

Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*:
Lyric scenes in three acts

- 1833 Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin's novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*, is published, Taruskin in NGDO IV calls it the "most beloved work of Russian fiction."
- 1877 The contralto Yelizaveta Lavrovskaya, a friend of Tchaikovsky, suggests that he set the story to music; this captures Tchaikovsky's fancy. The first scene he sets is the famous "Letter Scene," a self-contained passage of Pushkin's novel that is very familiar to educated Russians. Tchaikovsky convinces his friend Konstatin Shilovsky to collaborate with him on writing the libretto.
- 1878 Although the writing of the opera *Eugene Onegin* is interrupted by emotional turbulence (a brief and abortive marriage), Tchaikovsky completes the opera after 8 months.
- 1879 The premiere of *Eugene Onegin* is given by students of the Moscow conservatory at the Maliy Theatre, with Onegin sung by Pavel Khokhlov.
- 1881 The professional premiere is given at the Marinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, under conductor Enrico Bevignani.
- 1885 Tchaikovsky revises the third act of the opera to the version performed today.

Plot summary: Tatyana, a young country girl fond of books and daydreaming, falls in love with a rich young man, Eugene Onegin. She writes a passionate declaration of love to him, but he rejects her, saying that he is a free-roaming person who is uninterested in marriage. The years pass, and we next see Onegin at a party held in the mansion of a nobleman. He laments that his life of restless wandering has left him bereft of any meaningful connections. The Prince Gremin enters and introduces Onegin to his wife--none other than Tatyana, who has matured elegantly and now captures Onegin's heart. After the party, Onegin rushes to Tatyana and confesses his love. Tatyana, although she still loves Onegin, says she must remain faithful to her husband, leaving Onegin alone and in despair.

Assigned scene: Act I, Scene II

It is nighttime, and Tatyana and her nursemaid Filipyina are in Tatyana's bedroom. Previously, Tatyana has met Onegin and his friend Lensky and recognized the former as "the 'somebody' for whom her soul had been waiting" (Taruskin, NGDO IV). Tatyana, restless, asks Filipyevna to talk of her own courtship and marriage, but the old-fashioned story Filipyevna relates does not strike a chord with the lovesick Tatyana. She calls for letter-writing materials, sends the nursemaid away, and begins composing a letter to Onegin, confessing her love in a ~12-minute-long aria--"The Letter Scene." The scene is a series of romances linked by highly expressive accompanied recitatives:

1. "Even if it means I perish": Allegro non troppo, D-flat major, da capo form.
2. "I write to you": Moderato assai quasi Andante, D minor, strophic.
3. "No there is no one else on earth to whom I'd give my heart": Moderato, C major, da capo.

4. "Who art thou--my gaurdian angel?": Andante, D-flat major, da capo.

The dawn breaks, and a shepherd's song on oboe is heard (an undocumented Russian folk tune). Filipyevna returns to wake Tatyana up and is surprised to find her already awake. Tatyana sends her nanny off with the letter to Onegin. (Synopsis adapted from Taruskin, NGDO IV)

Commentary from readings:

The characters:

"All of these characters are real and complex people, not the larger-than-life figures we see in many operas. Tosca, Lucia, Don Giovanni, and Hoffmann, for all their fascination, are not people we think of as being like us. But the awkwardness of young love, with its uncomfortable combination of exciting discoveries and broken dreams, is something all of us can identify with...we are touched because we can feel the aching that the characters feel." -Plotkin, *Opera 101*

With regards to the fact that many Pushkin fans dislike the opera:

"Pushkin's novel was loved for the telling, not the tale...its divine details: the verbal dazzle, the wry social commentary... What Tchaikovsky shortly perceived--and what critics (not audiences) have failed to perceive for over a century--was that music of a sort he was uniquely inclined and equipped to write could perform exactly those functions for which Pushkin's narrative voice was prized." -Taruskin, NGDO IV

On Tchaikovsky's personal turmoil while he wrote the opera:

"...There is a special poignancy when the tragic events in the life of a composer parallel those of an opera he has created. We cannot help wondering how much of his own life and feelings he brought to a role. Did his sufferings make for greater art?" -Plotkin, *Opera 101*

"Tchaikovsky identified less with Onegin than with Lensky and Tatyana, the heroine of the opera...Tchaikovsky felt strongly about both characters and their longings." -Plotkin, *Opera 101*

Our DVD: "From the Festspielhaus, Baden-Baden, EU Opera Production"

Conductor: Gennadi Rozhdestvensky

Stage director: Nikolaus Lehnhoff

Tatyana (soprano): Orla Boylan

Eugene Onegin (baritone): Vladimir Glushchak

Lensky (tenor): Michael Konig

Filipyevna (mezzo-soprano): Katja Boos

Comments: Orla Boylan sings and acts the part of a young Tatyana well, capturing the character's passionate and genuine personality. The set is elegant and minimal in places, fitting with the poetic music and libretto.