

A HEROINE TO CHERISH: THE EMOTIONAL JOURNEY OF TCHAIKOVSKY'S TATYANA

BY ROGER PINES

When Tchaikovsky's stage works come to mind, we tend to think first of his universally admired ballets. However, Tchaikovsky also composed 11 operas, rich in humanity and abounding in heartfelt melody. *Yevgeny Onegin* (in English, *Eugene Onegin*), premiered in 1879, has long surpassed the others in popularity, remaining today the best-loved of all Russian operas internationally.

We owe the piece's dramatic source to Russia's most celebrated poet, Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837). He scored the greatest success of his short life with a verse novel, *Yevgeny Onegin* (published in serial form, 1825-32). The protagonist was to some degree inspired by Lord Byron's Childe Harold: the arrogant, restless young man who's easily bored and doesn't fit in. But it's not Onegin who tears one's heart out—it's Pushkin's heroine, Tatyana, to whom Tchaikovsky gives a profoundly moving emotional arc in the course of the opera.

Tchaikovsky prepared the libretto with fellow composer Konstantin Shilovsky, taking it directly from Pushkin's original wherever possible. Much editing was needed, and Tchaikovsky experienced some criticism for it; everyone had a different idea of how he should have proceeded with this familiar text. But he loved Pushkin's words and created the opera in a state approaching ecstasy, especially where Tatyana was concerned; her Letter Scene was the first portion of the score that he composed. The opera's keynote is lyricism, with grand dramatic outbursts employed very sparingly. We should remember that Tchaikovsky subtitled *Onegin*, "Lyrical Scenes" and indeed it's lyric voices that are needed—"juicy" lyric certainly (especially for Tatyana), but lyric nonetheless. Each role's vocal range is entirely manageable, with expressiveness—never vocal flamboyance—invariably the composer's emphasis.

In the opening scene, a moment of lyrical fervor prepares us for what's to come. This brief passage occurs when Tatyana sings to her mother about the romantic novel she's reading; the torment of its young lovers has affected her deeply. The girl's every phrase emerges with warmth, sincerity, and an unspoken but obvious vulnerability.

It's in the second scene of Act One that Tchaikovsky uses his lyrical style to reveal the depths of his heroine's soul. Her desperate, lovesick letter to Onegin represents the opera's emotional center. Most lyric sopranos long to sing Tatyana, and that surely has most to do with the 13-minute "Letter Scene"—a *tour de force* for a thoroughly musicianly and emotionally-responsive singing actress.

Tatyana calls for a "full lyric" soprano. Paradoxically, most youthful voices aren't yet able to offer much substance in the middle range, but that's exactly where much of this character's music "sits." The singer must free herself of technical concerns in order to concentrate on creating an arresting, aching intimacy, adapting vocal color to musical and textual needs. Pushkin had a surprisingly penetrating understanding of a young girl's yearnings, and how stunning that Tchaikovsky could express them musically with such unerring truth.

So what do we see in the object of Tatyana's affection? The following scene tells all. Here Onegin meets with Tatyana after receiving the letter and admits in person that, although touched by Tatyana's candor, marriage and domestic life offer no appeal. He can love her as a brother, perhaps more than that, and he asks that she not be angered by his response.

This music is cool—Onegin is simply being straightforward. He's often described as callous, but neither music nor text communicate that here. He can't be played as nasty and cold, otherwise we'd get annoyed with Tatyana for wanting anything to do with him. We *must* perceive something that would so intensely attract her. Certainly through body language and vocal color, the baritone portraying Onegin can project the coolness that wounds Tatyana at this moment.

Things change, however: in the final scene, Tatyana takes the upper hand. Yes, she struggles to sustain her core of strength, but in the end she prevails, showing a maturity acquired through marriage and her new stature in society.

The same singer who began the opera portraying a shy teenager now presents a conflicted but ultimately determined woman. Here the voice, too, can reflect the growth in the person. It should gain steadily in breadth and thrust during the scene's magnificent opening *arioso* as Tatyana confronts Onegin, wondering whether it's her social position that has awakened his attraction to her. When Tatyana and Onegin reflect on how close they'd been to true happiness, the quiet despair of their individual vocal lines speaks volumes. But after admitting that she still loves Onegin, Tatyana asserts—despite his entreaties—that she will stay with her husband. These closing pages are as dramatic as anything written for lyric voices in Russian opera, the orchestra surging with full Tchaikovskyan grandeur.

The sheer scale of the music at this moment is in keeping with the strength Tatyana has acquired. She conquers her agony and takes charge of her life. The man kneeling before her previously scarred her heart, and it's a measure of her growth as a woman that she can move forward. We know she won't forget the feelings he once inspired in her, but will she live confidently and even happily without him?

Absolutely.

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