

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

EUGENE ONEGIN

CONDUCTOR
James Gaffigan

PRODUCTION
Deborah Warner

SET DESIGNER
Tom Pye

COSTUME DESIGNER
Chloe Obolensky

LIGHTING DESIGNER
Jean Kalman

PROJECTION DESIGNERS
Ian William Galloway
Finn Ross

CHOREOGRAPHER
Kim Brandstrup

REVIVAL STAGE DIRECTOR
Paula Williams

GENERAL MANAGER
Peter Gelb

JEANETTE LERMAN-NEUBAUER
MUSIC DIRECTOR
Yannick Nézet-Séguin

Opera in three acts

Libretto by the composer and Konstantin Shilovsky, based on the novel in verse by Alexander Pushkin

Friday, March 25, 2022
7:00-10:45 PM

First time this season

The production of *Eugene Onegin* was made possible by a generous gift from **Ambassador and Mrs. Nicholas F. Taubman**

The revival of this production is made possible by a gift from the Metropolitan Opera Club

A co-production of the Metropolitan Opera and English National Opera

Tonight's performance is dedicated to the memory of Joel Revzen, who passed away in May 2020 from complications relating to Covid-19. A Met assistant conductor since 1999, he made his company debut leading *Eugene Onegin* in 2017.

With this performance and its entire spring season, the Met honors Ukraine, its citizens, and the many lives lost.

The Metropolitan Opera

2021-22 SEASON

The 156th Metropolitan Opera performance of
PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY'S

EUGENE ONEGIN

CONDUCTOR
James Gaffigan

IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE

TATIANA
Ailyn Pérez

MONSIEUR TRIQUET
Tony Stevenson*

OLGA
Varduhi Abrahamyan

ZARETSKI
Richard Bernstein

MADAME LARINA
Elena Zaremba

PRINCE GREMIN
Ain Anger

FILIPPYEVA
Larissa Diadkova

OFFSTAGE VOICE
Marco Antonio Jordão

LENSKI
Piotr Beccala

EUGENE ONEGIN
Igor Golovatenko

CAPTAIN
Vladyslav Buialskiy**

This performance is being broadcast live on Metropolitan Opera Radio on SiriusXM channel 355 and streamed at metopera.org.

Friday, March 25, 2022, 7:00-10:45PM



Ailyn Pérez as
Tatiana and Igor
Golovatenko
in the title role
of Tchaikovsky's
Eugene Onegin

Chorus Master Donald Palumbo
Assistant Costume Designer Luca Costigliolo
Musical Preparation Linda Hall, Gareth Morrell,
Jonathan Khuner, Katelan Trán Terrell*,
and Kseniia Polstiankina Barrad
Assistant Stage Directors Marcus Shields
Prompter Jonathan Khuner
Met Titles Cori Ellison

Scenery, properties, and electrical props constructed
and painted by Bay Productions, Coolflight, ENO
Property Workshop, and Metropolitan Opera Shops
Costumes constructed by Cosprop, London, MH Couture—
José Gomez; Atelier Onegin-Caraco/Claudie Gastine,
Paris; Sands Films; ENO Production Wardrobe; and
Metropolitan Opera Costume Department
Wigs and Makeup constructed and executed by Metropolitan
Opera Wig and Makeup Department

This production uses gunshot effects.

This performance is made possible in part by public funds from
the New York State Council on the Arts.

Before the performance begins, please switch off cell phones
and other electronic devices.

Please remember that face masks are required at all times inside
the Met.

Met Titles

To activate, press the red button to the right of the screen in front of
your seat and follow the instructions provided. To turn off the display,
press the red button once again. If you have questions, please ask an
usher at intermission.

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Synopsis

Act I

Autumn in the country. On the Larin estate, Madame Larina reflects upon the days before she married, when she was courted by her husband but loved another. She is now a widow with two daughters: Tatiana and Olga. While Tatiana spends her time reading novels, with whose heroines she closely identifies, Olga is being courted by their neighbor, the poet Lenski. He arrives unexpectedly, bringing with him a new visitor, the aristocrat Eugene Onegin, with whom Tatiana soon falls in love.

That night, Tatiana asks her nurse Filippyevna to tell her of her first love and marriage. Tatiana stays up all night writing a passionate letter to Onegin and persuades Filippyevna to have her grandson deliver it in the morning.

Tatiana waits for Onegin's response. When he arrives, Onegin admits that he was touched by her declaration but explains that he cannot accept it and offers only friendship in return. He advises her to control her emotions, lest another man take advantage of her innocence.

Intermission (AT APPROXIMATELY 8:20 PM)

Act II

January. The local community gathers at the Larin estate to celebrate Tatiana's name day. Onegin has reluctantly agreed to accompany Lenski to what he mistakenly believes will be an intimate family celebration. Annoyed to find himself trapped at an enormous party and bored by the occasion, Onegin takes his revenge on Lenski by flirting and dancing with Olga. Lenski's jealousy rises to such a height that he challenges Onegin to a duel, and the party breaks up.

Before the duel, Lenski meditates upon his poetry, his love for Olga, and death. Lenski's second finds Onegin's late arrival and his choice of a second insulting. Although both Lenski and Onegin are full of remorse, neither stops the duel, and Onegin kills Lenski.

Intermission (AT APPROXIMATELY 9:35 PM)

Act III

St. Petersburg, several years later. Having traveled abroad since the duel, Onegin has returned to the capital. At a ball, Prince Gremin introduces his young wife. Onegin is astonished to recognize her as Tatiana and realizes that he now loves her.

Onegin has sent a letter to Tatiana. He arrives at the Gremin palace and begs her to run away with him. Tatiana admits that she still loves him but that she has made her decision and will not betray her husband, leaving Onegin to his despair.

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Eugene Onegin

Premiere: Malyi Theatre, Moscow, 1879, with students from the Moscow Conservatory; Professional premiere: Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, 1881

Tchaikovsky's many moods—tender, grand, melancholic—are all given free rein in *Eugene Onegin*, the composer's lush adaptation of Alexander Pushkin's seminal work of Russian literature. The great poet reimagined the Byronic model of the restless romantic antihero as a definitive bored Russian aristocrat caught between convention and ennui; Tchaikovsky, similarly, took Western European operatic forms and transformed them into an authentic and undeniably Russian work. At the core of the opera is the young girl Tatiana, who grows from a sentimental adolescent into a complete woman in one of opera's most convincing character developments. Always popular in Russia, *Eugene Onegin* stands at the heart of the international repertory and commands as much admiration among experts as affection among newcomers.

The Creators

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-93) enjoyed tremendous fame during his lifetime as a composer of symphonic music and ballets, and his operas have achieved a steadily growing popularity outside Russia. The composer largely put together the libretto for *Eugene Onegin* himself. The source of the libretto is the mock-epic verse novel of the same name by Pushkin (1799-1837), whose position in Russian literature can be compared to that of Shakespeare's in English. Pushkin's body of work is marked by a wide range of tone and style, and his writings have been the source of many other Russian operas (most notably Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov, Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel*, and Tchaikovsky's own *The Queen of Spades*). Tchaikovsky specifically chose the most emotional and dramatic moments from Pushkin's poem and called his work "lyric scenes," emphasizing the episodic, rather than the strictly narrative, nature of his libretto.

The Setting

Pushkin presents a vast overview of old Russian society around 1820, which Tchaikovsky's original score neatly divides into each of its three acts: from the timeless rituals of country life to the rural gentry with its troubles and pleasures and, finally, the glittering imperial aristocracy of St. Petersburg. The Met's production places the action in the later 19th century, around the time of the opera's premiere.

The Music

Tchaikovsky's universally beloved lyric gifts are at their most powerful and multilayered in this opera. Rich ensembles punctuate the work, including a quartet for women near the beginning, an elaborate choral ensemble that concludes the first scene of Act II, and a haunting fugue for tenor and baritone in Act II, Scene 2. The vocal solos are among the most striking in the repertory: Anyone who can remember the first stirrings of love will be moved by Tatiana's extended "Letter Scene" in Act I, in which she rhapsodically composes a letter to Onegin in an outpouring of gorgeous melody. This is rivaled in popularity by the tenor's moving farewell to his young life in Act II, while Onegin's Act III narrative of the pointlessness of life borders on Wagnerian. Interspersed among these great solos are finely honed character pieces, such as the French tutor's charming name-day serenade to Tatiana (in French) and the bass Prince Gremin's moving ode to the surprise of finding love late in life. Throughout the opera, Tchaikovsky's unique mastery of dance music provides episodes of ballet that reflect and augment the drama.

Met History

Eugene Onegin premiered at the Met in 1920, sung in Italian by a cast headed by Giuseppe DeLuca and Claudia Muzio. After a total of eight performances in two consecutive seasons, the opera disappeared from the Met until 1957, when it was presented in English with George London, Lucine Amara, and Richard Tucker, with Peter Brook directing. Onegin appeared in Russian in 1977 with Sherrill Milnes in the title role and James Levine conducting. Robert Carsen directed a new production in 1997 that featured Vladimir Chernov, Galina Gorchakova, and Neil Shicoff, with Antonio Pappano conducting in his Met debut. Other notable stars to have appeared in the opera include Leo Nucci, Thomas Hampson, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, and Peter Mattei (Onegin); Mirella Freni, Raina Kabaivanska, Leontyne Price, Ileana Cotruș, Renée Fleming, and Karita Mattila (Tatiana); Nicolai Gedda, Marcello Giordani, and Ramón Vargas (Lenski); and Nicolai Ghiurov and Giorgio Tozzi (Prince Gremin). The current production, by Deborah Warner, opened the Met's 2013-14 season, with Mariusz Kwiecień, Anna Netrebko, and Piotr Bezdala in the leading roles and Valery Gergiev conducting.

I would eagerly take on any opera in which there were human beings similar to myself, who would experience feelings that I also have experienced and can understand ... I am seeking an intimate but powerful drama whose conflict would be founded on situations that I myself have experienced. ... I wrote [Eugene Onegin] because I was obeying an irresistible inner attraction. I assure you that it is only under this condition that one should write operas.

—Tchaikovsky, letter of January 2, 1878, to composer Sergei Taneyev

The idea for an opera based on Alexander Pushkin's celebrated novel in verse arose out of conversation with friends at the home of contralto and fellow Moscow Conservatory professor Elizaveta Andreevna Lavrovskaja, as Tchaikovsky described in lively terms to his brother Modest in a letter of May 18, 1877:

The conversation came round to operatic subjects. Her stupid husband was talking awful nonsense and suggested all sorts of impossible librettos. Lizaveta Andreevna was silent and smiled condescendingly when she suddenly said: 'What about using Eugene Onegin?' The idea seemed wild to me, and I did not say anything, but later, while eating alone in a pub I remembered about Onegin and started thinking ... then became captivated, and by the end of my meal I had decided. I ran at once to get Pushkin at the library ... read the poem over again with rapture and passed a sleepless night. ... In the morning I went off to [Konstantin] Shilovskiy's, and now he is arranging the libretto for me at full speed. ... You cannot imagine how passionately keen I am about this plot. How glad I am to get rid of Ethiopian princesses, pharaohs, poisonings, and all that sort of pompous convention. *Onegin* is full of poetry. I know very well that there will be no scenic effects and little movement in this opera; but the lyrical quality, the humanity, and the simplicity of the story, and a text written by a genius, will compensate more than enough for these failings.

Tchaikovsky's visit with Lavrovskaja and his impetuous love for Pushkin's star-crossed lovers coincided with one of the worst crises of his life, his disastrous marriage to Antonina Milyukova.

As a successful composer and professor of music, a devoted son, brother, and friend, Tchaikovsky's place in the public forum was secure. He was fastidious about his working environment, particularly when it came to composing opera, needing above all solitude and a piano. It was one thing to isolate himself while composing, but the social estrangement he experienced as a gay man was a source of immense suffering. His siblings were also aware of the situation, and he was very open with them in his correspondence. As he wrote to his brother Anatoly on January 9, 1875, from Moscow: "I am very, very lonely here, and if it were not for working constantly I should simply give myself over to melancholy. It's also true that my damned homosexuality

creates an unbridgeable chasm between me and most people. ... I am growing more and more unsociable."

Tchaikovsky increasingly worried about gossip and scandal, even though he continued to have affairs with men, including the violinist Josef Kotek, who inspired the "passion of unimaginable force" and "endless love" that Tchaikovsky described to Modest in a letter of January 19, 1877.

One of the ways he dealt with these anxieties was a series of attempts to suppress his sexual identity, as in 1868–69 when he was briefly engaged to the soprano Désirée Artôt. Late in the summer of 1876, he concluded again that the best course of action would be marriage, even though there was no bride on the horizon. But marriage as the composer imagined it would have to be "open," meaning, as he told Modest in his letter of September 28, 1876, "I shall not enter into any lawful or illicit union with a woman without having fully ensured my own peace and my own freedom." Only a woman of extraordinary devotion could or would agree to an arrangement of this kind.

That woman materialized in the form of Antonina Milyukova (1848–1917), a former conservatory student who had secretly loved Tchaikovsky for many years and finally revealed it to him in a letter of March 26, 1877. Tchaikovsky did not reply, and Antonina wrote again, threatening suicide. The two met on June 1, and by June 23, Tchaikovsky proposed marriage, promising only "brotherly love." She accepted straight away, and they were married in St. George's Church in Moscow on July 6.

The couple actually lived together for only a few weeks. Tchaikovsky made numerous excuses to travel and eventually separated permanently from his wife, neither of them pursued a divorce. In April of 1894, only a few months after Tchaikovsky's death, the *Petersburgskaya Gazeta* published Antonina's autobiographical narrative, which included a claim to significant influence on the composition of *Eugene Onegin*:

He asked my permission to go to his friend's estate near Moscow in order to write more quickly an opera he had already begun to compose in his head. This was *Eugene Onegin*, the best of all his operas.

It is good because it was written under the influence of love. It is based directly on us. He himself is Onegin, and I am Tatiana. His operas written before and afterward are not warmed with love; they are cold and fragmentary. There is no wholeness in them. This is the only one that is good from beginning to end.

That Antonina thought of herself as Tchaikovsky's muse is not nearly as fantastical as a first reading might suggest. A similar narrative, much of it in Tchaikovsky's own words, was published three years later by musician and music critic Nikolay Kashkin. In the relevant passage, Tchaikovsky drew a distinct parallel between Tatiana and Onegin and Antonina and himself:

At the same time I was captivated utterly and exclusively by the thought of Eugene Onegin, and specifically of Tatiana, whose letter had first drawn me to this composition. Before I had a libretto or even any general plan for the opera, I began to write the music for this letter, yielding to an irresistible emotional need to set about this project, in the heat of which I not only forgot about Miss Milyukova, but even lost her letter or hid it away so well that I could not find it...

While engrossed in the composition I had come to sympathize with the figure of Tatiana to such a degree that she began to seem alive to me, together with everything round her. I loved Tatiana and was terribly indignant with Onegin, who appeared to me a cold and heartless fop. On receiving a second letter from Miss Milyukova, I felt ashamed and was even angry at myself for my attitude toward her...

In my mind, all this merged with the notion of Tatiana, while I myself, it seemed to me, had behaved incomparably worse than Onegin.

One of the great pleasures of Pushkin's novel is the narrator's commentary, a distinctly literary conceit that would suffer in a direct transfer to the stage. But Tchaikovsky did not abandon the idea altogether, adopting a Wagnerian strategy in which the orchestra takes on the roles of analyst and critic. The shift from words to music was a completely natural process to the composer, who believed in the profound musicality of Pushkin's language. As he wrote to his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, on July 3, 1877:

I have never regretted my choice of subject matter for an instant. I cannot understand how it is that you who love music cannot appreciate Pushkin, who by the power of this genius often oversteps the limitations of poetry and enters the illimitable sphere of music. This is no mere phrase. Apart from the substance and form of his verses, they have another quality, something in their sequence of sound which penetrates to our inmost soul. This "something" is music.

And it is through music that Tchaikovsky was able to achieve something that Pushkin could not: He memorialized Tatiana in a "sequence of sound" known as Tatiana's theme. Fragments of the theme are first heard in the halting opening phrases of the brief orchestral introduction to the opera. Tchaikovsky saved its full realization for the Letter Scene, in which Tatiana pours her heart into an unfiltered declaration of love for a man she has met for the first time only hours before. While Tatiana's words may be naive, her musical language is rapturous and lamenting: a downwardly cascading line that falters chromatically in the middle to descend again, rise briefly, and finally collapse in a sigh.

Tatiana is a musical presence throughout the opera—as a fragmented undercurrent to the social context iterated in songs and dances; in Lenski's farewell, in which his despair parallels hers; as a mirror image in the ascending lines of Prince Gremin's

homage to love; and, most significantly, in the freely constructed monologues and dialogue duets that crystallize her relationship with Onegin, who absorbs her music into his final soliloquy. And even though Onegin has the last word in the opera, Tatiana is the nexus of the drama as it unfurls in two throughlines in contrary motion: her social ascent and the defeat of passion.

Tchaikovsky took enormous pleasure in this opera and often played it for himself, describing one such "performance" to Modest in a letter of May 27, 1878:

Last night I played nearly the whole of Eugene Onegin: The composer was the only listener. I am ashamed to say so, but I must tell you in secret that the listener was impressed to tears by the music and paid a thousand compliments to the composer. Oh! If only all the other members of the future audience could be so impressed and touched by this music as the author was...

—Helen M. Greenwald

Helen M. Greenwald is chair of the department of music history at New England Conservatory and editor of the Oxford Handbook of Opera.



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