

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Eugene Onegin



Music by
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Libretto by
Konstantin Shilovsky

From the novel in verse
by Alexander Pushkin

An opera in Three Acts
Sung in Russian

**Setting: St. Petersburg/
surrounding countryside**
Time: The 1820s

Characters

Tatiana, Larin's daughter (soprano)..... Renée Fleming
 Olga, Tatiana's sister (mezzo-soprano) Elena Zarembo
 Madame Larin, their mother (mezzo-soprano) Svetlana Volkova
 Filippyevna, the old nurse (mezzo-soprano)..... Larisa Schevchenko
 Lenski, Olga's fiancé (tenor) Ramón Vargas
 Eugene Onegin (baritone)..... Dmitri Hvorostovsky
 A captain (bass)..... Keith Miller
 Monsieur Triquet, an old French tutor (tenor)..... Jean-Paul Fouchécourt
 Zaretski, Onegin's servant (bass)..... Richard Bernstein
 Prince Gremin (bass)..... Sergei Aleksashkin
 Chorus, silent roles: peasants, peasant women, ballroom guests, landowners and ladies of the manor, officers

Conducted by Valery Gergiev
 Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Chorus and Ballet

Moscow première performance at the Maly Theatre in Moscow on May 29, 1879
 Bolshoi première performance at the Bolshoi Theatre on January 23, 1881

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Synopsis

Act I

Scene 1: The garden of the Larin country estate

Madame Larin and their nurse Filippyevna are sitting outside in the garden. They can hear Madame Larin's two daughters, Tatiana and her younger sister Olga, singing a love song.

Madame Larin 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.

A group of peasants enter, celebrating the harvest with songs and dances. Tatiana and Olga watch. Tatiana has been reading a romantic novel and is absorbed by the story. Her carefree sister, on the other hand, wants to join in the celebrations. Madame Larin tells Tatiana that real life is very different from her novels.



Filippyevna announces that unexpected visitors have arrived: Olga's fiancé Lenski, a young poet, and his friend Eugene Onegin, are visiting the area from St Petersburg. The pair are shown in and Lenski introduces Onegin to the Larin family.

Onegin is initially surprised that Lenski has chosen the extrovert Olga rather than her more subtle elder sister, Tatiana, as his fiancée. Tatiana for her part is immediately and strongly attracted to Onegin. Lenski expresses his delight at seeing Olga, and she responds flirtatiously.

Onegin tells Tatiana of his boredom in the country and describes the death of his uncle and his subsequent inheritance of a nearby estate. Filippyevna notices that Onegin has had a profound effect on Tatiana.

Scene 2: Tatiana's room

Tatiana is dressed for bed. Restless and unable to sleep, she asks her nurse Filippyevna to tell her of her first love and marriage. Tatiana confesses that she is in love. Left alone, Tatiana pours out her feelings in a letter to Onegin. She tells him that she loves him and believes that she will never feel this way about anyone else, and begs him to understand and help her. She finishes writing the letter at dawn.

A shepherd's pipe is heard in the distance. Filippyevna enters the room to wake Tatiana. Tatiana persuades her to send her grandson to deliver the letter to Onegin in the morning.

Scene 3: The garden of the Larin country estate

Servant girls pick fruit and sing as they work. Tatiana waits anxiously in the garden for Onegin's arrival. Onegin enters the garden and sees Tatiana. He admits to her that he was touched by her letter but

explains that he cannot accept it and can only offer her friendship. He explains to her that he is not a man who loves easily and is unsuited to marriage. He is unworthy of her love and can only offer her brotherly affection. He advises her to control her emotions, lest another man take advantage of her innocence. The voices of the servant girls singing are heard again. Tatiana is crushed and unable to reply.

Act II

Scene 1: The ballroom of the Larin house



A ball is being held, and the local community has been invited to 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. He grows irritated with a group of neighbors who gossip about him and Tatiana, and with Lenski for persuading him to come to the ball. Annoyed at finding himself trapped at an enormous party and bored by the occasion, Onegin takes his revenge on Lenski by flirting and dancing with Olga.

Lenski is astounded at his arrogance and becomes extremely jealous. He confronts Olga, but she cannot see that she has done anything wrong and tells Lenski not to be ridiculous. Onegin asks Olga to dance with him again as "punishment" for Lenski's jealousy; she agrees.

The elderly French tutor Monsieur Triquet sings some couplets in honor of Tatiana. Lenski's jealousy is aroused to such a height that the quarrel between Lenski and Onegin becomes more intense. Lenski renounces his friendship with Onegin in front of all the guests, and challenges Onegin to a duel, which Onegin is forced, with many misgivings, to accept. Tatiana collapses and the ball ends in confusion.

Scene 2: On the banks of a wooded stream, early morning



Lenski, while waiting for Onegin to arrive, reflects on his life, his fear of death and his love for Olga. Onegin arrives with his second, Zaretski. Lenski finds Onegin's late arrival and his choice of a second to be insulting. Both Lenski and Onegin are full of remorse and reluctant to go ahead with the duel, reflecting on the senselessness of their sudden enmity. But neither man has the courage to stop it. Zaretski gives them the signal to begin and Onegin shoots Lenski dead.

Act III

Scene 1: The house of Prince Gremin, St. Petersburg

Years have passed, during which Onegin has traveled extensively around Europe and has returned to St. Petersburg. Standing alone at a ball, he reflects on the emptiness of his life and his remorse over the death of Lenski.

Prince Gremin enters with his wife, Tatiana, now a grand, aristocratic beauty. She is greeted by many of the guests with great deference. Onegin is taken aback when he sees Tatiana, and deeply impressed by her beauty and noble bearing. Tatiana, in turn, is overwhelmed with emotion when she

recognizes him. Gremin tells Onegin about his great happiness and his love for Tatiana, and re-introduces Onegin to his wife. Onegin, suddenly injected with new life, realizes that he is in love with Tatiana. He is determined to write to her and to arrange a meeting.

Scene 2: A room in Prince Gremin's house



Tatiana has received Onegin's letter, which has stirred up the passion she felt for him as a young girl. Onegin enters. Tatiana recalls her earlier feelings and asks why Onegin is pursuing her now. Is it because of her social position? Onegin denies any cynical motivation — his passion is real and overwhelming. Tatiana, moved to tears, reflects at how near they once were to happiness. Nevertheless, she asks him to leave. He asks her to have pity and begs her to run away with him.

Tatiana admits that she still loves Onegin, but asserts that their union can never be realized, as she is now married and determined to remain faithful to her husband, despite her true feelings. Onegin implores her to relent, but she bids him farewell forever, leaving him alone and in his despair.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born: May 7, 1840 in Votkinsk, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russia



Pyotr (Peter) Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born the second of six children (five brothers and one sister). His father, Ilya Chaikovsky, was a mining business executive in Votkinsk. His father's ancestors were from Ukraine and Poland. His mother, Aleksandra Assier, was of Russian and French ancestry.

Tchaikovsky played piano from the age of 5 and also enjoyed his mother's playing and singing. He was a sensitive and emotional child and was sent to a boarding school in St. Petersburg. In 1854 he became deeply traumatized by his mother's death of cholera. He graduated from the St. Petersburg School of Law in 1859, then worked for three years at the Justice Department of Russian Empire. In 1862-1865 he studied music under Anton Rubinstein at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. In 1866-1878 he was a professor of theory and harmony at the Moscow Conservatory. At that time he met Franz Liszt and Hector Berlioz, who visited Russia with concert tours. During that period Tchaikovsky composed his first ballet *The Swan Lake*, an opera *Eugene Onegin*, four Symphonies and the brilliant Piano Concerto No 1.

As a young man Tchaikovsky suffered several traumatic experiences. He was sincerely attracted to a beautiful soprano, Desiree Artot, but their engagement was destroyed by her mother and she married another man. His homosexuality caused him excruciating guilt. In 1876 he wrote to his brother, Modest, about his decision to "marry whoever will have me." One of his admirers, a Moscow Conservatory student, Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova, persistently wrote him love letters and threatened to take her life if Tchaikovsky didn't marry her, which he did. Their brief marriage in the summer of 1877 lasted only a few weeks and caused him a nervous breakdown. He even made a suicide attempt by throwing himself into a river. In September of 1877 Tchaikovsky separated from Milyukova, who eventually ended up in an insane asylum, where she spent over 20 years and died. They never saw each other again. Although their marriage was terminated legally, Tchaikovsky generously supported her financially until his death.

Tchaikovsky was ordered by the doctors to leave Russia until his emotional health was restored. He went to live in Europe for a few years. In 1877-1878 Tchaikovsky settled together with his brother, Modest, in a quiet village of Clarens on Lake Geneva in Switzerland. There he wrote his very popular Violin Concerto in D. He also completed his Symphony No. 4, which was inspired by Russian folk songs. He dedicated it to the wealthy widow, Nadezhda von Meck. From 1877 to 1890 Tchaikovsky was financially supported by her, who also supported Claude Debussy. She loved Tchaikovsky's music and became his devoted pen-pal. They exchanged over a thousand letters in 14 years but, at her insistence, they never met. In 1890 she abruptly terminated all communication and support, claiming bankruptcy.

Tchaikovsky played an important role in the artistic development of Sergei Rachmaninoff. They met in 1886, when Rachmaninov was only 13 years old, studying the music of Tchaikovsky under the tutelage of their mutual friend, composer Aleksandr Zverev. Tchaikovsky was a member of the Moscow Conservatory graduation board. In 1892 he joined many other musicians in recommending Rachmaninov for the Gold Medal. Later Tchaikovsky was involved in popularizing Rachmaninov's graduation work, the opera *Aleko*, which was included in the repertory and performed at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow.

From 1883-1893 Tchaikovsky wrote his best Symphonies No. 5 and No. 6, ballets *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, operas *The Queen of Spades* and *Iolanta*. From 1888-1889 he made a successful conducting tour of Europe, appearing in Prague, Leipzig, Hamburg, Paris, and London. In 1891 he went on a two-month tour of America, where he gave concerts in New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. In May 1891 Tchaikovsky was the conductor on the official opening night of Carnegie Hall in New York. He was a friend of Edvard Grieg and Antonín Dvořák. In 1892 he heard Gustav Mahler conducting his opera *Eugene Onegin* in Hamburg. On October 16, 1893 Tchaikovsky himself conducting the première of his Symphony No. 6 in St. Petersburg, Russia. A week later, after drinking a glass of tap water, Tchaikovsky died of cholera. He was laid to rest in the Necropolis of Artists at St. Aleksandr Nevsky Monastery in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Eugene Onegin

Eugene Onegin is a well-known example of lyric opera, to which Tchaikovsky added music of a dramatic nature.

In May 1877, the opera singer Yelizaveta Lavrovskaya spoke to Tchaikovsky about creating an opera based on Alexander Pushkin's verse novel, *Eugene Onegin*. According to his memoirs, Tchaikovsky at first seemed apprehensive about the idea. He felt that the novel had a plot and was rather banal. The strength of the novel resided in its character development and social commentary, as well as in the beauty of its literary delivery. Shortly, however, Tchaikovsky came to embrace the idea, growing excited about the suggestion. He created the scenarios in one night before starting the composition of the music.

Tchaikovsky, with the assistance of Konstantin Shilovsky, used original verses from Pushkin's novel and chose scenes that involved the emotional world and fortunes of his heroes, calling the opera "lyrical scenes." The opera is episodic in that there is no continuous story, just selected highlights of Onegin's life. Since the original story was so well known, Tchaikovsky felt that his audience could easily fill in any details that he omitted.

Tchaikovsky worried whether the public would accept his opera, which lacked traditional scene changes. He believed that its performance required maximum simplicity and sincerity. With this in mind, he entrusted the first production to the students of the Moscow Conservatory. The premiere took place on March 29, 1879 at the Maly Theatre, Moscow, conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein.

Two years later the first performance at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow took place on January 23, 1881 with conductor Eduard Nápravník. Outside of Russia the initial reception was lukewarm, and it was slow to conquer other European cities, being seen as a Russian curiosity. The first performance outside

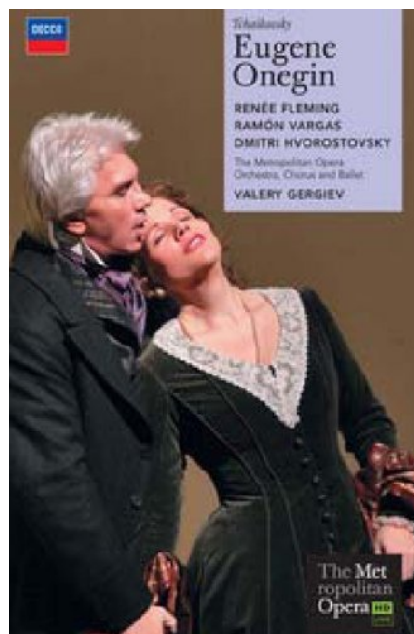
Russia took place on December 6, 1888 in Prague conducted by Tchaikovsky himself. It was sung in Czech and translated by Marie Červinková-Riegrová.

The first performance in Hamburg, on January 19, 1892, was conducted by Gustav Mahler, in the composer's presence. Tchaikovsky was applauded after each scene and received curtain calls at the end. He attributed its success to Mahler, whom he described as "not some average sort, but simply a genius burning with a desire to conduct."

The opera was first performed in Moscow in 1879. There are several recordings of it, and it is regularly performed. The work's title refers to the protagonist. The first performance in England took place on October 17, 1892 at the Olympic Theatre in London with Henry J. Wood conducting. This performance was sung in English, to a text translated by H. S. Edwards. Vienna first saw Eugene Onegin on November 19, 1897, conducted by Gustav Mahler. The United States premiere was given on March 24, 1920 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The opera was sung in Italian.

Eugene Onegin: The Video (2007)

Starring Renée Fleming, Ramón Vargas; Valery Gergiev conducting



This Metropolitan Opera production of Tchaikovsky's most popular opera has just about everything going for it — an all-star cast in peak form, a great orchestra led by Russia's greatest living conductor, Valery Gergiev, and a striking stage production whose minimalist, often stark, sets manage to superbly suit this most Romantic of operas. The opera is introduced by the great Russian dancer, Mikhail Barishnikov.

Eugene Onegin is not only filled with beautiful melodies, but it also contains a very dramatic story told episodically, almost as a tableau of grand scenes. The story is unconventional in that the lovers never get together because they are never on the same page romantically; initially he is too mature for her, then, later, ironically, when he finally becomes interested in her, she is too mature for him. There is death in this opera, but the real tragedy of *Eugene Onegin* is the title character's self-centered, unfeeling hubris, and finally his regrets. All of this is expressed through music so achingly romantic it washes over the listener like a wave. Anyone who thinks Tchaikovsky was just a composer of pretty ballets has obviously never seen or heard *Eugene Onegin*.

Renée Fleming and Dmitri Hvorostovsky are a combination of knockout looks, intelligence, charisma, dramatic ability and vocal talent. Renée Fleming's Tatiana is a triumph — her gorgeous soprano voice, intense acting and precise characterization make the complex young woman come alive. Hvorostovsky's icy detachment is chilling. His firm baritone fits the music like a velvet glove and his acting matches Fleming in its intensity. Tchaikovsky gave the work's most beautiful arias to Lenski. Ramón Vargas makes for a fiery Lenski. Valery Gergiev leads Russia's classic opera with a thrilling account of Tchaikovsky's most intense and passionate score.