BAD VIOLIN

They were a bit drunk.  
More than just a bit.  
My Andryusha had been injured,  
he had a limp.

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I was in the kitchen  
chopping this thing,  
when I heard them fighting,  
the ruckus, the din!

GOOD VIOLIN

Rytka, I knew,  
had done time.  
Murder they said,  
it was a long stint.  
She picked a fight with Vadym,  
and then I see  
she's got a butterfly knife.

BAD VIOLIN

In I run with my knife!  
I drag the guy off my Andriy.  
His pal says, run for help –  
I dash into the street,  
and the guy's after me.

GOOD VIOLIN

When I saw that knife in Rytka's hand  
something clicked:  
  
I grabbed a bottle and hit her—*bam!*

*Mimes crashing the bottle on another person's head in slow motion.*

GOOD VIOLIN

Then Vadym picked up the knife then  
and things went a little bit mad.

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VIOLA

The old woman came out first.

Takhir hit her with an axe, *wham!*

GOOD VIOLIN

I sit there, paralysed.

Rita's down.

Her husband's up,  
he said something.

Vadym turned,  
hit him in the face.

The man was out cold.

On the floor.

I sit there, paralysed,  
and from the other room  
comes the owner of the house.

OLD VIOLIN

I'm running, and there's this  
dilapidated old building.

Valentin catches up,  
it's dark. I punch—  
don't know how many times.

GOOD VIOLIN

Vadym grabbed a screw-driver—  
bent it. He kept stabbing.

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I hid behind a wardrobe.  
He pulled me out, *ow!*  
made me take the screw-driver,  
says, hit him now.

He'd slashed the man's neck...  
Blood spurted in a fountain,  
over his jeans...

#### BAD VIOLIN

Behind me, everything's gone quiet.  
I turn around—he's on the ground.  
Needs first aid,  
but I don't have anything,  
do I? And he, you know,  
can't breathe...

#### GOOD VIOLIN

Three men down.  
Vadym takes my hand and says:  
“We are in it  
together now.”

#### ALL WOMEN TOGETHER

Now hit!  
So you won't go to the police,  
so you won't tell.  
So you too get implicated