

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Tatiana's Letter Scene from "Eugene Onegin"

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY was born at Kamsko-Votkinsk, Vyatka Province, Russia, on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg on November 6, 1893. He composed his opera "Eugene Onegin" between May 1877 and February 1878; the first performance was on March 29, 1879, in a student production by the Moscow Conservatory at the Maly Theater, Moscow, with Nikolai Rubinstein conducting (the Tatiana was Maria Klimentova-Muromtseva). The first professional performance took place on January 23, 1881, at the Bolshoi Theater, Moscow, with Enrico Bevnigani conducting (the Tatiana was Augusta Verni).

THE SCORE OF THE OPERA calls for an orchestra of three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, bass trombone, timpani, and strings.

Opera audiences are often surprised by the character of Tatiana Larina in Tchaikovsky's late romantic masterpiece *Eugene Onegin*. After a steady diet of doomed and helpless heroines like Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto* or Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, sensible and assertive Tatiana comes as a bracing change—like lemon after too much chocolate.

For Tchaikovsky, too, Tatiana Larina, the immortal creation of Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) in his Byronic novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*, was a special spirit. Initially a provincial dreamer hungry for the sentimental passions found in her favorite novels, Tatiana matures from an awkward teenager into a sophisticated and self-confident woman, the worthy consort of Prince Gremin, a war hero decorated in Russia's momentous victory over Napoleon. Tchaikovsky (who wrote the libretto along with Konstantin Shilovsky) described Tatiana as "a young and virginal being, untouched as yet by the realities of life, a creature of pure feminine beauty, a dreamy nature, ever seeking some vague ideal, and striving passionately to grasp it." Although the composer titled his opera after the name of its diffident and manipulative anti-hero Eugene Onegin, it is the radiant and completely believable Tatiana who occupies the emotional, dramatic, and musical center. Tchaikovsky even confided to his brother Modest that he had "fallen in love with the image of Tatiana." Aware that there was little plot in the piece (girl falls in love with boy and is rejected, same boy later falls in love with same girl and is rejected), Tchaikovsky called his opera "lyrical scenes in three acts."

Tchaikovsky's attraction to Tatiana—and his almost total inability to empathize with Onegin—led him to alter fundamentally the tone of Pushkin's celebrated novel (set in the early 1820s and first published in 1833). The opera replaces Pushkin's dry irony and parody—which pokes fun at everything and everyone, including Tatiana and her naiveté—with a lush, serious sentimentality. The novel's vinegar is turned into honey. The spirit of the resulting opera is as remote from Pushkin as *La bohème* is from *Così fan tutte*. In Tchaikovsky's defense, however, it's only fair to note that he was hardly the first Russian creative artist to be seduced by the character of Tatiana Larina. Generations of writers (including both Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy) have rhapsodized on her significance as an embodiment of the virtues of steadfast, uncorrupted Russian womanhood.

Tchaikovsky's music for *Eugene Onegin* is wonderfully varied and accomplished. It features charming genre set-pieces (the opening pastoral duet between Tatiana and her sister Olga; the nameday tribute sung in French by Tatiana's tutor Monsieur Triquet), cheerful folk choruses (the peasant chorus in the first scene), grand ballroom scenes (the waltz and mazurka in the first scene of Act II; the majestic polonaise that opens Act III), brilliant conventional arias that have become standard recital items (Lensky's pre-duel lament in Act II, scene 2; Gremin's aria in Act III), and ensembles.

But what distinguishes the score and makes it one of the great accomplishments of 19th-century opera is its psychological penetration, conveyed through a masterful unity of vocal and symphonic elements. In *Eugene Onegin*, the orchestra never merely accompanies the singers; it shapes and propels the drama and the development of the characters. By the time Tchaikovsky came to write the opera, he was already an experienced symphonic composer, having completed three symphonies, the First Piano Concerto, and the "fantasy-overture" *Romeo and Juliet*. Simultaneously with *Eugene Onegin*, he was composing the programmatic Fourth Symphony (with its innovative unifying "fate" fanfare-motif), a work that showed new command of formal structure and musical narrative accomplished by purely symphonic means.

In the symphonic and vocal texture, too, it is Tatiana who dominates. The opera's musical and emotional heart beats in her "Letter Scene" of Act I, scene 2, when, smitten by her first meeting with the dashing Onegin, she stays up all night to pour out her adolescent feelings of what she believes is love. In his novel, Pushkin gently mocks her passion. His jaded narrator even jokes that she had to write the letter in French because her Russian was so poor

owing to her aristocratic Francophile education. But—using much of Pushkin’s incomparable poetry—Tchaikovsky turns Tatiana’s slight two-page letter into one of the greatest confessional scenes ever composed.

In the opera’s brief orchestral prelude, the woodwinds prefigure the two basic themes of the Letter Scene, a falling and rising scale. Because of the free arioso-style musical structure (which repeatedly stops and starts, reflecting Tatiana’s indecision and confusion), the fifteen-minute scene itself is not exactly an aria, and requires as much dramatically of the soprano as it does vocally. Throughout the rest of the opera, fragments of the motifs of the Letter Scene continue to reappear in subtly transformed guise, associated with Tatiana and her thwarted passion for Onegin.

Tchaikovsky’s most brilliant musical and dramatic stroke, however, comes near the opera’s very end. Returned from his pointless travels, Onegin reencounters the now-stately Tatiana at a glittering high-society St. Petersburg ball. Stunned by her beauty and poise, he decides he must have her—even after her husband, the venerable Prince Gremin, tells Onegin (in an aria much beloved of basses) how much he adores her and how happy they are together. As Tatiana walks away on Gremin’s arm, Onegin launches into a declaration of love—and here Tchaikovsky puts into Onegin’s mouth the very same music and text with which Tatiana opens her nocturnal Letter Scene. “Let me perish (*Puskai pogibnu ya*), but first let me summon in dazzling hope the magic poison of desire,” he sings in desperation and loneliness. “Wherever I look, I see her!” he continues, recalling the words Tatiana had sung in adolescent naiveté, “Wherever I look, I see him!”

But it is too late. Onegin, unable to accept mature responsibilities, is stuck in the past, trying to sing Tatiana’s tune. She has moved on to other music.

Harlow Robinson

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE of “Eugene Onegin” (a concert performance sung in English) took place on February 1, 1908, at Carnegie Hall in New York, with Walter Damrosch conducting.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA PERFORMANCES of music from “Eugene Onegin” were of Tatiana’s Letter Scene, in February 1937 with Serge Koussevitzky and soprano Olga Averino, later BSO performances being given by Koussevitzky with Marina Koshetz (January 1948), Erich Leinsdorf with Jane Marsh (at Tanglewood in July 1966), Mstislav Rostropovich with Galina Vishnevskaya (August 1975), and John Fiore with Mirella Freni (February 1990, as part of an “opera gala” also featuring tenor Peter Dvorsky), as well as in concert performances of the complete opera led by Seiji Ozawa in August 1974 at Tanglewood (with Judith Beckmann as Tatiana) and October 1976 in Symphony Hall and New York’s Carnegie Hall (with Galina Vishnevskaya as Tatiana). More recently, Renée Fleming sang Tatiana in a complete concert performance of “Eugene Onegin” led by Sir Andrew Davis with the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra at Tanglewood this past summer, on August 2, 2008.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY **Tatiana’s Letter Scene from “Eugene Onegin”**

TATIANA

Puskai pogibnu ya, no pryvezhde
Ya v oslepitelnoi nadyezhde
Blazhenstvo tyomnoye zovu,
Ya nyegu zhizni uznayu!
Ya pyu volshebni yad zhelani!
Menya preslyedyuyut mechti!
Vezdye, vezdye peredo mnoi
Partes moi iskusitel rokovoii!
Vezdye, vezdye, on predno mnoyu!

May I perish, but first
I will call upon some mysterious bliss
in the radiant hope
that I shall know all life’s joys!
I drink the magic poison of desire,
I am pursued by dreams:
Everywhere my fatal tempter
appears before me,
always, always, he is before me!

(She writes quickly, but immediately tears up what she has written.)

Nyet, vsyo ne to! Nachnu snachala!...

No, that’s not it! I’ll start over again...

(She reflects, then writes again.)

Akh, shto so mnoi, ya vsya goryu...
Ne znayu, kak nachat!

Ah, what's wrong? I'm on fire!
I don't know how to begin...

(She writes. She stops and reads through what she has written.)

“Ya k vam pishu... chevo zhe bole?
Shto ya mogu yeshcho skazat’?
Tepyer ya znayu, v vashei vole
Menya prezryenyem nakazat’!
No vi, k moyei neschastnoi dole
Khot’ kaplyu zhalosti khranya,
Vi ne ostavite menya.
Snachala ya molchat’ khotyela;
Povyerte, moyevo stida
Vi ne uznali b nikogda,
Nikogda!”
O da, klyalas’ ya sokhranit’ v dushe
Priznanye v strasti pilkoi i bezumnoi!
Uvi! Ne v silakh ya vldayet’ svoyei dushoi!
Pust budet to, shto bit dolzhno so mnoi!
Yemu priznayus ya! Smelyei! On vsyo uznayet!

“I write to you—what else can I say?
What more can I explain?
I know you have the power
to punish me with your scorn.
But you will not desert me
and you will find a little pity
for me in my unhappiness!
At first I wanted to remain silent.
Believe me: my shame
would have remained unknown to you forever,
forever!”
Oh yes, I had sworn to keep my ardent passion
a secret locked within my heart.
But I can no longer subdue my heart!
Let fate take its course,
I'll confess to him! Courage! Let him know everything!

(She continues to write.)

“Zachem, zachem vi posetili nas?
V glushi zabitovo selyenya
Ya b nikogda ne znala vas,
Ne znala b gorkovo muchenya.
Dushi neopitnoi volnyenya
Smiriv so el vryemenem (kak znat’?)
Po syerdtsu ya nashla bi druga,
Bila bi vyernaya supruga
I dobrodyetel’ naya mat’...”

“Why, oh why did you visit us?
In this remote country district
I should never have met you,
I'd never have known these heartaches.
Time would have soothed the emotions
of the guileless heart and (who knows)
I might have met someone to my liking,
have become a faithful wife
and virtuous mother...”

(She sinks into meditation. Suddenly she recovers.)

Drugoi! Nyet, nikomu na svyete
Ne otola bi syerdtsa ya!
To v vishnem suzhdeno sovyete,
to volya nyeba: ya tvoya!
Vsya zhizn’ moya bila zalagom
Svidan’ya vyernovo s toboi;
Ya znayu, ti mnye poslan bogom
Do groba ti khranitel’ moi!
Ti v snovidyen’yakh mnye yavlyalsa,
Nezrimi, ti uzhd bil mnye mil,
Tvoi chudni vzglyad menya tomil,
V dushe tvoi golos razdavalsa.
Davno... Nyet eto bil ne son!
Ti chut’ voshol, ya vmig uznala,
Vsya obomlyela, zapilala,
I v mislyakh molvila: vot on!
Vot on!

Another!—No, I could not give my
heart to anyone else!
This has been decreed from above,
Heaven has willed it: I am yours!
My whole life has been pledged
to this true meeting with you!
I know that God has sent you to me,
you are my guardian 'til the grave!
I saw you in my dreams,
and yet unknown, I loved you!
I pined for your wonderful glance!
My soul has listened to your voice
for years... No, this was no dream!
The moment you entered, I knew you.
I swooned, I took fire,
and I said to myself: It is he!
It is he!

Ne pravda l', ya tebya slichala:
Ti govoril so mnoi v tishi,
Kogda ya byednim pomogala,
Ili molitvoi uslazhdala
Tosku dushi?
I v eto samoye mgnovenye
Ne ti li, miloye vidyenyey
V prozrachnoi temnotye melknul,
Priniknuv tikhoo k izgolovyyu
Ne ti l', s otradoi i y lyubovyyu
Slova nadyezhdi mnye shepnul?

Was it not your voice that I heard
when you spoke to me in the silence,
when I helped the poor,
or soothed my soul
with prayers?
And at this moment,
was it not the dear vision of you
that flashed through the transparent gloom,
quietly nestling up to my bedside,
and with love and happiness
whispered words of hope to me?

(She approaches the table and again sits down to write. She stops writing and muses thus.)

“Kto ti, moi angel li khranitel'
Ili kovarni iskusitel'
Moyi somnyenya razreshi.
Bit mozhet, eto vsyo pustoye,
Obman neopitnoi dushi,
I suzhdeno sovsyem inoye?”

“Who are you, my guardian angel
or an evil tempter?
Disperse my doubts.
Perhaps this is all a vain dream,
the deception of an innocent heart,
and mine is to be a different fate?”

(Again she rises and walks about, musing.)

No tak i bit'! Sudbu moyu
Otnine ya tebye vruchayu,
Pered toboyu slyozi lyu,
Tvoyei zashchiti umolyayu,
Umolyayu!
Vooobrazi: ya zdyes odna!
Nikto menya ne ponimayet!
Rassudok moi iznemogayet,
I molcha gibnut' ya dolzhna!
Ya zhdu tebya,
Ya zhdu tebya! Yedinim slovom
Nadyezhdi serdtsa ozhivi,
Il' son tyazholi perervi,
Uvi, zasluzhennim ukorom!

Then so be it! My fate
I confide into your hands,
and in tears before you
I plead for your protection,
I beg you for it!
Imagine: I am alone here!
No one understands me!
I'm too exhausted to think,
and I must perish in silence!
I wait for you,
I wait for you! With one word
you can revive my hopes,
or shatter this dream
with well-merited scorn!

(Suddenly she goes to the table and quickly finishes the letter.)

Konchayu! Strashno perechest',
Stidom i strakhom zamirayu,
No mnye porukoi chest' evo,
I smyelo yei sebya vverayu!

I must end...I dare not read it through...
I could die for shame and fear...
but your honor is my safeguard,
and fearlessly I put my trust in it!