Tchaikovsky’s

EUGENE ONEGIN

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In-Depth Guide by Stu Lewis

LYRIC OPERA KANSAS CITY
INTRODUCTION: “THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING”

Russian opera has always been a “hard sell” for American opera companies. The most obvious reason is the Russian language itself, which lacks the lyricism of French or Italian. It can be hard to find American or Western European singers who are comfortable singing in Russian, since most opera students focus on French, Italian, and German, in addition to their native languages. Yet this cannot be the only reason. For the first forty years of its existence, Lyric Opera of Kansas City performed all of its repertoire in English—yet no Russian operas were produced during that period. This year’s “Eugene Onegin” is only the second Russian opera production. The other one? Also “Eugene Onegin.”

Moreover, the reasons for the dearth of Russian opera in the U.S. cannot be political. Russian concertos, ballets, and symphonies are a familiar part of the American musical scene; even Soviet-era composers such as Prokofiev and Shostakovich are widely admired.

The shining exception to our neglect of Russian opera is Tchaikovsky’s “Eugene Onegin.” Of course, the general popularity of Tchaikovsky’s music is one reason for its success, though none of the composer’s other operas have approached the status of this one.

What is it that makes this opera stand out? One reason is that many Russian operas were written in the “grand opera” tradition that is currently out of vogue. Tchaikovsky himself was concerned at the lack of action in the story, so much so that he hesitated to call it an opera, preferring the term “lyrical scenes.” Moreover, it is a love story without a love duet, and in the end the hero and heroine part quietly. As English critic Herman Klein explained to the composer, “We like a definite denouement, not an ending where the hero goes out one door and the heroine goes out another.” After all, in most
operas the hero and heroine stay together until death does them part, even if one has to kill the other to bring about that resolution. (Perhaps this explains why Puccini’s “La Rondine,” which contains some of his most beautiful music, has failed to achieve the popularity of his other works.)

Yet perhaps it is this very “flaw” that makes this opera relevant for our times. As opera critic Terry Teachout writes, “While romantic operas are typically about resolution, Onegin is about irresolution…. In its preoccupation with what we have since learned to call ‘alienation,’ this opera has far more in common with twentieth-century literature than with the larger-than-life derring-do that is the customary stuff of nineteenth-century opera.” That, along with the subtlety of characterization and, of course, Tchaikovsky’s glorious gift for melody, has earned “Eugene Onegin” its place among the great operas of all time.

CHARACTERS

Madame Larina/mezzo-soprano/age 56. Widow, owner of a large country estate. The family name is Larin—in Russian, women add the feminine ending “-a” to their surnames Filippyevna/mezzo-soprano/age 70. Nurse to Mme. Larina’s two daughters.

Tatiana (sometimes spelled Tatyana)/soprano/age 17. Mme. Larina’s older daughter. As is common in Russian literature, she is sometimes referred to by a variety of nicknames, such as Tanya. Also, in Russian, names are inflected, so when used as a direct object, her name sounds different.


Vladimir Lensky/tenor/age 19. A young poet, neighbor of the Larin family.
Eugene (Yevegni) Onegin (pronounced on-YAY-gin)/baritone/age 22. Heir to a large fortune/a new neighbor of the Larin family

Captain/bass. A neighbor

Triquet/tenor. A Frenchman who lives in the area, friend of the Larins

Zaretsky/bass. Trained in supervising duels.

Guillot/silent. A servant of Onegin.

Prince Gremin/bass/age 45. A retired military officer; later, husband to Tatiana.

Chorus and dancers/taking on various roles throughout the opera.

Note: ages shown above were stipulated by Tchaikovsky, not in the Pushkin novel that was his source

**THE STORY**

**Time: The Nineteenth Century**

Pushkin’s “novel in verse” was so well known by Tchaikovsky’s time that he was able to assume that his audience would be familiar with the original—though he did make several changes to heighten the drama. The audience thus would have known that Onegin was a dilettante whose family had fallen on hard times, but who was fortunate to have been named heir to his uncle’s fortune, including a country estate. While Onegin took care of his uncle in the latter’s final days, he kept hoping that the uncle would die soon.

**Act 1, Scene 1: The Garden of the Larin estate; late afternoon, a summer day**

The brief overture sets a melancholy tone for the story to follow. Mme. Larina and Filippyevna are on stage. Offstage we hear Olga and Tatiana, singing a romantic folk song, in overlapping melodic lines. Mme. Larina tells Filippyevna how the song brings back memories of her youth. As the older women reminisce, the young
women continue their song, the twin dialogues merging into a quartet.

Mme. Larina speaks of her love for the English novelist Samuel Richardson, whose works she knows only second hand. This is significant in that Richardson dealt with the subject of arranged marriages, which is an important theme in this opera, as both she and Filipyevna had to marry men chosen by their parents. The two conclude that “Habit is sent from above in place of happiness.”

As these reminiscences end, a chorus of peasants, workers on the Larin estate, enter, presenting a decorated sheaf to their employer as a token of the recently completed harvest. Mme. Larina asks for a more upbeat song, and the chorus replies with and earthy Russian folk song, with its unique Slavic rhythm. As their song concludes, Tatiana reflects, over the orchestra’s playing of the theme from the overture, how the music makes her dream of floating away somewhere. Olga, on the other hand, is a perpetual optimist and cannot understand Tatiana’s melancholy. Mme. Larina tells Filipyevna to provide some wine for the peasants, and the chorus and Filipyevna exit.

Olga is concerned about Tatiana’s mood, and the latter explains that she is depressed because of the love story she has been reading; Mme. Larina reminds her that it’s only fiction, and Olga worries how her mood will affect her fiancé, Lensky.

As if on cue, Lensky arrives, accompanied by his friend Onegin, whom he introduces to the family. Though he has yet to converse with the two sisters, Onegin tells Lensky that he is surprised that he has chosen Olga over Tatiana; in fact, he speaks disparagingly of Olga, illustrating to the audience his cold, unfeeling nature, a trait which will be emphasized repeatedly as the story progresses. Tatiana, in the meantime, with a speed unique to opera heroes and heroines, has
immediately fallen in love with Onegin. The four express their individual thoughts, their voices joining in a quartet.

Lensky and Olga briefly exit to go for a walk, leaving Onegin and Tatiana alone on stage. In what we will see is his characteristically judgmental tone, Onegin asks Tatiana how she can put up with the boredom of country life. She replies that she loses herself in dreams, and the disillusioned Onegin explains that he too was once a dreamer. Lensky and Olga return, and Lensky sings a brief love song to Olga. Onegin tells Tatiana of the death of his uncle, and how much he resented having to take care of him in his final days. The principal characters leave for dinner as the curtain falls.

**Act 1, Scene II. Tatiana’s room. Late evening, the same day.**

Filipyevna and Tatiana are sitting quietly in the latter’s room as the curtain rises. It is clear that Filipyevna, not Mme. Larina or Olga, is Tatiana’s primary confidant. Tatiana asks her nurse for advice about love, but she replies that in her day no one talked about love; she herself was married to a man her parents chose for her at age thirteen. Tatiana tells her that she is in love, and asks for a pen and paper.

This leads to the famous letter scene, more properly considered a dramatic monologue than an “aria.” Though it may seem somewhat disjointed, Tchaikovsky achieves unity through a periodic reference to Tatiana’s central theme, as well as a repeated instrumental figure featuring the woodwinds. After a false start, she pours out her passion for Onegin. In operatic time, the scene simulates the passing of the night. As she finishes, Filipyevna enters and tells her it is time to get up for the day. Tatiana asks her to have her grandson deliver her letter to Onegin. She leaves, and Tatiana is left alone with her agitated thoughts.
Act 1, Scene III: Another garden on the Larin estate: The next day

The scene opens quietly. The orchestra paints a peaceful morning, with simulated bird calls. The servant girls sing a playful tribute to love. As they retreat, Tatiana enters, seeing Onegin approaching from a distance. She is now having second thoughts about having sent the letter. (Anyone who has hurriedly pressed “send” while writing an email knows this feeling). Approaching Tatiana, Onegin says coldly, “You wrote to me; don’t deny it.” He then goes on to explain that he appreciates her feelings but, as much as he loves her, it is brotherly, not romantic, love, and, he is too much a wanderer to consider marriage, and he warns her that their marriage would certainly lead to disaster. Moreover, he warns her to be more careful in expressing her feelings, since the next man she chooses might take advantage of her innocence. As he concludes his monologue, a reprise of the servant girls’ chorus is heard in the background. Tatiana is too taken aback to reply, and the scene ends with an offstage reprise of the servant girls’ song.

Some critics have condemned Onegin for his harsh, unfeeling response to Tatiana’s overtures, but it is hard to fault him for his candor. After all, no one would expect someone to accept the first marriage proposal that came his or her way. Onegin’s true character, however, will be revealed in the next scene.

Act 2, Scene I: A reception room in the Larin home; the following January.

Following a brief orchestral reiteration of Tatiana’s theme, the curtain opens on a party celebrating Tatiana’s “name day,” a Russian custom of the time in which instead of celebrating one’s own birthday, a person would celebrate the date associated with the saint whose name he or she shares. (An American analogy
would be having everybody named Patrick celebrating his birthday on March 17, St. Patrick’s Day). The assembled guests sing a lively waltz praising the extravagance of the occasion. Onegin has been dancing with Tatiana, leading the chorus to gossip both about the prospect that the couple will soon marry, as well as the prediction that Onegin would mistreat her once they were married. Onegin, who is already in a bad mood, is upset by the gossip and is angry with Lensky for persuading him to attend.

Here, as before, Tchaikovsky assumes that his audience, from reading the novel, would know the reason for Onegin’s resentment. Onegin had expressed a dislike of large parties, and Lensky had promised him that the event would be a small family gathering rather than a crowded ball.

Onegin decides to take revenge on Lensky by flirting with Olga, who accepts Onegin’s attention, oblivious to Lensky’s jealousy. Lensky becomes increasingly upset, while the guests continue to celebrate. As the dance ends, Lensky confronts Olga angrily, and every attempt to appease him results in another outburst. Lensky tells Olga that she no longer loves him, and her willingness to dance again with Onegin adds fuel to the fire. The tension is momentarily subdued with the appearance of Triquet, a Frenchman who lives in the neighborhood, who sings a simple song (in French) that he has written in honor of Tatiana. A captain enters and invites the partiers to go to the next room for the cotillion.

Onegin is not finished with Lensky. He mockingly asks him why he has not joined the celebration. Lensky denounces him for his flirtation and declares that he longer considers Onegin to be his friend. One thing leads to another, until Lensky challenges Onegin to a duel. Mme. Larina is shocked that such a thing could happen in her house, and Lensky replies that while he had experienced much
joy in that house, it is all in the past. Onegin explains in an aside that he is ashamed of his behavior, and the various characters express their horror as the scene develops into a large ensemble, culminating in the chorus’ expression of shock. Onegin accepts the challenge; the chorus once again expresses its outrage as the curtain falls.

Act 2, Scene II: A rustic water-mill. Early the next morning.  

An orchestral introduction anticipates Lensky’s aria. Whereas woodwinds were prominent in the scenes featuring Tatiana, here the brass set a more solemn tone. Lensky and Zaretzky, his second, are waiting for Onegin at the site of the duel. Zaretzky expresses his annoyance at Onegin’s tardiness, which is contrary to the rules of dueling. Lensky, left alone for a moment, sings his aria “Kuda, kuda,” lamenting the loss of the golden days of his youth. This aria has become a popular recital piece for tenors. He wonders if Olga will mourn him and visit his grave should he lose the duel.

Onegin finally arrives As a further insult toward Lensky, he has brought his servant to act as his second. Zaretzky expresses his concern that all of the rules of dueling must be followed.

It may not be readily apparent, but in a sense Zaretzky is the real villain of the opera. According to Pushkin scholar A.D.P. Briggs, Zaretzky should have called the duel a forfeit when Onegin failed to appear on time. Leaving Lensky out in the cold for two hours gave Onegin an unfair advantage. Moreover, the principal function of a second was to attempt to talk the participants out of engaging in the duel, and to ask the offending party if he wanted to apologize. Zaretzky, however, is too much a fan of dueling to attempt to stop the duel. As the two men prepare to square off, they both express their regrets (in overlapping musical lines), but when they consider calling it off, both reply “nyet, nyet” (no, no). Onegin gets off the first
shot, killing Lensky immediately. He rushes to Lensky’s body and asks “Dead?” to which Zaretzky replies simply, “Dead.”

One other item of note: Not every duel had to be fought to the death. It was customary for participants to shoot at the leg in order to wound their opponent and be declared the winner. (Consider the offstage duel between the final acts of “La Traviata.”) Thus, Onegin was not acting completely in self-defense.

**Act 3, Scene I: A ballroom at a nobleman’s mansion in St. Petersburg. About four years later**

Onegin is standing to the side as several couples are dancing a polonaise. Onegin, however, is totally bored. In his aria, he explains that since killing Lensky he has wandered the world, finding no peace. He has just returned to St. Petersburg. His reverie is interrupted by another dance, a schottische.

Prince Gremin and his wife arrive on the scene, and the guests marvel at her beauty. At first Onegin cannot believe that this sophisticated woman is the country girl he knew years ago, but Tatiana recognizes him immediately. Onegin asks Gremin who she is, and Gremin explains that she is his wife.

Here Tchaikovsky makes a significant change from his source. In the novel, Tatiana’s husband is described as an elderly military veteran and he is not given a name. Tchaikovsky indicated that he should be portrayed as being age forty-five, much older than Tatiana but still within the social norms of the time. Moreover, he turns Gremin into a sympathetic character, who, as he expresses in his tender aria, loves her in ways that Onegin could never understand.

Not knowing of their past history, Gremin introduces Onegin to Tatiana, and both mention having been neighbors once, as if there was nothing more between them. Tatiana, however, claims that she
is tired and departs the scene. Onegin is dumbfounded by the change he sees in Tatiana, and he finds that he now is passionately in love with her, as he expresses in a brief aria that borrows music from Tatiana’s theme.

**Act 3, Scene II: A room in Gremin’s house. The next morning.**

Onegin has written to Tatiana, requesting a private meeting. Tatiana is on stage alone, admitting to herself that her former passion has been reawakened. Onegin enters. Tatiana berates him for his change of heart. She fears that he now loves her because she is now part of high society. Again, we hear her theme in the orchestra. She tells him that happiness was once in their grasp, but although she admits that she still loves him, the opportunity for them to act on that emotion has passed. She is now married and will not betray her husband. Onegin begs her to run off with him, but she remains firm in her commitment to her marriage. While the opera may lack a conventional love duet, the dialogue between the two is certainly among the greatest duets in the repertoire, concluding with Tatiana’s telling Onegin farewell forever and Onegin’s self-pitying declaration of despair.

In early drafts of the opera, their duet was interrupted by the appearance of Gremin on the scene. However, in the final draft Tchaikovsky rightly left Gremin out of the picture because he wanted to emphasize that Tatiana’s decision was hers alone.

As was mentioned earlier, some critics see this conclusion, though consistent with the novel, unsatisfying. Teachout has commented that Tatiana lacks the courage of her convictions: “One may well think that she did the right thing, but it is impossible for any self-respecting opera buff to love her for having done it.” This remark, I believe, shows a total misunderstanding of the opera. I believe that Dostoevsky, ostensibly writing about the novel but apparently basing
many of his comments on the opera, showed a greater understanding of the story when he stated, “She knows that he really loves a new fantasy of his own invention and not her.” He goes further to state that even if Gremin were to die, she would not have married Onegin, who is no more suited for domestic life than he was four years earlier.

PYOTR (PETER) ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in a small town outside of St. Petersburg, Russia in 1840, the son of a member of the civil service. Though his parents owned a piano and arranged for him to take lessons, they steered him toward a career similar to his father’s, enrolling him at age twelve in the St. Petersburg School of Jurisprudence. Fortunately (for him and music lovers everywhere) the school also had a piano teacher on staff, and he was able to continue his music lessons. By age fourteen he began composing, and by age sixteen he also studied voice. For about four years he was employed in the civil service, but music was his real love, and in 1863 he resigned his job to attend the St. Petersburg Conservatory full time, primarily under the tutelage of Anton Rubenstein.

Having completed his formal studies, he moved to Moscow in 1866 to teach music theory and to continue composing. In 1869 he composed his first work which has stood the test of time, the “Romeo and Juliet Overture.” Shortly afterwards he composed his first significant opera, “The Oprichnik.”

One of the most significant events in his career occurred in 1875, when he was contacted by a wealthy widow, Nadezhda von Meck, who commissioned a couple of short works and was so impressed by them that she became his patron, providing him with an annual allowance so he could continue his career. Their relationship spanned a fourteen-year period, during which they
corresponded frequently but never met, apparently by mutual consent. In his letters, Tchaikovsky was able to pour out his personal feelings that he otherwise could not share with anyone outside of his own family. This well may have been the most significant personal relationship of his life.

The years 1877 to 1879 marked the summit of his composing career, featuring the premiers of “Swan Lake,” the Fourth Symphony (generally considered his best work in that genre), and “Eugene Onegin.”

The idea for the opera “Eugene Onegin” was born at a party he attended in 1877, when a singer, Yelizaveta Lavrovskaya, suggested that Pushkin’s novel in verse might be an ideal source for an opera. Though he initially scoffed at the idea, upon returning home he re-read the novel and immediately decided that Lavrovskaya was right. The poem “cried out” for musical expression. He also made a key decision as to how the novel would be interpreted, making Tatiana, and not Onegin, the principal character. In fact, the first scene that he composed was Tatiana’s letter scene, which he had previously considered setting to music as an art song. He wrote, “Let my opera be undramatic, let it have little action—but I am in love with the image of Tatiana, I am enraptured with Pushkin’s verse, and I am writing music for them because I am drawn to them.” He added, “What an infinity of poetry there is in ‘Onegin.’…I know there will be little in the way of stage effects or movement in this opera. But the amount of poetry, humanity, simplicity of the subject, and a test of genius will more than compensate for these deficiencies….Only those who look to opera for the musical recreation of feelings remote from the tragic and the theatrical, ordinary, simple human feelings—they, I hope, will find satisfaction in my opera,” adding, “If the listener feels even the smallest part of what I experienced when I was composing this
opera, I shall be utterly content to ask for nothing more.” Though he initially collaborated with Konstantin Shilovskiy on the libretto, much of the text was Tchaikovsky’s own, with some input from his brother Modest. The opera’s premiere, a conservatory production, came in 1878.

For the next several years, he continued composing, including the 1892 “Nutcracker Ballet.” Ironically, given the work’s continuing appeal, he did not consider it to be his best work, and it was not well received at its premiere, mainly due to the poor choreography. In 1891, von Meck’s business investments took a disastrous turn for the worse, and she was no longer able to assist him financially. For some reason which is still a puzzle for his biographers, she also broke off corresponding with him. In need of cash, he agreed to make an American tour, which was highly successful for him, though the profits for his sponsors were not sufficient to allow for a second tour.

Throughout his career, Tchaikovsky was more popular with the general public than he was with the critics. In part this was due to the prominence of a group called “The Five,” who dominated Russian musical criticism with their theory that Russian music should avoid Western influences. This group included Mily Balakirev, Cesar Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and Alexander Borodin. Cui, in particular, constantly berated Tchaikovsky for being too Westernized.

In 1893, he became seriously ill, and he died shortly afterwards. The official cause of death was cholera, though rumors immediately spread that he either was murdered or committed suicide. While debunking many of the “conspiracy theories,” biographer Roland John Wiley nevertheless notes that there are enough inconsistencies in the reports surrounding his death as to leave room for doubt.
Thus far, we have not commented on his personal life, which was in many ways more complicated and unhappy than his professional life. It is well known that he was homosexual (to use the traditional word for such orientation), a situation which impacted his personal life but which he kept separate from his creative work. At his time attitudes in Russia toward homosexuality were far more liberal than they are today. It may not have been fully acceptable, but people were willing to look the other way. However, Tchaikovsky was personally conflicted about his orientation and tried to fight it. He wrote to his brother about his guilt over a visit to a homosexual brothel. When he saw his brother exhibiting similar feelings, he told him that he was still young enough to train himself to love women. Sadly, he never found a long-term companion. It appears that the only people, other than von Meck, with whom he shared any emotional intimacy were his two brothers.

Early in his life he was involved with a young female singer, but she ultimately chose someone else to marry. During the process of composing “Eugene Onegin,” he received a love letter from a former student, Antonina Milyukova. After a few brief meetings, he proposed marriage to her and she accepted despite his implying that he would love her as a brother. It appears that she may have misunderstood what he was telling her. The composer apparently was completely incapable of sexual relations with women, though he wrote to his brother that he was trying to re-orient himself in that direction. There is no clear indication of whether he intended to lead a double life or whether he honestly felt he could learn to be heterosexual. In any event, the couple separated less than a month after the wedding, though she refused to accept an offer of divorce, and Tchaikovsky stopped pursuing it even after her pregnancy by another man would have given him grounds.
His motivation for wishing to marry remains unclear. In his correspondence, Tchaikovsky explained that he was so moved by the story of “Eugene Onegin” that he could not bear to be as unfeeling toward a woman who loved him as Onegin was toward Tatiana. Moreover, in one of her letters Antonina had threatened suicide in the event that the composer would reject her.

Biographers, however, have questioned Tchaikovsky’s story. For one thing, Antonina later explained that she was not serious about the suicide threat. Moreover, Tchaikovsky had on a number of cases talked of marriage, apparently due to his belief that marriage would provide a sense of normality in his life and would enable him to better fit into society.

Can we read into his music the psychological torment that he felt most of his life? That is up to the listener, but it seems that it would be wiser to separate the creator from his creations and simply enjoy some of the most tuneful, uplifting music that has ever been composed.

ALEKSANDR PUSHKIN

Aleksandr Pushkin, author of “Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse,” is considered to be Russia’s greatest poet, in a nation that places great value on poetry. The best analogy to explain his popularity in Russia is to call him the Russian Shakespeare or Goethe. (It would be hard to find an American poet of equivalent stature). Moreover, “Eugene Onegin” has virtually achieved the status of a national epic. Several Russians have memorized large sections of the lengthy narrative, with some going as far as to learn it in its entirety by heart. The reason that he is not better known outside of Russia, according to several scholars, is that his tone and word play are too difficult to translate, which reminds one of Robert Frost’s definition of poetry as “what gets lost in translation.”

By Stu Lewis
Pushkin was born in 1799 to parents who were of noble birth (including an African prince) but short on cash. His father and uncle were both writers, and major literary figures were frequent guests at the family home. Despite their financial difficulties, his parents were able to send him to a lyceum on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, where he excelled in literature but was otherwise a poor student. Early in his literary career, he was considered a political radical, both from his writings and his association with other anti-tsarist activists. As a result, he was exiled to various remote areas of the country. This turned out to be a fortunate occurrence, since in December, 1825 several of his former colleagues (referred to as the Decemberists) tried to lead an uprising against the tsar. As a result, five of the leaders were hanged and the rest were exiled. Had Pushkin remained in St. Petersburg, he most likely would have been among them. When the tsar died and was succeeded by Nicholas I, who was considered more liberal than his predecessor, Pushkin wrote to the new tsar, apologizing for his youthful indiscretions and asking to be allowed to return to the big city. The wish was granted, but the tsar kept a close watch on him upon his return. This chain of events helped secure his popularity. The tsarist government valued him for being a loyal subject, while the Communist regime venerated him for his involvement with the rebellious Decemberists.

Over the course of his short lifetime, he wrote voluminous poetry and prose. One Russian scholar has estimated that his writings were set to music by about one thousand composers. Many of the most popular Russian operas are based on his writing, including two additional operas of Tchaikovsky (“Mazeppa” and “Queen of Spades”), Glinka’s “Ruslan and Lyuudmila,” Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Golden Cockerel,” and Modest Mussorgsky’s “Boris Gudenov.”

He was less fortunate in his personal life. He was a compulsive gambler, a failing reflected in “The Queen of Spades.” In 1831 he
married the noted beauty Natalya Goncharova, who had no interest in literature and was fond of attending expensive parties and balls, thereby subjecting her husband to staggering financial difficulties. Moreover, Natalya had several scandalous affairs with other men. When Baron D’Anthes (who was married to Natalya’s sister) became openly involved with Natalya instead, Pushkin, who had been involved in duels before, ignored the lesson of “Eugene Onegin” and challenged him to a duel, which cost the poet’s life at age 37.

RUSSIAN OPERA

Opera in Russia began as an import from Italy, supported primarily by and for the nobility, who had enough money to attract some of the leading composers of the day. Among others, such well-known composers as Giovanni Paisello (best known for his “Barber of Seville,” which preceded the Rossini version by several years), Dominic Cimarosa, and Vicente Martín y Soler (best remembered for a brief reference to his “Una Cosa Rara” in Mozart and DaPonte’s “Don Giovanni”) spent several years in Russia. Conversely, many of the earliest Russian opera composers went to Italy to learn the art of composition.

In the late 1700’s, however, the Russians began to compose operas in their native language based on native themes. The first such opera of note was Mikhail Glinka’s “Ruslan and Lyudmila,” based on a Pushkin poem. This was followed by Alexander Dargomyzhsky’s “The Stone Guest,” a different take on the Don Giovanni legend, left unfinished at his death but completed by Rimsky-Korsakov in 1872. Several others, virtually never performed outside of Russia, followed. Modest Mussorgsky’s “Boris Godunov” (1872) is considered by many to be the greatest Russian opera,
though the grand-opera tradition in which it was written has gone out of fashion, at least outside of Russia. Tchaikovsky was also a major figure around that time. Among the most significant opera composers of that era were Aleksandr Borodin, whose opera “Prince Igor” is best known to Americans for the music that was lifted from it for the Broadway musical “Kismet,” and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, better known for his instrumental “Scheherazade.” Other significant composers were Sergei Rachmaninoff and Sergei Prokofiev, whose adaptation of “War and Peace” is performed occasionally, and Dmitri Shostakovich, whose “Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District” gained him some notoriety, though his life demonstrated the drawbacks of having to work under the Communist regime; his career was nearly destroyed when Stalin walked out of the above-named opera. As noted previously, most of these works, with the exception of a few by Tchaikovsky, are rarely heard outside of Russia. I am not including Stravinsky in their company since most of his “operas” are closer to oratorios in form, and his best-known actual opera, “The Rake’s Progress,” was written to an English libretto.

One thing that virtually all of these composers have in common is that they are better known for their non-operatic compositions, whereas the majority (though not all) opera composers in the West are known primarily for their operas. This is especially true of Italian composers (think of Rossini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini), but it applies to others as well, including Wagner, Gounod, Bizet, Sullivan, and Menotti, to mention a few.

THE BYRONIC HERO

Other than outright villains such as Iago and Scarpia, there are few leading characters in opera less likable than Eugene Onegin. To understand his character type, we need to refer to the British poet.
Lord Byron, whose works were well known in Russia and who is specifically mentioned in both the novel and the opera.

The Byronic hero is most specifically exemplified in “Child Harold’s Pilgrimage.” Lord Macauley described him as “a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorners of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection.” During Byron’s time, many people who found themselves alienated from mainstream culture identified with this character. A few quotations from the poem will help identify his character, who is defined as “the wandering outlaw of his own dark mind...Restless and worn, and stern and wearisome.”

He who ascends to mountain-tops shall find
The loftiest peaks most wrapt in clouds and snow;
He who surpasses and subdues mankind,
Must look down on the hate of those below.
Though high above the sun and glory glow,
And far beneath the earth and ocean spread,
Round him are the icy rocks, and loudly blow
Contending tempests on his naked head,
And thus reward the toils which to those summits led.

Apparently, Onegin identifies with this character prototype. In his study of Puskin, Walter Vickery argues that the poet was implicitly condemning the Child Harold type, a snob with no accomplishments. Speaking of Onegin, he comments, “Deep down he prefers to be ironically detached rather than wholeheartedly committed to any understanding and the effort it requires.”

Consider Onegin’s actions toward other people. Not only does he look down his nose at the country people among whom he lives;
he betrays anyone whose trust he believes he has earned. He has two friends: one whom he effectively murders, the other whose marriage he attempts to destroy. Furthermore, he is self-pitying, speaking of the suffering his conscience over the duel has caused him, not of the damage it did to his direct victim and the Larin family. In the final line of the opera, he again thinks only of himself.

In great literature and drama, the protagonist is one who grows during the course of the story. The Onegin of the final scene is the same as the Onegin of Scene I. It is Tatiana who over the course of four years has been transformed from a simple, impulsive country girl into a magnificent, mature woman who is guided by her strong sense of morality and her understanding of her obligations toward others. Onegin may be the title character, but Tatiana is clearly the heroine. It is no wonder that both Pushkin and Tchaikovsky—as well as readers and opera-goers throughout the years—have fallen in love with her.

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