

Eugene Onegin



An opera in three acts
Composed by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Text By Tchaikovsky & K.S. Shilovsky
after a poem by Pushkin

Written by Glyndebourne Education Department

Preparing for a workshop

This pack contains information about the basic storyline and characters of **Eugene Onegin** - it would be useful for your students to know something of this before the workshop. The entire pack will not take long to read.

Breaks and refreshments

There will be a break of approximately 30 minutes during the workshop, and about one hour and 45 minutes between workshop and performance at the theatre.

Please ensure that the students bring drinks, snacks and a packed meal as food and refreshments will not be available.

Parking

Please allow adequate time for parking before a workshop as workshops must start promptly (please make sure you check the start time of your workshop)

Information

Students below year 10 should not attend the workshop.

If you would like further information, please contact Glyndebourne Education on 01273 812321

What will happen in a workshop?

Many of the students who will attend our workshops have never been to see an opera before. The workshop will serve as an introduction to opera itself as well as the specific opera to be seen that evening.

The afternoon will consist of:

Warm up activities

Musical exercises

Dramatic exercises

Listening to singers from the GTO company

Discussing the opera

By the end of the workshop, the students will be ready to see and hear and enjoy the opera with genuine understanding.

Students should wear comfortable clothes suitable for physical activities (if you would like to please bring a change of clothes for the evening performance).

Eugene Onegin

The Characters

Madame Larina

a widowed landowner
mezzo-soprano

Tatiana

Madame Larina's daughter
soprano

Olga

Madame Larina's daughter
mezzo-soprano

Lensky

Olga's fiancé
tenor

Eugene Onegin

a young nobleman
baritone

Prince Gremin

a retired general
bass

Monsieur Triquet

a Frenchman
tenor

Filipievna

an old nurse
contralto

Zaretsky

a military officer
baritone

The basics of the plot

Tchaikovsky's **Eugene Onegin** is a tragic tale of impossible love. Based on Pushkin's poem, the opera tells of the young dreamy Tatiana's infatuation with the aristocrat, Eugene Onegin whom she meets through her sister Olga's fiancé Lensky. She professes her love for him and is devastated by his cold reaction. Onegin is cynical about love and marriage, and after provoking and enraging Lensky, he kills him in a duel. Many years of exile pass before Onegin comes across Tatiana with her new husband. Seeing her as an elegant sophisticated young wife, he realised too late that he loves her and is now sentenced to a life of loneliness and despair.

Synopsis

ACT I

Scene 1 *The Garden of Larin's House. Late summer*

Madame Larina, a widow, lives on her country estate with her daughters, Olga and Tatiana. The girls' romantic duet, heard from inside the house, reminds their mother of her own youth. She and the old nurse Filipievna recall how their own romantic ideals were crushed by arranged marriages. Peasants arrive to celebrate the harvest and the two girls appear. But Olga has no time for Tatiana's romantic melancholy - she is too full of the joys of love. Her fiancé, the young poet Lensky, arrives with a stranger - his neighbour and new friend, Eugene Onegin. Tatiana falls violently in love with the stranger, while Lensky ardently declares his love for Olga.

Scene 2 *Tatiana's bedroom*

Unable to sleep, Tatiana asks the nurse to sing to her about her childhood: was she ever in love? Filipievna retorts that love had nothing to do with it - she was forced into marriage aged only thirteen. Tatiana confesses that she is in love and asks for pen and paper. Alone, she pours out a torrent of feelings, anxieties and hopes in a passionate love letter. As the sound of a shepherd's pipe heralds the dawn, she tells the nurse to deliver the letter to Onegin.

Scene 3 *A corner of the Larins' garden*

Peasant girls sing as they gather berries. Onegin calls to return Tatiana's letter and criticises her for writing so frankly to a stranger. He tells her that he is too restless for love and marriage - he will love her as a brother, nothing more. Devastated, Tatiana is upset to respond.

ACT II

Scene 1 *A ball at the Larins' house*

Guests gather to celebrate Tatiana's birthday. Bored by the small-minded, provincial gossip, Onegin criticises Lensky for inviting him to such a dull party. To spite Lensky, he flirts with Olga, while a French guest, Monsieur Triquet, sings an ode to Tatiana. Onegin insists on dancing with Olga and, aroused to jealous fury, Lensky publicly challenges him to a duel. Too late, Onegin realises that this time he has gone too far.

ACT II *cont.*

Scene 2 *A lonely spot: early morning. Winter*

Lensky, remembering happier times, meditates on his love for Olga and sings that he no longer cares if he lives or dies. Onegin arrives. Both men are filled with remorse that their friendship should have come to this, but there can be no turning back: honour demands that the duel must proceed. The duellers measure up, Onegin fires first and Lensky is killed.

ACT III

Scene 1 *A grand ball in St. Petersburg. Some years later*

Restless and world-weary, Onegin has returned to St. Petersburg after years in exile to atone for the death of his friend. The host of the ball is an old friend, Prince Gremin, a retired general. The Prince introduces his wife, Tatiana, who is now a sophisticated, mature and elegant society lady. Gremin tells Onegin that his love for Tatiana has transformed his life. Astounded at how she has changed, Onegin realises that he has fallen desperately in love with Tatiana and swears to try and win back her love.

Scene 2 *A room in Prince Gremin's palace*

Tatiana has received a love-letter from Onegin, which has stirred up her emotions. When he throws himself at her feet, Tatiana reminds him that he once rejected her, and accuses him of loving her for her new-found status, or for the frisson of scandal that an affair would bring. As he pours out his passion, she at last concedes that although she still loves him, it is too late: she will not compromise her husband. Onegin rushes out in despair: now only death remains.

Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich

(b Votkinsk, 7 May 1840; d St Petersburg, 6 November 1893)

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in 1840, the son of a modestly prosperous civil servant. After initial training for a career in law, Tchaikovsky began his official musical education at the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1862. On graduating, he accepted a teaching post at the Conservatoire, enabling him to dedicate himself to music. Years of successful commissions and compositions followed. Then, in 1876, a wealthy patroness, Nadezhda von Meck began a correspondence with Tchaikovsky. Although they never met, she supported Tchaikovsky financially for 14 years (until 1890), enabling him to give up his teaching post, thus making him Russia's sole professional full-time composer.

This financial independence was not the only thing that set Tchaikovsky apart from his peers. He was an exact contemporary of "the mighty five" (Balakirev, Cui, Borodin, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsgov) a group of nationalist composers who insisted that Russian composers should use Russian folk music as the basis of their own compositions, that vocal compositions should follow the inflexions of Russian speech and that subject matter should be drawn from Russian history and legend. Tchaikovsky, however, kept his distance from the group. Although he often used Russian folk-tunes in his work (there are several examples in *Onegin*), he believed that the future of Russian music lay not in isolating itself from Europe, but in greater contact with the more progressive parts of Western Europe. Furthermore, he was a true cosmopolitan - an accomplished linguist and experienced traveller, living much of his life abroad. He was a fan of the German romantic music hated by the Five and he loved French opera, which they considered frivolous. Bizet's *Carmen* was his favourite piece of music theatre.

Tchaikovsky was an establishmentarian, comfortable with official institutions and existing, and never unwilling to conform to the expectations of the paying public. As a result, unlike the Five, who remained relatively unknown during their lives, Tchaikovsky was recognised as a significant international artist during his lifetime. The rich melodic vein, brilliant orchestral colour and strong emotional expression of his 10 operas, 6 symphonies, symphonic poems, 3 piano concertos, violin concerto, chamber music and 3 ballets earned him a world-wide reputation. In 1893 he was honoured with the Cambridge MusD alongside Saint-Saëns, Boito, Bruch and Grieg and on his American tour of 1891, during which he conducted at the Carnegie Hall inaugural concert, he was repeatedly hailed as, with Brahms and Saint-Saëns, one of the three greatest living composers.

Professionally very much the institutional insider, Tchaikovsky inwardly regarded himself as an outsider, even a social outcast. Feelings of self-alienation plagued him: his closet homosexuality contributed to this in no small way. In 1877, perhaps to dispel rumours about his sexuality, Tchaikovsky entered into a disastrous marriage with an infatuated admirer, Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova. The union left him desperate. In his diary there is mention of suicide, and he even made an ineffectual attempt at taking his life. In the same year as this marriage, Tchaikovsky began work setting Pushkin's poem, *Eugene Onegin*.

Eugene Onegin

Alexander Pushkin (b.1799) was the first Russian author to establish the possibility of using Russian as a literary language. He led a romantic and fiery life, exiled for his political opinions (it was whilst in exile that he wrote *Eugene Onegin*, a novel in verse). In 1836, a French diplomat started a flirtation with his wife: the argument which ensued led to a duel in which Pushkin, like his own creation Lensky, was shot. Russia's greatest poet died two days later in terrible agony. In choosing to set the greatest work by the father of Russian literature, Tchaikovsky was staking a claim to contribute as a musician to Russia's artistic heritage. But in setting a domestic story which includes many references to the influence of European culture in Russia, he was also rejecting the blinkered exotic primitivism of so much Russian nationalist opera.

In writing the opera, Tchaikovsky was adamant that he wanted to express the true feelings of real people. Along with his co-librettist, Konstantin Shilovsky, Tchaikovsky himself set the libretto from Pushkin's poem, much of which was preserved intact (the text of Tatiana's letter, Onegin's response, Lensky's farewell to life). Tchaikovsky said that he wanted "an intimate, profound drama based on situations and conflicts that I myself experienced or observed at first hand and that can move me... I want human beings, not puppets!"

Although most of the libretto uses Pushkin in verbatim, Tchaikovsky added some lines himself. One significant instance of this occurs as Tatiana declares her love to Onegin in the Letter Scene. She sings "Alas I have no power to control my passion. Let what happens to me happen!". Could this be Tchaikovsky voicing his own feelings about his homosexuality? He undoubtedly associated his own gayness with fate: he was disgusted by his sexual activities, yet could not escape them. And he recognised that his sexuality condemned him to frustration and loneliness - also the fate of Tatiana and Onegin through their doomed love for each other. Tchaikovsky's works are laced with themes and motifs of fate: he was obsessed with the inescapable destiny of a person, which may force them to act in self-destructive ways, or which will render all attempts to achieve happiness futile.

In October 1893, Tchaikovsky's fated existence came to an end. During a cholera epidemic in St Petersburg, he drank a glass of unboiled water. He died of cholera nine days later. His death is surrounded by mythology and speculation: some say that he knowingly drank the contaminated water, perhaps to avoid having his homosexuality exposed publicly. Whatever the truth, his death was mourned nationally, and his burial in St Petersburg was a public event such as no Russian musician, not even Shostakovich, has ever had, before or since.

Opera Glossary

aria A song for solo voice reflecting how the character feels (usually miserable) about what has just or is about to happen.

auditorium Space within the theatre occupied by the audience.

baritone Middle-range man's voice, lurking somewhere between bass and tenor.

bass Lowest male voice. Often plays characters with dubious moral fibre.

chorus A body of singers who (mostly) sing and act as a group to make the crowd scenes a bit more plausible. Also the term used for any musical number sung by this group.

conductor Hand-waving-head-honcho, positioned to obscure the view of the lady sitting in the centre of the front row. Makes sure everyone is performing the same piece.

contralto (or alto) Low-pitched woman's voice. Not to be confused with... counter tenor High-pitched man's voice. Nearest we have nowadays to a castrato (from the verb to castrate...ouch...)

ensemble From the French word for "together". When two or more soloists try to have their say at the same time (can get rather messy...). Ensemble for two is a duet, three is a trio, four a quartet and so on.

finale The final number of an act - sung by an ensemble (see above).

intermezzo A piece of music played between the acts of an opera (usually just long enough for the prima donna to put on her sixth frock of the show).

interval A (welcome) break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around, catch up on what's been happening, join the chorus at the bar...

libretto The text of an opera. Written by a librettist.

mezzo-soprano Female singer who can't quite reach those top notes. Not much glass-shattering action here.

orchestra Group of musicians found in the pit.

overture Music at the start of the show. Sets the scene, warms up the orchestra and reminds the audience that the performance is about to begin.

prima donna The leading woman singer in an operatic cast. Not to be confused with Guy Ritchie's wife...

props Mobile pieces of the set which help to make it all a bit more believable.

proscenium arch Wall in front of the curtain, dividing the stage from the auditorium.

recitative The bits which aren't the songs. Closer to the rhythm of speech and often accompanied by just a harpsichord or piano. Used to further the action of the story (we'd never get home if the plot was told through the arias...).

repetiteur from the French for to repeat. This tortured soul sits in on rehearsals and pretends to be an orchestra at the piano.

score The full score contains all the sung and orchestral parts in the opera. The vocal score has the voice parts and a piano reduction of the orchestra (for rehearsals - see repetiteur).

soprano High female voice. Watch out for those delicate window panes...

synopsis Outline of the plot. Especially useful during the interval when it is once more light enough to find out what on earth is happening.

tenor A high male voice. The good guy, pure of heart and all that.