

“EUGENE ONEGIN” IN BRIEF

HERE IS THE BRIEFEST POSSIBLE PLOT SUMMARY OF “EUGENE ONEGIN,” FROM “THE METROPOLITAN OPERA ENCYCLOPEDIA,” EDITED BY DAVID HAMILTON (Simon & Schuster/Metropolitan Opera Guild ©1987):

A country estate and St. Petersburg, 19thC. The impressionable Tatiana (s) falls in love at first meeting with the blasé young aristocrat Eugene Onegin (bar), and writes him an impassioned letter. When he tells her that he can offer her only friendship, she is distraught. At a ball, Onegin flirts with Tatiana’s sister Olga (ms), engaged to his best friend the poet Lenski (ten). The enraged Lenski challenges Onegin to a duel and is killed. Some years later at a party, Onegin, disillusioned with his empty life, encounters Tatiana, now married to Prince Gremin (bs). Onegin begs her to abandon her husband and become his lover after all, but she rejects him.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I

Scene 1: The garden of Madame Larina’s country estate

Scene 2: Tatiana’s room

Scene 3: Another part of the garden

INTERMISSION

ACT II

Scene 1: The main room of the Larina house

Scene 2: The open country, in the early morning

ACT III

Scene 1: The Gremin Palace in St. Petersburg

Scene 2: A room in the Gremin Palace the next day

SYNOPSIS OF THE PLOT

ACT I

Scene 1: The widowed Madame Larina and her servant Filipyevna listen as the Larin daughters, Olga and Tatiana, sing. The peasants come from the fields celebrating the completion of the harvest with songs and dances. Olga teases Tatiana for avoiding the festivities; pensive Tatiana prefers her romance novels. When the peasants leave, Olga’s suitor, the poet Lenski, arrives with his worldly friend Eugene Onegin. Lenski pours out his love for Olga. Onegin strolls with Tatiana and asks how she doesn’t get bored with country life. Unnerved by the handsome stranger, Tatiana answers with difficulty. The two couples go inside for dinner as night falls.

Scene 2: In her bedroom, Tatiana persuades the reluctant Filipyevna to tell her of her first love and marriage. Tatiana admits she is in love and asks to be left alone. She sits up the entire night writing a passionate letter to Onegin. When day breaks, she gives the letter to Filipyevna for her grandson to deliver.

Scene 3: A group of women sing as they work in the Larins’ garden. They leave, and Tatiana appears, nervous, followed by Onegin. He asks that she hear him out patiently. He admits that the letter was touching, but adds that he would quickly grow bored with marriage and can only offer her friendship. He coldly advises more emotional control in the future, lest another man take advantage of her innocence.

INTERMISSION

ACT II

Scene 1: Some months later, a party is underway in the Larins’ house for Tatiana’s name day. Young couples dance while older guests comment and gossip. Onegin dances with Tatiana but he is bored by these country people and their provincial ways. Annoyed with Lenski for having dragged him there, Onegin dances with Olga, who is momentarily distracted by the charming man. Monsieur Triquet, the elderly French tutor, serenades Tatiana with a song he has written in her honor. When the dancing resumes, Lenski jealously confronts Onegin. Madame Larina begs the men not to quarrel in her house, but Lenski cannot be placated and Onegin accepts his challenge to a duel.

Scene 2: Lenski waits for Onegin at the appointed spot at dawn. Lenski reflects on the folly of his brief life and imagines Olga visiting his grave. Onegin finally arrives. He and Lenski admit to themselves that the duel is pointless and they would prefer to laugh together rather than fight, but honor must be satisfied. The duel is marked off and Onegin shoots Lenski dead.

ACT III

Scene 1: Several years later, a magnificent ball is being given in the Gremin Palace in St. Petersburg. Onegin appears, reflecting bitterly on the fact that he has traveled the world seeking excitement and some meaning in life, and all his efforts have led him to yet another dull social event. Suddenly he recognizes Tatiana across the ballroom. She is no longer a naive country girl but is sumptuously gowned and bearing herself with great dignity. Questioning his cousin, Prince Gremin, he learns that Tatiana is now Gremin's wife. The older man explains that he married Tatiana two years previously and describes Tatiana as his life's salvation. When Gremin introduces Onegin, Tatiana maintains her composure but excuses herself after a few words of polite conversation. Onegin is surprised to realize he himself is in love with Tatiana.

Scene 2: The next day Tatiana is distressed when she receives an impassioned letter from Onegin. He rushes in and falls at her feet, but she maintains her control. Does he desire her only for her wealth and position? She recalls the days when they might have been happy, but that time has passed. Onegin repeats his love for her. Faltering for a moment, she admits that she still loves him, but she will not allow him to ruin her. She leaves him, and he regrets his bitter destiny.

Courtesy of OPERA NEWS

NOTES ON "EUGENE ONEGIN"

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Eugene Onegin, Opera in three acts, based on the verse novel
by Alexander Pushkin

First performance: March 29, 1879, in a student production by the Moscow Conservatory at the Maly Theatre, Moscow, Nikolai Rubinstein cond., with Maria Klimentova-Muromtseva (Tatiana), Mikhail Medvedev (Lenski), and Sergey Giloyov (Onegin). *First professional performance*: January 23, 1881, Bolshoi Theater, Moscow, Enrico Bevilacqua cond., with Augusta Verni (Tatiana), Dimitri Usatov (Lenski), and Pavel Khokhlov (Onegin). *First United States performance (concert performance, sung in English)*: February 1, 1908, Carnegie Hall, New York, Walter Damrosch cond. *Only previous Tanglewood performance of the complete opera (concert performance)*: August 17, 1974, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Seiji Ozawa cond., with Judith Beckmann (Tatiana), Stuart Burrows (Lenski), and Richard Stilwell (Onegin). Ozawa subsequently led the BSO in concert performances in Boston and New York in October 1976, with Galina Vishnevskaya, Nicolai Gedda, and Benjamin Luxon. *Most recent Tanglewood performances of music from "Eugene Onegin"*: August 1, 1993, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Seiji Ozawa cond., Galina Gorchakova, soprano, Sergei Leiferkus, baritone (Final scene of the opera); July 15, 1994, BSO, Mariss Jansons cond. (Polonaise from Act III).

"Sometimes it seems to me that Providence, so blind and unjust in the choice of its protégés, has deigned to care for me," Tchaikovsky confessed to his brother Modest on May 23, 1877. "Really, I begin at times to perceive in certain coincidences of circumstances not mere chance." By this, Tchaikovsky was referring to the fact that as soon as he resolved to marry in order to stem gossip concerning his homosexuality, a certain young woman appeared in his life. It so happened that at the end of March 1877, a former Conservatory student, Antonina Milyukova, whom Tchaikovsky had met briefly five years earlier, sent the composer a written declaration of her love for him. Both Antonina and Tchaikovsky testify that they "began a correspondence," in result of which he received her offer "of hand and heart" by early May.

By an irony of fate, a further coincidence was a catalyst in the unfolding drama. About two weeks later during an evening party at the home of Elizaveta Lavrovskaya, a singer with the Bolshoi Theater, the conversation turned to possible subjects on which Tchaikovsky might base an opera. The hostess suddenly suggested Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*, which the composer at first thought an absurd idea. But the more he considered it, the more intrigued he became. "I rushed off to look for [a volume of] Pushkin," he wrote to Modest a few days later, "and finding one with difficulty, I went home,

reread it enraptured, and spent an absolutely sleepless night, the result of which has been the scenario of a charming opera based on Pushkin's text."

Tchaikovsky's growing concern with Antonina must have certainly affected his involvement with Pushkin's text, even though the composer used to claim that it was the other way around. In later years and with an eye to posterity, Tchaikovsky insisted that the main reason for their rapid intimacy and marriage was his fascination with the plot of Pushkin's novel and his sympathy for its heroine, as if he sought to avoid emulating its male protagonist by cruelly rejecting a young woman in love. Tchaikovsky probably himself initiated their personal meeting. It is, however, unlikely that he acted under the threat of suicide that is found in one of Antonina's letters to him, since in that letter's context it strikes one as nothing more than a device in the tradition of sentimental models from so-called "letter books," popular at the time and containing samples of fictional correspondence for all occasions. Their first encounter occurred on May 20 in Moscow, and at the next such occasion, three days later, Tchaikovsky made a formal proposal, promising his bride only his "brotherly" love, to which she readily acquiesced.

About the same time, Tchaikovsky suggested to his friend, actor Konstantin Shilovsky, that they should collaborate on the libretto for his *Onegin* opera. The resulting text utilized much of Pushkin's original verse, especially direct and indirect speech, but also included a considerable amount of new text, which is to be expected in the dramatic adaptation of a largely narrative work. Shilovsky's contribution in compiling the libretto remains unclear and he later asked that his name be omitted from its printed text. In 1885 he even declared that, although he originally wrote the libretto, he did not wish to claim it as his work because of the changes made by Tchaikovsky.

After Tchaikovsky's engagement to Antonina on May 23 and upon the end of classes at the Conservatory, Tchaikovsky proceeded to Shilovsky's estate near Moscow, where he fully immersed himself in the creation of the opera. Not surprisingly, given his recent experiences, his special preoccupation became the scene in which Tatiana writes a letter to Onegin confessing her love. The composer shared his excitement about his current project with his future benefactress, Nadezhda von Meck, in a letter dated May 27: "The opera will have no strong dramatic action, but the portrayal of everyday life will be interesting, and how full of poetry it all is! The scene between Tatiana and her nurse is marvelous! If only I can attain that calm state of mind essential for composition, I am sure that Pushkin's text will be an absolute inspiration to me." A week later, writing to his brother Modest, he voiced the same concerns and the same enthusiasm: "Maybe there will be little action, but I'm in love with the image of Tatiana. I'm enchanted by Pushkin's verses and I'm setting them to music because I'm being drawn to do this....I've already written all of the second scene of Act I (Tatiana with her nurse), and I'm very satisfied how it turned out. The greater part of the first scene is also already written." Before the end of June he had composed all three scenes of the first act and completed nearly two-thirds of the entire work.

Tchaikovsky's marriage to Antonina Milyukova took place on July 6, 1877, temporarily disrupting his work on the opera. From the very beginning of his married life, the composer took a painful view of his new predicament. Soon he realized that he had made a grievous mistake: he found himself unable to accept the personality and character of his wife, as well as her family and her circle of friends. After twenty days of cohabitation they still had not consummated their marriage. It remains uncertain whether Tchaikovsky had avoided revealing his homosexuality to his wife at the outset, or whether she simply disregarded his admission of it. On July 27 the composer left Antonina for one-and-a-half months, staying with his sister at her estate in the Ukraine, where he continued to work on the opera. After his return to Moscow in September, Tchaikovsky spent only twelve days with his wife before leaving her for good. He went abroad for a long period of time under the pretext of a nervous breakdown that, according to archival documents, was fabricated in order to win over some sympathy from his colleagues and the general public. There hardly remains any doubt that his psychosexual problems coupled with emotional incompatibility between himself and his wife (as he insisted in his correspondence) proved the ultimate cause of this matrimonial fiasco.

Tchaikovsky went first to Switzerland, where he settled and resumed scoring the music for Act I of *Onegin*, which he completed within three days. During his Italian stay, in January of 1878 in Venice and San Remo, the entire work was finished and fully scored. The composition of the opera *Eugene Onegin* undoubtedly constituted Tchaikovsky's most profound creative engagement. "If ever music was written with sincere passion," he wrote to fellow composer Sergey Taneyev in January of 1878, "with love for the story and the characters in it, it is the music for *Onegin*. I trembled and melted with inexpressible delight while writing it.

If the listener feels even the smallest part of what I experienced when I was composing this opera, I shall be utterly content and ask for nothing more.”

From the very beginning, Tchaikovsky saw this work as fundamentally different in form from most contemporary operas; he even called it “Lyrical Scenes,” thus narrowing the scope of Pushkin’s original novel in verse. Although the opera preserves the substance of Pushkin’s design, the composer came up with several changes in the plot, particularly in the opera’s last scene, the climactic meeting between Onegin and Tatiana. In Tchaikovsky’s first version, Tatiana, while trying to resist Onegin’s entreaties, finally falls into his arms only to be discovered by her husband, Prince Gremin, who, as Tatiana begins to faint, signals Onegin to withdraw. Onegin was supposed to rush out with the cry: “Oh death, Oh death! I go to seek thee out!” In 1880, however, during the preparation for the opera’s professional premiere at the Bolshoi, Tchaikovsky changed Tatiana’s text and the final stage directions, while leaving the music unaltered. The composer also found it necessary to alter the final lines of the opera, this time making Onegin leave the scene with the words: “Disgrace! Anguish! How pitiable is my fate!”

Tchaikovsky’s treatment of the three main protagonists markedly differs from Pushkin’s occasional condescension toward Tatiana, ironic portrayal of Lenski, and highbrow sympathy for Onegin—attitudes characteristic of Russian society in the 1830s. For Tchaikovsky, a man of the 1870s, Tatiana turned into a symbol of unfulfilled love and a heroine as vulnerable as a Juliet, whose innocence is shattered before the audience’s very eyes. Lenski the poet became the epitome of creative talent with whom the composer, to a certain extent, must have identified. The operatic Onegin cuts a disagreeable figure: he responds nastily to a young woman in love with him, behaves rudely at the ball, wantonly kills his best friend in a duel, and wanders around without any purpose until his final meeting with Tatiana, when he is finally forced to recognize the drama of life. Tchaikovsky conveys this particular perspective on the characters and their relationships through the musical material—melodic and rhythmic patterns of harmony, tonality, and even texture. He described his understanding of the essential dramatic content of Pushkin’s novel in terms of Onegin’s unforgivable crime, pointing out “that a bored society lion, out of boredom, out of petty irritation, against his will, as the result of a fateful coincidence of circumstances, takes the life of a young man whom, in essence, he loves!” The conclusion of the opera, dominated by the musical material that is associated with Lenski, makes the ghost of the poet a very tangible presence.

Eugene Onegin is Tchaikovsky’s fifth opera and the first based on the writings of Alexander Pushkin. In 1881 and 1890 he again used Pushkin’s poetry and prose for the libretto of the operas *Mazeppa* and *The Queen of Spades*. The premiere of *Eugene Onegin*, on March 29, 1879, in a student production by the Moscow Conservatory at the Maly Theatre, seemed to have been received enthusiastically, especially by students, but its reception proved much cooler among the public and the critics, who were not appreciative of student singers with little experience and were bewildered by the very choice of Pushkin’s masterful “society novel.” The first professional performance, at the Bolshoi Theater on January 23, 1881, yielded more favorable reviews. But the real rise of *Onegin* began on October 19, 1884, with a performance at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg under the baton of Eduard Nápravník. It took a while for *Eugene Onegin* to appear in Western European opera houses, but in the end it was splendidly performed—both times in Tchaikovsky’s presence—first on December 6, 1888, in Prague, and next on January 16, 1892, in Hamburg under the baton of Gustav Mahler.