I. Duo (Olga Knipper)

We met in 1898 at one of the Moscow Art Theatre’s early rehearsals of The Sea-Gull.

We actors were filled with immense excitement at this first meeting with Anton Pavlovich, the author beloved by us all.

How exhilarating it was to feel in that dark, empty theatre that he who was our ‘soul’ sat listening.

We did not know how to take his words— in jest or in earnest. He looked at us, sometimes with a smile, sometimes with the utmost gravity, pinching his beard, twirling his pince-nez by its cord.

(Anton Chekhov)

We met in 1898 at one of the Moscow Art Theatre’s early rehearsals of The Sea-Gull.

An actor asked me to discuss the character of the author in The Sea-Gull. I replied, “Why, he wears check trousers!”

Another actor wanted to know what one was to make of a certain role. I answered, “The best you can.”

Ah, but Olga Knipper, she was magnificent. Voice, dignity, earnestness – her acting was so good it brought a lump into my throat.

Had I stayed in Moscow, I should surely have asked her to marry me!

II. Solo (Olga)

On the 25th of May we were married.

From then on, we were constantly parting, Always seeing each other off, Always having to say ‘goodbye.’

Though his heart was drawn to Moscow, For his health we had to live in Yalta— His ‘warm Siberia,’ he called it.

Through his efforts and great love For everything the earth brings forth He transformed a wilderness into a Luxuriant, exquisite varied garden.

Still he always yearned to be in Moscow— To be near the theatre among actors, to talk, to joke, To be near life, to watch it, feel it, take part in it— Even so, he took a simple, wise and beautiful attitude To his bodily dissolution, saying it is because ‘God has put a bacillus into me.’

III. Solo (Anton)

It’s the devil who has put this bacillus into me and the love of art into you, Olga!

Yalta November 12th

We are having glorious weather for November, Although for the past few days it has been pouring down incessantly.

It is so damp that toads and frisky young crocodiles Are hopping about all over the garden. The performing fleas continue to serve the sacred cause of art. There is even an operetta at the theatre.

Oh, if only we could spend five years together, and Then let old age catch us; then we should really have Something to remember. But, what is the use of talking About it?

And though the weather here is magnificent for November, it would be far nicer in Moscow, In Moscow, driving in a sledge with you.

God bless you, my little German. I love you, but you Have known that for ages now.

I send you 1,013,212 kisses

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IV. Duo (Olga)

Chekhov as I knew him was the Chekhov of the last six years of his life—Slowly growing weaker in body but at The same time stronger in spirit, Stronger in mind.

The impression left by those six Years is one of anxiety, and of rushing From place to place—like a sea-gull, A sea-gull over the ocean, Not knowing where to alight: Endless trips between Moscow and Yalta; Dreams of traveling along northern Rivers, traveling to Sweden and Norway. And the Most cherished dream of all:

To travel through Italy which allured Him with its colors, its pulsing life, and Above all, its music and flowers.

VI. Solo (Olga)

Our first performance of *The Cherry Orchard* was A triumphant occasion, but there was a feeling of anxiety, A sense of something ominous in the air. I do not know.

*(Anton: When are you going to take me away?)*

Chekhov listened very gravely, very attentively to All the speeches read in his honor, but from time to time he Threw up his head and it seemed as though he were taking A bird’s-eye view of all that was going on, as though he Had no part in it, it was nothing to do with him . . .

*(Anton: When are you going to take me away?)*

. . . and characteristic lines appeared around his mouth, his Face lit up by a soft, twinkling smile. Still I could not escape The sense of something immense swooping down upon me. I Do not know.

VII. Duo (Olga)

We went instead to Badenweiler, a Health resort in the Black Forest. One night he woke up, and asked For the doctor to be fetched. The doctor came and ordered champagne. Chekhov sat up and said aloud to the Doctor:

*Ich Sterbe . . .*

Then he took the glass, turned to Me, and with his wonderful smile He said:

“`It’s been a long while since I Have drunk champagne.’”

Olga and Anton, 1901

A Few Words about A Few Words about Chekhov:

A Few Words about Chekhov is part of a trilogy of cycles commissioned by The Schubert Club, the other two being From the Diary of Virginia Woolf and The Andrée Expedition. The first cycle was for mezzo, the second for baritone, and this one for mezzo and baritone. I seem to prefer mezzos to sopranos and baritones to tenors: the leading roles in most of my operas are for either of these voice types. Without intending it, I now notice that all three cycles share certain characteristics: they are person-orientated and exhibit a seriousness of purpose not present in their other siblings, and all three conclude with the protagonist’s death. The greater weightiness of these cycles is a reflection of the commissioner they have in common and the specific audience that he has cultivated, perhaps the most discerning group of music lovers in this area.

—Dominick Argento, from Catalogue Raisonné As Memoir