



Pushkin, Tchaikovsky and *Eugene Onegin*

Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799 – 1837) is Russia's national treasure. Poet, playwright and author of short stories, Pushkin was a cosmopolitan, cultured man who led a wild life. He was extremely well read, conversant with French literature, inspired by Russian history and folk stories. He was also a liberal in an age of autocracy, writing satirical, bawdy and sometimes subversive epigrams that condemned him to long periods of exile.

Eugene Onegin, his long novel-in-verse, is regarded as his supreme achievement. The poet himself called it his best and favorite work. Its seven chapters were composed between May 1823 and November 1828, with further revisions by the author in 1831. The 389 stanzas in *Eugene Onegin* are written in the famous Onegin stanza form, a tour-de-force realized with extraordinary skill and finesse. Despite the rigorous, complex rhyming structure, the work has a casual, conversational tone, a light touch.

Pushkin's tale combined fully realized, psychologically complex characters with long digressions on life and society in all its aspects, often with a sting in the final couplet. He dwells on the beauty of the Russian countryside and the life of its people, serfs and landowners, and muses on the great themes of love, convention and misplaced passion. There are frequent autobiographical passages, filled with a sometimes bitter sense of loss. The omnipresent narrator's voice stands in for Pushkin himself.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was inspired by the works of Aleksandr Pushkin. -At a time when opera was regarded as music's supreme artistic form Tchaikovsky turned to Russia's greatest poet for source material. From the 1825 play *Boris Godunov* he set a scene for a projected opera, now lost. His *Mazeppa* of 1881-83 drew its libretto from *Poltava*, Pushkin's historical poem of 1828-29. *The Queen of Spades*, composed in 1890, was inspired by a short story of the same title written in 1833, though Tchaikovsky took considerable liberties with the text.

Tchaikovsky began writing his masterpiece *Eugene Onegin* in May of 1877 during a period of great emotional turmoil. He had contemplated marriage in order to quash rumors of his homosexuality. On July 6 he married Antonina Milyukova. It proved an utter disaster. Tchaikovsky soon fled his wife in a state of panic and loathing, never to see her again. Ever after he referred to her as "the reptile." Later, recuperating in Europe, Tchaikovsky found solace in resuming his work on *Eugene Onegin*, completing it on February 3, 1878.

The composer had decided to set long passages of Pushkin's original text, often quoted verbatim. He crafted his opera from different episodes, knowing that his audience was familiar with the original narrative and all its digressions. He also inserted another poem by Pushkin into *Eugene Onegin*. It is the melancholy song of the sisters Tatyana and Olga that begins Act One.

It is well known that Tchaikovsky identified with his heroine. But Pushkin too expressed great sympathy for Tatyana despite all her faults, from her overwrought personality to her propensity for "trashy" novels. He even likened her to his Muse, though he made her the most miserably unhappy girl in all of literature.

What Tchaikovsky chose to leave out of the opera is as revealing as what he kept. The most noticeable difference is the absence of the authorial voice, the poet observing the action and

commenting on the deficiencies of his protagonists. The many digressions, the ironic tone and satirical asides on the shallowness and deceit of society, his own wry farewell to the passions and despairs of love are all absent from the opera. Irony was not a part of Tchaikovsky's vocabulary. There is Tatyana's famous Letter Scene, but not Eugene's letter that mirrors hers and in the novel-in-verse is given equal weight. Tchaikovsky omits Tatyana's famous nightmare, that terrifying, erotic phantasmagoria presaging Lensky's violent death by Onegin's hand. Likewise there is no allusion to her superstitious belief in divination, especially the gift of prophesying marriage from certain omens. There is no scene of her disillusionment when, in his absence, she enters Onegin's house, and in the library finds an entirely commonplace selection of books, superficially annotated. It is a moment when Tatyana realizes that she had projected upon Onegin all of her passion and longing for an ideal union, a passion fostered by the old-fashioned novels that had captivated her for so long. Nor does Tchaikovsky depict Tatyana being carted off against her will to the Moscow marriage market, where she catches the eye of some fat General.

Tchaikovsky also chose not to set the first chapter of the novel, where the reader meets Onegin. He is intelligent, he is bored, he is cynical, he is selfish, and gradually he withdraws, a misanthrope as lost to society in his own way as Tatyana is in hers. Tchaikovsky's reading of the character is close, but lacks the full force of Eugene's profound alienation. He does not show how, in the midst of St. Petersburg's glittering society, Onegin gradually comes to renounce the frivolity, the fashionable posturing and intrigues, the frantic pursuit of pleasure. He grows tired of his own affectations and the empty life he leads, withdrawing into a profound isolation.

And what did Tchaikovsky add? Most noticeably he transformed that fat general into Prince Gremin, whose noble aria adds a bass voice to the mix. The choruses and songs of happy serfs are likewise amplified, woven into the drama in counterpart to the emotions of the chief characters. Within the duel scene, the fugal play of the two voices, tenor and baritone, and their convergence in the word "nyet" have a plangent quality that is pure Tchaikovsky, though the text follows closely the original poem.

And then there is the ending. The opera concludes resoundingly with Onegin's tormented cry "Ignominy...Anguish...Oh, my pitiable fate!" Pushkin simply loses interest in the work and abruptly ditches his Onegin.

Of course an opera is not a piece of literature. Opera speaks a different language. The meaning is in the music, vocal and orchestral. Tchaikovsky was right to call his work a series of "Lyrical Scenes," inspired by the far more complex Pushkin novel-in-verse, yet emotionally intense, brilliant and complete in its own right.

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