



TCHAIKOVSKY AND *EUGENE ONEGIN*

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Tchaikovsky and *Eugene Onegin*

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On 18 May 1877¹ Petr Il’ich Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Modest Il’ich:

Last week I happened to be at Mme Lavrovsky’s. There was talk about suitable subjects for opera. Her stupid husband talked the most incredible nonsense, and suggested the most impossible subjects. Elizaveta Andreevna smiled amiably and did not say a word. Suddenly she said, ‘What about *Eugene Onegin*?’² It seemed a wild idea to me, and I said nothing. Then when I supped alone in a tavern [59] I remembered *Onegin*, thought about it, and began to find her idea not impossible; then it gripped me, and before I had finished my meal I had come to a decision. I hurried off at once to find Pushkin, found one with some difficulty, went home, re-read it with enthusiasm, and spent an entirely sleepless night, the result of which was the scenario of an enchanting opera on Pushkin’s text. Next day I went to see Shilovsky³ and he is now working furiously on my scenario.

Tchaikovsky goes on to sketch the scenario:

Here it is in brief: Act 1, Scene 1: The curtain rises on old Larina and the nurse: they remember the old days and make jam. Duet of the old women. Singing heard from the house. Tatiana and Olga sing a duet accompanied by a harp on a text by Zhukovsky. Peasants appear bearing the last sheaf: they sing

¹ Dates are given according to the pre-Revolutionary Julian calendar: for the Gregorian dates used in the West add 12 days.

² The correct phonetic rendering is ‘Yevgyéni Anyégin’. But *Eugene Onegin* is the ordinary English title of both the poem and the opera, and will be used hereafter.

³ Konstantin Stepanovich Shilovsky (1849–93), a minor poet, justly forgotten.

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and dance. Suddenly the servant boy announces "Guests!" Panic. Enter Onegin and Lensky. Ceremony of their introduction and hospitality (cranberry juice). Evgeny talks about his impressions to Lensky, the women to each other: quintet à la Mozart. Old woman goes off to prepare supper. The young stay behind and walk off in pairs; they pair off (as in *Faust*). Tatiana is at first shy, then falls in love. Scene 2: Scene with the nurse and Tatiana's letter. Scene 3: Onegin and Tatiana. Act 2, Scene 1: Tatiana's birthday. Ball. Lensky's jealous scene. He insults Onegin and challenges him to a duel. General horror. Scene 2: Lensky's aria before his death, duel (pistols). Act 3, Scene 1: Moscow. Ball at the Assembly. Tatiana meets rows of aunts and cousins. They sing a chorus. Appearance of the General. He falls in love with Tatiana. She tells him her story and agrees to marry him. Scene 2: Petersburg. Tatiana is waiting for Onegin. He appears. Enormous duet. Tatiana, after the explanation, yields to a feeling of love for Onegin and struggles against it. He implores her. Enter the husband. Duty wins. Onegin flees in despair.

This libretto was preserved almost intact, save that the penultimate scene was replaced by that of the ball in St Petersburg at which Onegin meets Tatiana and Gremin, and the episode of Gremin's proposal to Tatiana was omitted. The opera opens with a duet of Tatiana and Olga (not of the 'old women') on a text by Pushkin (not Zhukovsky): Gremin does not appear in the last scene. Tchaikovsky continues:

You won't believe how passionate I have become about this subject. How delighted I am to be rid of Ethiopian princesses, Pharaohs, poisonings, all the conventional stuff. What an infinity of poetry there is in *Onegin*. I am not deceived: I know that there will be little movement and few stage effects in this opera. The poetry, humanity, simplicity of the theme, combined with a text of genius, will more than make up for these shortcomings.

Nine days later he wrote to his adoring patroness Nadezhda von Meck that a libretto on Pushkin's text was being composed for him: 'a bold idea, don't you think?'

Why should he or anyone else have thought this idea 'wild', or even 'bold'? The plot of Pushkin's 'novel in verse' has a certain intrinsic operatic quality: indeed, the famous monologues and dialogues between Onegin and Tatiana, Tatiana and the nurse, Lensky and Olga had been recited by actors on the Russian stage since the early 1840s. What daunted Tchaikovsky was the mere thought of touching this great and sacred national masterpiece, of tampering with it at all; he constantly confesses to a feeling that he might be committing a sacrilege, and he defends his treatment of it as an act of sincere homage to a poet of unsurpassed genius.

Tchaikovsky's fears will be intelligible to anyone who knows that Pushkin occupies a unique position in his country's literature. Since his death in a duel in 1837 (and, indeed, to some degree in his lifetime), he has been recognised by Russians as being beyond all question the greatest poet and prose writer their country has produced. What Dante is to Italians, Shakespeare to Englishmen, Goethe to Germans, Pushkin is to the Russians. *Eugene Onegin* is his supreme masterpiece, the first and, for some critics, the greatest novel in the Russian language. It has dominated the imagination of virtually every major Russian writer since its day.

In Pushkin's story, for the first time, simple and uncorrupted human beings come into contact with falsity, inhumanity, craven weakness – the debased values of the society in which they are condemned to live. Tatiana is the ancestress of the pure-hearted, morally passionate, at times *exaltées*, heroic Russian women whose unswerving idealism and suffering is celebrated by the great Russian novelists of the nineteenth century, notably Turgenev, and is in danger of becoming a stereotype among their successors in the twentieth. Lensky and Onegin, too, are just as hopelessly alienated from this society: Lensky, passionate, poetical, his head deep in German metaphysical clouds, is incapable of facing the dreary reality of the Russian society of his time, escapes into romantic illusions and lives and dies for his fantasies. Onegin, a stronger and more ambitious man, stifled equally in a society in which he cannot develop his nature and his gifts, runs away from genuine feeling, and protects himself, like Byron's demonic heroes, by defiant coldness, cynicism, and a self-dramatising, sardonic rejection of common humanity and its traditional values.

Both represent types of ‘the superfluous person’⁴ – those unusually sensitive and gifted human beings who cannot find a place in the society to which they are born, or a form of life that would satisfy their moral and intellectual needs, or at least not reduce them to impotence or despair. For all its exhilarating brilliance and wit, the poem is an expression of a bitterly frustrated society. No one, save the light-hearted Olga, is contented in Pushkin’s poem: everyone suffers and comes to terms in the end with a bleak reality. Even the conventional Mme Larina was forced to abandon the man she loved to marry her brigadier and settle down to her round of routine duties and boring country life; she carries on with the aid of the saving grace of habit – ‘habit [she sings with the old nurse Filipevna in the very beginning of the opera] is heaven’s gift to us: sent us in place of happiness’. Filipevna, too, sings Tatiana to sleep with the story of how bitterly she had cried when she was led to the altar with an unknown boy chosen for her by her parents.

Tatiana’s silent, inward-directed passion, nourished on the sentimental novels of her day, generates an image of the ideal lover; blindly she identifies it with Onegin; the Onegin of her imagination screens the true Onegin from her eyes. His smooth, faultlessly phrased, polite, faintly ironical, wholly sensible rejection of her love inflicts a wound upon her that never heals. In due course she, too, learns her lesson. Like her mother, like the nurse, she marries without love a general who adores her, and to whom she is grateful. When, in the last scene, she rejects Onegin, whom she still loves, it is because she has firmly stabilised [60] her life at another level, has capitulated, has renounced the possibility of personal fulfilment.

This is Tolstoy’s morality in *Anna Karenina*, not Anna’s. Tatiana, like Turgenev’s heroines, is Anna’s direct antithesis. Onegin, whose new passion for Tatiana is excited by her refusal to take notice of his pursuit, sees the door to a genuine life shut to him for ever, and is left with no further motive for existing. Lensky is

⁴ [The concept of the ‘superfluous person’ was given its familiar name by Turgenev in *Dnevnik lišnego cheloveka* (‘Diary of a superfluous person’, 1850): see entry for 23 March 1850: I. S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1960–8), *Sochineniya*, v 185–9. The term was also used as a catchphrase by Dostoevsky in *Zapiski iz podpol’ya* (1864), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii F. M. Dostoevskogo v XVIII tomakh* (Moscow, 2003–6), vi 7–80.]

destroyed by a total inability to come to terms with reality: he is wounded by Olga's light-hearted flirtation with Onegin, which he mistakes for betrayal of his love; infuriated by his friend's callous desire to amuse himself; dominated by a romantic conception of honour and by fear of seeming a poltroon, of cutting a ridiculous figure. He discovers that Olga's feeling for him, such as it is, has in fact not changed; but it is too late to retreat: he dies (as Pushkin was to die) because he is caught in a net, partly of his own making, from which he cannot, and does not want, to disentangle himself.

Loneliness, frustration, inability to find fulfilment in a human relationship, a bitter sense of failure, self-pity and, finally, despair – these are the feelings that Tchaikovsky knew most intimately, and he wished to write about what he knew:

The sensations of an Egyptian princess, a Pharaoh, some mad Nubian, I do not know and do not understand [he wrote to the composer Sergey Taneev on 2 January 1878]. Some kind of instinct tells me that these people must move, talk, feel, and therefore also to express their feelings in a peculiar fashion of their own – it is not ours. Hence my music [...] will have as much connection with the personages in *Aida* as the elaborate, gallant speeches of the heroes of Racine, who address each other as *vous*, have in common with [...] the real Orestes, the real Andromache, etc. [...] I don't want kings, queens, risings of the people, battles, marches, in a word, everything that makes up the attributes of 'grand opera'. I am looking for a drama which is intimate, yet powerful, based on the conflict of attitudes which I have myself experienced or witnessed, which touches me to the quick. [...] What I want to say is that *Aida* is so remote from me, her unhappy love for Radamès (whom I cannot imagine either) moves me so little, that my music would not be genuinely and deeply felt, as all good music must be. Not long ago I saw [Meyerbeer's] *L'Africaine* in Genoa. The miseries of this poor African! Slavery, imprisonment, death under a poisonous tree, her rival's triumph as she herself lies dying, all this she suffers – but I don't feel in the least sorry for her. Yet here do we have 'effects'! – a ship, fights, all kinds of goings on. To hell with them all – all these 'effects'!

Onegin's feelings, Tatiana's feelings, as he understood them, meant everything to him:

I have always [he wrote to Tanev on 14 January 1891] tried to express in music as sincerely and truthfully as I could that which was in the text. Such truth and sincerity come not from the work of the intellect, but spring from inner feeling. To give this feeling life and warmth I have always tried to choose stories in which the characters are real, living men whose feelings are like my own.

The sweet, at times perhaps over-sweet, melancholy and resignation of the principal figures in the opera are to some degree read into Pushkin by Tchaikovsky, because these 'feelings are like my own'. Tchaikovsky was not the ideal composer for Pushkin's poem. Pushkin's verse is taut, crystalline, of classical simplicity and purity, luminous, direct, passionate, sometimes ironical or gay, at other times sublime and magnificent, always of an indescribable freshness and beauty. It is as untranslatable as Sophocles or Racine. The only modern artist whom he resembles is Mozart; with Mozart and perhaps Goethe he can claim to be the greatest and most universal genius since the Renaissance. Yet Tchaikovsky's setting of *Onegin* is neither silly nor vulgar, as some ferocious literary critics have maintained. He knew himself how far he fell below Pushkin – hence his acute nervousness about scaling this unapproachable peak. He adored the poem, and tells us that he had been – like so many of his compatriots – in love with Tatiana from his earliest youth. He found the subject irresistible; and his opera, whatever the relation or absence of relation of the score to Pushkin's text, remains a deeply nostalgic, melodious, lyrical masterpiece, in its own way as moving a memorial to the dying, but still elegant and attractive, life of the decaying country houses of the Russian gentry as the novels and stories of Turgenev, with whom indeed he has much in common. The lyrical *arioso* recitatives, the long monologues (Tatiana's sleepless night, Lisa's in *The Queen of Spades*) are vocal symphonic poems which convey a vivid psychological portrait of character, and express intimate personal feeling and experience. They have their counterparts in Turgenev's (and to some degree Chekhov's) writings.

Tchaikovsky set to work with the enthusiasm that gripped him whenever he contemplated a new and ambitious work. He began *Onegin* towards the end of May 1877, and finished two-thirds of it by 23 June. 'This opera will [...] have little dramatic movement in it; on the other hand, its social aspects will be interesting; and then how much poetry there is in it all!' he had written to Nadezhda von Meck on 27 May. 'I feel that Pushkin's text will work upon me in the most inspiring manner, if only I can find that peace of mind which is [61] necessary for composing.' The opposite occurred. He received a letter from an admiring lady suggesting marriage to him. He explained to her that he could not love her, and would at most be a good and faithful friend. She declared herself prepared to marry him on these terms. He decided that in his position he had no choice. The marriage occurred on 6 July and led, inevitably, to a severe nervous breakdown. In a hysterical condition, approaching madness, he fled from his wife; towards the end of August he slowly began to recover. He now had no doubt that his opera was doomed to failure:

Now that the first transport of enthusiasm is over [...] [he wrote to his ever-faithful friend on 30 August], I feel sure my opera [...] will be misunderstood by the mass of the public. The content is too artless, there are no theatrical effects, the music is neither brilliant nor 'effective'. [...] Only those who look in an opera for the musical re-creation of feelings remote from the tragic and the theatrical – ordinary, simple, human feeling, only they will (I hope) like my opera. In a word, it is written with sincerity, and it is on this sincerity that all my hopes are based.

In October he went to Clarins, where he orchestrated his Fourth Symphony. Having finished the symphony on 6 December, he worked on the opera, which was completed on 20 January 1878 in San Remo. As always, regular hours of dedicated work restored him to himself. His letters grew more calm. Taneev had complained to him that the first act was too static: he tried to express the character of the *dramatis personae* not by action or by music, but by the words they spoke, the words which Pushkin used to describe them; but the methods of a novel or a poem cannot be effective in opera; here character must be conveyed by the music, not by self-descriptive statements. Agate in Weber's *Der*

Freischütz conveys her dreamy nature by being heard at prayer, or singing on a balcony at night, not by declaring that she is dreamy: whereas Olga in Tchaikovsky's opera informs her audience that she is gay and thoughtless, Tatiana explains that she is pensive and fond of books, and so on.

Turgenev, who had looked at the piano score in 1878, wrote in similar terms to Tolstoy on 15 November: 'the music is marvellous, the lyrical and tuneful moments are particularly good, but what a libretto! Pushkin's verses describing the characters are put in the mouths of the characters themselves. For example, the lines about Lensky, "He sang of the faded flower of his life – when he was scarcely eighteen years of age", in the libretto become "I sing about the faded flower of my life" etc., and so everywhere.'⁵ This did not worry the composer, who was tormented by only one thought, that his music might not be worthy of the divine poet. 'Pushkin's exquisite texture will be vulgarised if it is transferred to the stage, with its routine, its idiotic traditions, its veterans of the male and female sex.' As for the fact that the opera might not be effective on the stage:

You may be right [he wrote to Taneev on 2 January 1878] when you say the opera is not 'scenic' enough. The answer is – to hell with scenic effects. That fact that I haven't got a theatrical streak has long been recognised and I don't feel particularly gloomy about it. If you find that the work is not 'theatrical', don't stage it, don't play it. I wrote it because one fine day I suddenly felt an inconceivably strong desire to transform into music everything in *Onegin* that asks for it. I did this as well as I was able. I worked with indescribable absorption and pleasure without worrying much about movement, 'effectiveness', etc. Damn effects. [...] What I need is human beings, not puppets – [...] beings similar to myself who have experienced sensations which I, too, have experienced and which I understand.

And on 24 January he writes:

I have one anxiety – far more important than any fear that the public will not tremble with excitement about the *dénouement*. I

⁵ In fact no such lines are to be found in the libretto, but Turgenev's (and Taneev's) general charge is perfectly valid.

am talking about my sacrilegious presumption when, reluctantly, I have to add to Pushkin's verse my own or, in places, Shilovsky's lines. That is what upsets me. As for the music, I can tell you, that if ever music was written with sincere passion, with love of the subject 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. Let *Onegin* be a tedious spectacle with warmly written music – that is all I want.

The central scene of the opera is Tatiana's letter scene in the first act, which he composed before the rest. Tatiana's fevered night, and the outpouring of love and terror, self-doubt and self-torture determine the mood of the work. Its central theme (in E flat major) occurs in the prelude to the opera. Her tormented doubts about Onegin – does he come as a guardian angel or a tempter? – is echoed in the prelude to the fatal birthday party in Act 2. The music of her resolve to write, come what may, is heard again in Onegin's mounting passion for her at the ball in Act 3. (Act 4, which expresses sober reality and an end to romantic revolt against convention, is sharply different.) Ernest Newman's description of the letter aria as 'one of the masterpieces of musical-dramatic psychology'⁶ would surely have pleased the composer, who wrote of this scene: 'if I burnt with the fire of inspiration when I wrote the letter scene – it was [62] Pushkin who lit this fire; if my music contains a tenth part of the beauty of the book, I shall be very proud and content'.⁷

Onegin must not be 'an opera': Tchaikovsky called it 'Lyrical scenes in three acts'.⁸ He will not offer it to the Imperial opera houses of St Petersburg or Moscow. The opera must be treated as an intimate piece of lyrical chamber music, best played and sung 'in private houses';⁹ in this way, it would enter the consciousness of sincere, musically sensitive people. Then, when the demand

⁶ Ernest Newman, *Opera Nights* (London, 1943), 105.

⁷ Letter of 28–30 September 1883 to Nadezhda von Meck.

⁸ Letter of 2 August 1878 to Petr Jurgenson.

⁹ Letter of 4 February 1878 to Petr Jurgenson.

‘from below’¹⁰ rose to sufficient pitch of intensity, the great opera houses would be bound to ask for it. That was the way to do it: let the pupils of the Imperial Conservatoire in Moscow do it first. He wrote to Karl Albrecht, choirmaster at the Moscow Conservatory, that the singers in the Conservatoire need not be first rate, but they must be ‘very well disciplined and firm’, and must be able ‘to act simply and well’.¹¹ The production must not be luxurious and meaningless; care must be taken about fidelity to the period, above all the historical accuracy of the costumes, ‘the choruses must not be the flock of sheep which appear on the Imperial stages, they must be human beings who participate in the action of the opera; [...] the conductor should not be a machine, or even a musician like Nápravník,¹² whose only anxiety is that where the score says C sharp, the musicians should not play C natural, but rather a real leader of the orchestra. [...] I need [...] artists and, moreover, friends.’ As for the singers, ‘to wait for an ideal Tatiana may be to wait until some distant age’. ‘I adored Tatiana,’ he told his friend Nikolay Kashkin, ‘and was terribly indignant about Onegin, who seemed to me a cold and heartless fop.’¹³ Again, Onegin is ‘a cold dandy, penetrated to his marrow by the odious conventional values’¹⁴ of the *beau monde*, and ‘a bored social lion who out of boredom, out of trivial irritation, without deliberate intention, as a result of a fatal combination of circumstances takes the life of a young man whom, in fact, he loves’.¹⁵ But he is not a monster: his tormented self-disgust at the destruction he wilfully causes is both dramatically and musically fully expressed. As for Lensky, ‘he must be a youth, eighteen years old, with thick curls and the impulsive, spontaneous movements of a young poet *à la* Schiller’.¹⁶ Sincere young singers, Pushkin’s marvellous words – this will compensate for everything.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Letter of 3 December 1877 to Karl Albrecht, from which the next three quotations are also taken.

¹² Eduard Francevič Nápravník, chief conductor of the St Petersburg opera.

¹³ N. N. Kashkin, ‘Iz vospominanii o P. I. Chaikovskom’ [‘From My Recollections of Tchaikovsky’], in *Proshloe russkoi muzyki: materialy I issledovaniya*, I: *P. I. Chaikovskii* (Petersburg, 1920), 99–132 at 119.

¹⁴ Letter of 16 December 1877 to Nadezhda von Meck.

¹⁵ Letter of 28 September 1883 to Nadezhda von Meck.

¹⁶ Letter of 16 December 1877 to Nadezhda von Meck.

And indeed Pushkin's text is extensively used. From the opening duet (of Tatiana and Olga) in the first scene, which is a setting of a poem by Pushkin that is not in *Eugene Onegin*, to Onegin's lines to Tatiana before entering the house with which the first scene ends, virtually all but the peasants' chorus (which is an adapted folk song), and the words of the second half of Lensky's first aria ('I love you, Olga') is authentic Pushkin; there are interpolated connecting links, but they are scarcely noticeable. In the second scene, the confession of love which Tchaikovsky is the heart and centre of the work, scarcely a word of the text has been tampered with. In the third scene, even the words of the chorus of peasant girls are Pushkin's own. In the second act, the proportion is a good deal smaller. Onegin's stricken speech at the Larin's party after he provokes Lensky's insult, and, in the second scene, only Lensky's famous last aria and the rivals' melancholy duet over a predicament which neither desires, but neither seems able to avert, come from the poem. In the third act, Onegin's monologue, the first half of Gremin's aria, and the dialogue of Onegin and Tatiana, and, in the final scene, Tatiana's opening words to Onegin were composed by Pushkin; the rest were supplied by the faithful Shilovsky.

Even more faithfully than Bizet in *Carmen*, which he so much admired, Tchaikovsky sought to fuse every word in the text with its music; his letters to his various correspondents give evidence that he lived through this work more intensely than even he was accustomed to when composing a major piece. He is himself Tatiana, he is Lensky, he is at times even the bitter and disdainful Onegin in his moments of misery. If these are not Pushkin's creations, they have been transmuted into an equally authentic work of art. This is not Gounod's *Faust*, nor Thomas's *Mignon*; the wedding of music to words is genuine. *Figaro*, or *Falstaff*, or *Pelléas* (for all Maeterlinck's protests) are closer parallels. Nevertheless, critics have from time to time complained that the libretto of the opera is a monstrous travesty of Pushkin's text. In particular, it is said that too much in the poem has been left out. Where, it is asked, are Pushkin's brilliant evocations of the St Petersburg social scene, of Onegin's character, of his day from early morning until late into the night, which the poet describes so marvellously? Where is Onegin's own agonised letter to Tatiana? Where is the irony and the charm with which Lensky's complex relationship to

him is conveyed? Where, above all, are the marvellous descriptions of country life and nature to which there is no parallel in any literature? Why is the minor but marvellously drawn figure of Zaretsky reduced [63] to nullity? Why is Gremin, who in Pushkin is still in his thirties, transformed into a pompous, limping old general, vastly older than his wife or, indeed, his kinsman Onegin? Why does Triquet sing a worthless little tune – that of *Dormez, dormez chers amours*, described as a *nocturne à deux voix* by Amedée de Beauplan, and not Pushkin's original, taken from *Reveillez vous, belle endormie* from *La belle dormeuse* by Dufresny, scored by Grandval?¹⁷ These questions, some more valid than others, have multiplied as time has gone on. The Russian public paid no attention to these grievances; it responded to the intentions of the composer, and continued to love both Pushkin and Tchaikovsky.

The opera was not an immediate success. The singers at the Conservatoire performance found the music strange: it was too unlike the Rossini or Donizetti to which they were accustomed. Only the set 'numbers', the only really conventional writing in the entire work – Triquet's couplets and Gremin's aria – were greeted with genuine applause. Triquet's pretty rhymes in particular were the kind of *pastiche* at which Tchaikovsky was so brilliant. Nevertheless, his plan worked in the end. The opera became more and more popular in the Russian provinces until it came back in triumph to Moscow and St Petersburg. In the original version, the work ended with the happy embrace of Onegin and Tatiana, which is alleged to have lasted for five minutes. After a unanimous protest by the critics, this was altered in 1889 to the present finale. The Moscow critic Kruglikov expressed his fear that to put a modern sitting room on the operatic stage and to allow singers to appear in prosaic frock-coats or jackets was much too bold. Moreover, to end an act with the nurse's recitative – without any bravura climax – was to ask for trouble: how could the public tell that the act had ended? The curtain had come down on a profoundly puzzled audience. Nevertheless, the work made steady progress in popular esteem. The performances in 1881 at the

¹⁷ Beauplan wrote in the early years of the nineteenth century; Dufresny and Grandval are versifiers and composers of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. No dancing master worth his salt would use a tune a hundred years old for his *pièce d'occasion*. This fully justifies Tchaikovsky's choice of a contemporary piece.

Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow under Bevignani, and then in St Petersburg, evidently left much to be desired. The first full-scale performance took place on 21 October 1884, in the Bolshoi Theatre in St Petersburg. The grandest, however, was the hundredth performance, conducted by Napravnik in St Petersburg on 8 November 1982, with the famous tenor Figner, then not in his first youth, as a very dashing Lensky, and his Italian wife Medea Mei as Tatiana. Medea Mei learnt her part in Cernobbio with Toscanini (who knew no Russian), and asked for directions from the composer. She tells us that he gave her none: said only that she was his ideal Tatiana. The best singer of Lensky's part was, by all accounts, Leonid Sobinov, who first sang it in 1898; his terrible battle in 1901 in St Petersburg with the jealous Figner, who coveted the role, is part of Russian operatic history. Tchaikovsky's favourite Onegin was Khokhlov. He declared that after seeing him, he 'could not imagine Onegin except as Khokhlov'.¹⁸

Some of Tchaikovsky's worst fears were duly realised, and not in St Petersburg alone. In the Prague production of 1888 the curtain rose on the interior of an Italian Renaissance palazzo; the dancers of the *écossaise* in the sixth scene wore Highland dress; but the Tatiana was 'marvellous', better, the composer wrote, than any Russian, and this made up for everything; the quality of the singers meant incomparably more to him, as to every true composer (at any rate before the dominant influence of Wagner) than decor or production.

The opera grew in fame. Gustav Mahler conducted it in Hamburg in 1892 and then in Vienna; he took it to France and Italy. In 1922 Stravinsky attempted a production on the lines of Chekhovian psychological realism (his comments on Tatiana are still worth reading), but this proved an honourable failure. In the present century, it grew to be virtually a national opera, better loved, if not more respected or venerated, than the masterpieces of Glinka or Mussorgsky. In the middle 1920s, the fashion among zealous Communist critics in the Soviet Union was to attack it for being soft, sentimental and decadent, an entertainment for the declining gentry, not for workers. Tatiana was described as anaemic, pathetic, passive, embodying the reactionary 'spiritualist' morality of the *ancien régime*. This proved a passing phase. Lenin did

¹⁸ L[ev Mikhailovich] Tarasov, *Volshebstvo opery: ocherki* (Leningrad, 1979), 145.

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not waver in his loyalty to the work: ‘So I see,’ he said to some students in 1921, ‘you are against *Eugene Onegin*: well, we old people, we are for it.’¹⁹

Eugene Onegin is a work of the late Victorian summer. It looks back with nostalgia upon an almost vanished world, and this communicates a sweet, intimate and haunting melancholy to the entire work, in which the central themes reflect and echo each other. Only those who find the novels of Turgenev and the poetry of Tennyson intolerably cloying, and still react violently against the elegiac mood of some of the most beautiful works of art of the nineteenth century, will harden their hearts against this lyrical masterpiece.

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¹⁹ Aleksandr Maisurian, *Drugoy Lenin* (Moscow, 2006), 97.