

# Denis & Katya

A true-story amplified opera in two acts

Music by Philip Venables • Libretto by Ted Huffman  
Co-Creator/Translator: Ksenia Ravvina

PITTSBURGH OPERA  
E D U C A T I O N

## Study Guide to the Opera



### REAL TEENAGERS

Katya Vlasova and Denis Muravyov,  
15-year-olds in the rural Pskov  
region of Russia



### ARTISTS TELLING THE TEENAGERS' STORY

Baritone Theo Hoffman and Mezzo-soprano  
Siena Licht Miller in the 2019 Opera Philadelphia  
production of *Denis & Katya*

## What's so unique about the opera *Denis & Katya*?

On November 14, 2016, two Russian teenagers named Denis and Katya began broadcasting video of themselves through Periscope, an app used to livestream. The pair explained that they had run away, had hidden in a cabin, fought with Katya's relatives, and were now barricaded in the cabin and under threat by police and Special Forces. The teens' story became a brief internet sensation.

Denis and Katya's real-life story became *Denis & Katya*, a 2019 opera with contemporary media and staging effects. It's not the first opera to include teenage suicide, but we must avoid thinking "here we go again" because the work expresses unique and disturbing social media concerns. Examine each element of this haunting opera, and most are present in many other works. As Julia Bumke, a Philadelphia-based dramaturg, has written, "death shows up at every turn in opera stories—stabblings, suicides, and tuberculosis have run through libretti since the beginning." List some of the most often performed operas throughout the centuries, and **death is a common theme**: Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Puccini's *La bohème*, and even the early *Dido and Aeneas* by Purcell. **Suicides abound** in Verdi's *Il trovatore* and *Aida*, in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca*, and Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* (with doomed teenagers). Operas based on **real people and events** range from Handel's Baroque opera *Giulio Cesare* to John Adams' contemporary *The Death of Klinghoffer*. A multi-media work with amplification is no longer unusual. An opera sung in several languages (English and Russian), also doesn't surprise after Glass' 1983 *Akhmaten* and Puts' 2011 *Silent Night*. Even hearing a story from multiple perspectives is increasingly the norm.

What is unique about *Denis & Katya* are discomfiting thoughts that the teens who bought junk food with a stolen credit card could be **just like 15-year-olds that we know**, that habitual **live-streaming** could become so intoxicating that ending one's life in front of a world-wide audience might seem exciting, that social media platforms could turn an unfolding tragedy into **fan-crazed entertainment**. *Denis & Katya* is a modern tale of morality that prompts us to think about young people, their challenges, and how social media affects us all.

# Denis & Katya Concept

Duration c. 65 minutes without interval (not including the Countdown at beginning)

The opera follows the accounts of the true story of 15-year-old Russian teenagers Denis Muravyov and Katya Viasova. Their story was reported worldwide in November 2016 after they ran away from home together and hid in a family-owned hunting cabin in Strugi Krasnye. After a few days, the police surrounded the house, and the situation escalated and the pair died of gunshot wounds on November 16, 2016. Other circumstances of their death are unclear. They live-streamed on social media during the ordeal in the cabin, engaging with online viewers as they filmed while in the midst of a standoff with Russian Special Forces.

The text material for the opera comes from interviews with people who were adjacent to these events—namely the best friend of Denis, who was 17 years old when we spoke to him, and a journalist who visited the scene of the incident and wrote an extended piece about the tragedy for the Medusa newspaper in the days following. Other interviews with members of the community (Neighbour, Teenager, Teacher, Medic) have been fictionalized, based on verbatim sources such as press reports and a television talk show about the incident. Additionally, we include excerpts of text conversations that took place on WhatsApp Messenger between Ted Huffman and Philip Venables.

The opera cuts between these different 'talking heads' characters in quick succession, much like a television documentary that might reconstruct an event from a variety of eye-witness reports. The story is slowly pieced together from these talking heads, alongside the story of the making of the opera that unfolds in the WhatsApp conversations. Each character has their own particular mode of text setting between the two performers, and their own musical indicators. The cuts between characters are hard cuts, indicated in the opera with a loud beep, and a projected character name. The result is 112 micro-scenes, some as long as c.2 minutes, some as short as 5 seconds.

The conceit of the performance is that two performers are making a piece of spontaneous role-play theatre for the audience. This is theatre of the imagination; there is no fourth wall, and the stage setting should be a blank canvas. They perform all characters, but without a direct link between performer and character. Sometimes these micro-scenes are fragments of a larger whole—where this happens, the fragments are labelled A, B, C. There is fertile ground for experimenting with bold ways to articulate the cut-and-splice form of the piece.

In essence, this opera is about storytelling. It plays with the idea of storytelling, how we tell stories to each other, both in real life and on the internet. The six characters told their stories about this event, and the two performers are re-telling these stories to the audience.

Source: *Denis & Katya* score, published by Ricordi

## Opera Structure

The opera is in two parts, with the following structure:

### Part One

- Prologue (spoken)
- Section 1 (talking heads)
- Interlude 1 (spoken)
- Section 2 (talking heads)
- Interlude 2 (spoken)
- Section 3 (talking heads)
- Interlude 3 (audio video)

### Part Two

- Journalist and Friend
- Baroque song
- Epilogue



## Instrumentation

- Mezzo-soprano, amplified
- Baritone, amplified
- 4 Celli, amplified
- Pre-recorded Sound and Video material

## Characters

**Journalist** — sung by Mezzo-soprano, with supporting spoken text from Baritone

**Friend** — sung by Baritone, with supporting spoken text from Mezzo-soprano

**Teacher** — sung 'double-headed' in rhythmic unison by Mezzo-soprano and Baritone

**Neighbour** — sung by Mezzo-soprano, with live spoken translation / interpretation by Baritone

**Teenager** — sung by Baritone, with live spoken translation / interpretation by Mezzo-soprano

**Medic** — performed by both Mezzo-soprano and Baritone in alternating wordless singing (or humming) and spoken text



Photo copyright Monica de Alwis

## COMPOSER Philip Venables

<https://philipvenables.com>

Philip Venables is a British composer best known for his/their operatic and theatrical works with themes of sexuality, violence, and politics.

Born in Chester, England in 1979, Venables studied at Jesus College, Cambridge and the Royal Academy of Music, where he/they studied under Philip Cashian and was awarded the DipRAM diploma and the Manson Fellowship in Composition.

Venables' orchestral works include *Arc*, written for the BBC Philharmonic; *String Quartet* for the Duke Quartet at Wigmore Hall; *Hyaline*, for the London Symphony Orchestra; and *The Revenge of Miguel Cotto* for the London Sinfonietta. His/their operatic and vocal works include *In America et ego*, performed at the Bregenz Festival; *UNLEASHED*, for the Grimeborn Festival; and *Thalidomide* for the BBC Singers.

Venables wrote the 2016 operatic adaptation of *4.48 Psychosis* by Sarah Kane for the Royal Opera at the Lyric Hammersmith. Venables is the Doctoral Composer in Residence at the Royal Opera House and Guildhall School of Music and Drama. In 2016, he/they became an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music.

Venables identifies as queer and many of his/their works touch on LGBT culture. He/they is described as “one of the finest composers around” (*The Guardian*) and his/their work as “brutally effective” (*Times*), “original and intelligent in both form and content” (*Exeunt Magazine*). He/they lives in London and Berlin.



## LIBRETTIST Ted Huffman

<https://tedhuffman.com>

Ted Huffman is a writer and director for the stage. A New York native, Huffman studied Humanities at Yale University and apprenticed at San Francisco's Merola Opera Program.

He recently directed *L'incoronazione di Poppea* for the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, nominated for Best Production at the International Opera Awards 2022 and named in the *New York Times*' Best Classical Music Performances of 2022; the world premiere of Stefan Wirth's *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* for Opernhaus Zürich, winner of Opernwelt's Best World Premiere 2022; and the world premiere of Kris Defoort's *The Time of our Singing* for La Monnaie, winner of Best World Premiere in the International Opera Awards 2022.

This season, he will write and direct his third stage work with composer Philip Venables, an adaptation of Larry Mitchell's cult 1977 book, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*. *Faggots* is a co-production of Manchester International Festival (MIF), the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, Bregenz Festival, and Skirball Center (NYU). He will also direct a new production of *Roméo et Juliette* for Opernhaus Zürich (filmed for Arte).

*Denis & Katya* was co-commissioned and co-produced by Opera Philadelphia, Music Theatre Wales and Opéra National de Montpellier, with major support provided by the William Penn Foundation. *Denis & Katya* was winner of the Fedora Generali Prize for Opera 2019 and the winner of the Ivor Novello Award for Stage Works in 2020.



**Photo from the Periscope livestream platform:**  
Denis and Katya on November 14, 2016, in the summer home where they barricaded themselves away from family and police.

## APPS TO SHARE CONTENT SOCIALLY and INSTANTLY ONLINE



**Periscope** was an American live video streaming app that was acquired by Twitter before its launch in March 2015. The service was discontinued in 2021.



**BKOHTAKTE**

**VK** (short for *Vkontakte*, meaning *InContact*), the 16th most visited website in the world, is a social media service used mostly by Russian speakers.



**Discord**

**Discord** is a VoIP and instant messaging social platform for voice and video calls, texting, and media files.



**Facebook** is an online social media and social networking service ranked third worldwide among the most visited websites and used by almost 3 billion users monthly.



**Instagram** is a photo and video sharing social networking service that allows users to upload media, edit it, organize it, and share it publicly or privately.

**reddit**

**reddit** is an American social news aggregation, content rating, and discussion website. Registered users submit content, which is voted up or down by other members.



**Snapchat** is an American multimedia instant messaging app, which posts pictures and messages for a limited time.

**tumblr**

**tumblr** is a microblogging and social networking website that allows users to post multimedia to a short-form blog.

**twitch**

**Twitch** is an American video live streaming service that focuses on video games, esports competitions, music broadcasts, creative content, and "in real time" streams.



**Twitter** is an online social media and social networking service on which users post and reply publicly or privately texts, images, and videos known as "tweets".



**YouTube**

**YouTube** is a global online video sharing and social media platform owned by Google and the second most visited website (after Google Search). YouTube has more than 2.5 billion monthly users.



**WhatsApp** is an internationally available freeware, cross-platform, instant messaging, and voice-over-IP service that allows users to send text and voice messages, and share images and other content.

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### Two Teenagers in the News

excerpt from  
[Denis Muravyov & Katya Vlasova \(neocities.org\)](https://www.neocities.org/~muravyov/)

A brief Synopsis of the events:  
*Denis Muravyov and Katya Vlasova were a teenage Russian couple who on November 14th, 2016 began a siege with police which they live-streamed over Periscope, that ultimately ended in their suicides.*

## For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

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