



TCHAIKOVSKY'S
**EUGENE
ONEGIN**

November 4 • 8 PM | November 6 • 2:30 PM

By Pyotr Tchaikovsky
Libretto by Konstantin Shilovsky and Pyotr Tchaikovsky
Based on Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse

Audience Guide

Cast & Characters
Exploration of the opera
What To Listen For
Pushkin & Tchaikovsky
Want to Know More?

 **MADISON OPERA**

Eugene Onegin

Cast & Characters (in order of appearance)



Madame Larina: Allisanne Apple, mezzo-soprano

A widowed landowner. In Russia, surnames are differentiated by gender. Madame Larina is the widowed wife of a man named Larin.



Filipevna: Jane Shaulis, mezzo-soprano

Servant to Madame Larina and nurse to both Tatiana and Olga.



Tatiana: Maria Kanyova, soprano

Madame Larina's eldest daughter. A voracious reader, mostly of romantic novels, the youthful Tatiana is shy but impetuous, with an innocent disposition and fanciful imagination.



Olga: Jamie Van Eyck, mezzo-soprano

Madame Larina's youngest daughter. Extroverted, cheerful, and more even-tempered than her passionate elder sister, Olga is engaged to their childhood friend and neighbor, the poet Lenski.



Eugene Onegin: Hyung Yun, baritone

A charismatic but jaded and world-weary aristocrat, Onegin accompanies his neighbor and friend Lenski to the Larin country estate. Onegin is also a neighbor of the Larins', having recently inherited his uncle's estate.



Vladimir Lenski: Scott Ramsay, tenor

The young, Romantic poet Lenski has much in common with Tatiana, as his friend Onegin points out. However, Lenski is passionately in love with, and engaged to, Olga.



Monsieur Triquet: Andrew Abrams, tenor

A Frenchman employed by Madame Larina as a language tutor to her daughters.



Prince Gremin: Harold Wilson, bass

Gremin is an elderly retired general whom Tatiana marries.

Exploration of the opera

Eugene Onegin takes place in early 19th century Russia

Act I.i The garden of the Larin country estate

Tatiana and Olga sing a duet inside the house while Madame Larina and Filipevna, hard at work outside, gossip to themselves and reminisce about how Madame Larina's marriage transformed her from a silly romantic girl into a dignified and contented wife. Madame Larina and Filipevna sing together a proverb that translates as "Habit is sent from above in place of happiness and love!"

The estate's peasants return from the fields, singing of the aches and pains endured to complete the harvest. Madame Larina declares they should celebrate with a song, and the peasants begin a country dance. Tatiana and Olga come out onto the balcony to listen. The peasants' song makes Tatiana yearn for far-away places; Olga simply wants to dance.

The peasants finish their celebration and take their leave, Filipevna following after them. The fun over, Tatiana sits down to read a romance novel, her usual pastime. Madame Larina worries that her eldest daughter is so pale and quiet. Tatiana answers that she is always pale and that her moodiness is not illness but deep concern for the suffering of the young lovers in her novel. Madame Larina tells Tatiana that age teaches there are no heroes or heroines in life.

The women are distracted by the sounds of a carriage approaching. Filipevna returns to inform them that Olga's fiancé, Lenski, has arrived. Lenski introduces his neighbor and friend, Onegin, to the family. Madame Larina welcomes her guests and excuses herself to see to supper. The young women and men stand away from one another. Lenski and Onegin evaluate the two sisters, Onegin commenting that he is surprised his poet friend chose the pretty but rather ditzy Olga over the passionate and thoughtful Tatiana. Tatiana, meanwhile, is falling in love with Onegin at first sight, while Olga laments her sister's predictable feelings and frets that the neighbors will gossip.

Lenski approaches Olga to express his joy at once again being with her, stating that their one day apart seemed an eternity. Olga reprimands him for exaggerating. Onegin engages Tatiana in conversation, asking her how she can stand the boredom of the country. Tatiana explains that she is not at all bored, because she has her books and daydreams to occupy her. Onegin and Tatiana walk off into the garden as Lenski's ardor grows and he expresses his undying love for Olga. Night falls, and Lenski and Olga go inside the house for supper.

Onegin and Tatiana return. Onegin tells the love-struck Tatiana of how he recently inherited his uncle's fortune, and how tedious it was to sit beside the bedridden man while waiting for him to die. Filipevna, who has come out to fetch Tatiana for supper, notices Tatiana's expression and worries that the impressionable young girl might be falling in love with Onegin.

Act I.ii Tatiana's bedroom

Tatiana, too restless to sleep after her fateful meeting with Onegin, asks Filipevna about her own youth and marriage: "Did you not fall in love at all?" The old nurse scoffs at the notion, and tells of how she was only thirteen-years-old when her father arranged her marriage to an even younger boy. Tatiana, who is not listening, declares that she is in love and asks to be left alone with her writing desk, paper, and pen.

The Age of Innocence

In Pushkin's poem, he states that at the time of the meeting between Tatiana and Onegin, Onegin was 26, and Lenski was 18. Although neither Tatiana's nor Olga's ages are mentioned in the poem, scholars have theorized that Tatiana was at the youngest 13, and at the eldest 17.

Tchaikovsky was more specific. In his draft of the libretto, he sets the ages of the characters as follows: Onegin (22), Lenski (19), Tatiana (17), Madame Larina (56), Filipevna (70), and Gremin (45).

Tatiana writes a letter to Onegin, in which she expresses the full extent of her love, and confesses her fears and doubts about Onegin's feelings. She marvels at the power of her feelings, singing: "I fear my reason will desert me; to find release, I'd gladly die."

As she finishes her letter, a shepherd's pipe announces dawn has arrived. Filipevna, coming to wake Tatiana, is surprised to find the girl awake. Tatiana asks Filipevna to have her grandson deliver the letter to their neighbor.

Act I.iii The Larin estate

In the distance, peasant girls are picking berries and singing about flirting with boys by luring them near and then chasing them away in a pelting of summer fruit.

Tatiana, flushed and breathless, dashes in. Onegin has arrived to meet with her, and she is tortured over what he will say about her letter. As she tries to catch her breath and calm her emotions, Onegin enters. He reproves Tatiana for sending such a heartfelt letter to a complete stranger. He admits that he was touched by her words, but that he is incapable of feeling more than brotherly affection towards her. Onegin confesses that if her were the marrying-type he would choose her as a bride, but that any love he could feel for her would turn cold. He encourages her to forget him. Onegin ends his speech with a short lecture advising Tatiana to learn self-control, for other men would not be so honorable and would take advantage of her youth and innocence.

Tatiana, crestfallen, cannot speak. Onegin offers his arm to lead her back to her home. After a long moment, Tatiana marshals the courage to take his arm. As they exit, the song of the berry-pickers is heard in the distance.

What's in a name-day?

Name days are different from birthdays. They originated in the 17th century, and coincide with the Orthodox calendar of saints that gives the dates for honoring saints with feasts. St. Tatiana of Rome was a Christian martyr beheaded on January 25th in the 3rd century.

On January 25, 1755, as a present to his mother, Tatiana, the first Russian Minister of Education signed a decree to establish Moscow State University. When the Church of St. Tatiana was built on campus in 1791, the Russian Orthodox Church declared St. Tatiana the patron saint of students.

Act I.iv A brightly illuminated ballroom in the Larin house

Guests have assembled at the Larin home to celebrate Tatiana's name-day. It is some months since Tatiana was rejected by Onegin, but when they dance together the guests at the party begin gossiping. Completely unaware of what has occurred between the two, the guests tell one another that once Tatiana has married Onegin, she will discover him to be a tyrant, a gambler, a narcissist, a freemason, and a drunkard.

Onegin overhears the assassination of his character. Insulted and angry, he determines to seek revenge against his friend Lenski, whom he blames for dragging him to the party. Onegin dances with Olga to make Lenski jealous. The poet is first confused and then outraged. Lenski accuses Olga of falling in love with Onegin; Olga reproaches Lenski for his jealousy, and to punish him, accepts another dance with Onegin. Before Lenski can reason with Olga, Monsieur Triquet is entreated to sing a few couplets to Tatiana.

After the couplets end, Onegin dances again with Olga and then chides Lenski for sulking. The men argue, with Lenski becoming ever-more enraged even as Onegin attempts to apologize and explain that he meant no harm. As Madame Larina entreats the men not to quarrel, Lenski recalls the childhood joys of being in the Larin home, Onegin regrets his foolish behavior, and Tatiana laments the jealousy Onegin's attentions to Olga have aroused in her. Finally, Lenski issues a challenge that Onegin cannot refuse—a duel at dawn.

Act II.i Dawn in a wintry field near a water-mill

Lenski and his second, Zaretski, await the unpunctual Onegin. Lenski reflects on the passage of his youth, the probability of his impending death, and his love for Olga. Onegin finally arrives, nonchalant about his tardiness. Zaretski and Guillot, Onegin's second, load the pistols and measure the distance the duelers will walk before turning to shoot.

Separately, Onegin and Lenski consider the possibility of settling their quarrel without bloodshed, but the obligations of honor and their mutual anger make them decide they have gone too far to turn back now. The men take their pistols, pace the distance, turn, and shoot.

Lenski is dead. Silently, Onegin mourns the killing of his friend.

Act II.ii Several years later, the ballroom of a nobleman's house, St. Petersburg

Onegin muses on his life since the duel. He laments the murder of his only friend, and reflects on how the years of travel abroad have done nothing to extinguish the anguish in his soul. Wealthy but bored, without wife or family, Onegin has returned to St. Petersburg to put an end to his aimless wandering. The guests at the ball gossip briefly about Onegin, but he is old news and they soon turn their attentions to Princess Gremina. Onegin studies the elegantly attired and poised woman, only to realize in astonishment that it is none other than Tatiana.

Tatiana, surrounded by admirers, asks about the man her husband, Prince Gremin, has just approached. She is told it is Onegin. Tatiana says that they were once neighbors, while quietly telling herself to control her emotions.

Gremin tells Onegin that he and Tatiana have been married for two years, and joyfully praises his young wife and the love she awakened in his once melancholy soul. Gremin presents Onegin to Tatiana, who remarks that they met years before and then pleads fatigue as an excuse to leave the ball. As Gremin escorts Tatiana out, Onegin is overwhelmed with love for her.

Act II.iii Reception room in Prince Gremin's home

Tatiana holds a letter sent to her by Onegin, in which he has declared his love. She has put Onegin and her love for him in her past, and her peace of mind is disturbed by Onegin's return and his emotional confession. As she struggles with her desire for Onegin and her loyalty to her husband, Onegin bursts in and falls beseechingly at her feet. Tatiana reminds him of his cold rejection of her in the garden, and says that she heeded his paternalistic lesson. She recalls how he dismissed her as innocent and simple, and accuses him of wanting her now only because she is the wife of a wealthy member of the royal court. Onegin is shamed by her indictment of his character, and promises that he does not seek conquest but true love. In agony, Tatiana admits she still loves Onegin, but that fate has decided: she is a married woman, and Onegin must leave. He passionately tries to persuade her. Tatiana reminds him that he is, in his own words, an honorable man, and that she will remain faithful to her husband. She bids him farewell forever. Onegin is left alone, shattered in despair.

Fight like a gentleman

Alexander Pushkin, a poet like Lenski, also lost his life in a duel over a woman.

Pushkin challenged his wife's rumored lover, Georges d'Anthès, to a duel that left both injured. Pushkin died two days later. During his life, Pushkin fought 29 duels.

The location of a duel and the weapons chosen would be decided by the opponents' trusted representatives, or "seconds". Although the rules of dueling permitted the parties to choose not to shoot one another, most duels were fought to first-blood or death, as not shooting at one's opponent was considered an insult.

What to Listen For

Musical moments from *Eugene Onegin*

Musical Themes

The music in *Eugene Onegin* is a language all its own. Tchaikovsky assigns complex tonal identities to specific characters and ideas. Before looking at particular themes, here is a quick and simple overview of two important tonal assignments:

Onegin in key of G-major: Onegin receives the first tonal identity in the opera. Listen for the key change when Onegin enters for the first time in Act I.i, and again when he returns with Tatiana at the end of the scene.

Tatiana in key of D-flat major: Tatiana receives her tonal identity during her famous “letter scene” in Act I.ii. It is during this scene that Tatiana’s nature becomes distinct, revealed through Tatiana’s own actions and words rather than through the perceptions and comments of the other characters.

G-major and D-flat major are opposites on the tonal spectrum. They are as different as water and fire, earth and air—Tchaikovsky’s musical metaphor is quite clear. Keeping the importance of the language of music in mind, consider these other themes in *Eugene Onegin*:

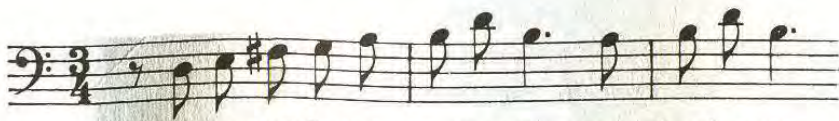


Act I.i Tatiana’s leitmotif.

Leitmotifs are recurring musical themes that identify a setting, idea, or character. Tatiana’s “theme music” introduces the opera. The theme is heard throughout Act I, but only once in Act II: when Tatiana reads Onegin’s letter and recalls the passion of her youthful love.



An extended variant of Tatiana’s theme introduces the famous “Letter Scene” in Act I.ii. Stronger and richer than Tatiana’s main leitmotif, it serves to underscore Tatiana’s passionate nature and the tumultuous experience of writing her letter. Act I.iv, Tatiana’s name-day celebration, also carries this theme, hinting that despite his rejection in the garden months before Tatiana is still fervently in love with Onegin.



Do you not find it ra-ther bo- ring li- ving so
Ya du- ma- ya, by va et vam pres- ku- chno zdes'

Act I. i. *Onegin's character.*

Though *Onegin* does not have a proper leitmotif, Tchaikovsky gave the character a series of important lyrical melodies. The first, when *Onegin* asks *Tatiana* about boredom in the country, seems to imply an intimacy and warmth to *Onegin's* character. However, just moments later *Onegin* employs a similar melody when complaining about the slow death of his uncle. This suggests that *Onegin* uses a similar tone in all social settings, whatever the topic of conversation. When a third melody is used by *Onegin* to reject *Tatiana*, the audience is left to puzzle over whether *Onegin*—behind his polished social façade—is even capable of sincere emotional depth.

Arias

There are six principal arias in *Eugene Onegin*. The first, in Act I.i is sung by *Olga*. Her aria explains the differences in character between the care-free *Olga* and her dreamy older sister *Tatiana*. The second, also in Act I.i, is a short aria by *Lenski*, who sings of his love and adoration for *Olga*. *Lenski's* aria is thematically mirrored in Act II.ii by *Prince Gremin*, who sings a tribute to the love *Tatiana* aroused in him. As *Gremin* sings, it is easy to imagine that had *Lenski* lived longer, his love for *Olga* might have reached the maturity and dignity of *Gremin's* love for *Tatiana*.

The third, and most famous, of the major arias is in Act I.ii, *Tatiana's* emotional "Letter Scene".

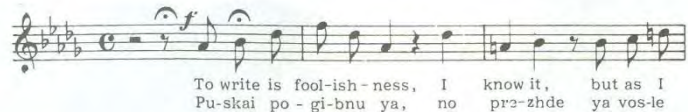
Act I. ii. The Letter Scene

Tatiana's famous aria—in which she writes to *Onegin* of her love—is almost fifteen minutes long, one of opera's lengthiest arias.

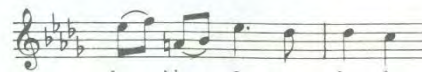
Tatiana's indecision about the contents of the letter, her confusion over her feelings of love, and her alternating frustration and giddiness as she carefully chooses her words are but a few of the moods captured during this vocally and dramatically intense scene.

Tchaikovsky originally envisioned setting *Tatiana's* letter scene from Pushkin's novella as a concert aria. When he decided to translate the whole of Pushkin's verse into an opera, the letter scene became the foundation of Tchaikovsky's work.

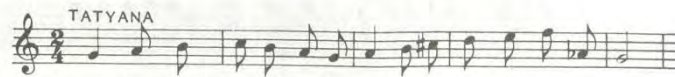
As the opera continues, you will note motifs from the Letter Scene reappearing throughout.



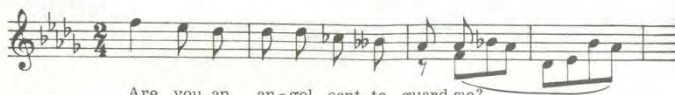
To write is fool-ish- ness, I know it, but as I
Pu- skai po - gi- bnu ya, no pr2- zhde ya vos- le



love him, I must show it;
pi - tel noi na - dez- hde



TATYANA
No, there could ne- ver be an- oth- er to whom I'd give my love!
Net, ni - ko - mu na sve- te ne ot- da- la by serd tsa ya!



Are you an an- gel sent to guard me?
Kto ty, moi an- gel li khra- hi - tel'

ONEGIN

Were I the sort who had in-ten-ded to lead a calm do-mes-tic life;
Kog da by zhizn' do-mash-nim kru-gom ya og-ra-ni-chit' zak-ho-tel,

ONEGIN

My soul was des-tined to dis-co-ver it sought no o-ther;
Mech-tam i go-dam net vos-vra-ta akh, net vos-vra-ta!

Shall I sur-vive the day that's dawn-ing?
Chto den' gryad-ush-chii mne go-to-vit?



'...hardly breathing, without objection'
The garden scene from the *Eugene Onegin*
series, by Russian artist Lidia Timoshenko.

Act I. iii. Oleg's rejection of Tatiana

Whereas Tatiana's written confession of love is turbulent and impulsive, Oleg's rebuff is calm and measured. Not only does Oleg crush Tatiana's dreams of love, he lectures her for being rash and naïve.

Tchaikovsky, a prolific letter-writer himself, wrote openly to friends of his feelings about Oleg. Tchaikovsky was repulsed by Oleg's heartless and cold demeanor, and this is reflected in the opera's score. In fact, Tchaikovsky was so appalled by Oleg's character, it led the composer to make a rash real-life decision—more on that in the biography section.

Act II.i. The Death of Lenski

In the opening of the duel scene, Lenski considers his short life and tries to come to terms with his impending death. Most importantly, Lenski reflects on the love that he will leave behind. The music carries the same motifs as Lenski's love aria to Olga from the first act. The composition of this aria—moving from a reflection on death to a eulogy to love—is all the more poignant because it is Lenski's love for Olga that has led to his death.

A Masterpiece of Pure Passion

Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* is rich in nuance, and is celebrated largely for its intricate character studies and raw emotional power. As you watch the opera, listen for the orchestral cues that signify characters and ideas.

Aleksandr Pushkin

The poet



Aleksandr Pushkin (June 6, 1799-February 10, 1837) is one of Russia's most celebrated poets, considered the founder of modern Russian literature. His influence is evident in many works of the 19th and 20th centuries. Pushkin was born in Moscow to an impoverished aristocratic family. His father was a descendent of Russian nobility; his mother was the granddaughter of an African lord who served as a Major General in the court of Russian Tsar Peter the Great. At the time of Pushkin's birth, his family had lost most of their wealth and a great deal of influence, resulting in a troubled family life. Through a combination of bluster and focused social climbing, his parents managed to send him to the Lyceum in Tsarskoe Selo, a school for privileged children of the nobility. Although the Lyceum provided the best education available in Russia, Pushkin proved to be a poor student in almost all subjects but French and Russian literature. Before his completion of school in 1817, Pushkin became the Lyceum's unofficial poet laureate, gaining a wide audience and recognition for his budding talent.

Early years (1814–1820)

Upon completing school, Pushkin was given a sinecure—a salaried position without responsibility—at the Collegium of Foreign Affairs in St. Petersburg. During this time, Pushkin led a bohemian lifestyle, pursuing pleasure and political rebellion at every turn. He wrote nearly 130 poems in these years, but most went unpublished due to his predilection for socially inappropriate topics. His revolutionary poems included dozens criticizing Tsar Aleksandr I and his minister Arackcheev.

Despite the distractions of hedonism, Pushkin finished his first narrative poem in 1820. *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, a romantic adventure, was published one month after the St. Petersburg's governor-general banished Pushkin to the south of Russia for the political humor expressed in his earlier poems. He departed St. Petersburg on May 6, 1820 and would not return for six years.

Banishment in South Russia (1820-1823)

As his banishment was disguised as an administrative transfer, Pushkin was able to travel around the Caucasus and in the Crimea. Pushkin despised every dull moment of his travels, as evidenced by his first Bryonic verse tale *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*. Bored by the small towns of South Russia, Pushkin dove headlong into gambling and drinking. Already underpaid as a civil servant, his habits took a great toll on his finances, and his family refused to support him. Pushkin attempted to make ends meet by selling and publishing his poetic works, but his lifestyle outpaced his earning power.

Three years into his banishment, a group of influential friends managed to get him transferred to Odessa, a larger and more cosmopolitan city. Happier and less impoverished, Pushkin became involved in endless social outings and two affairs with married women (both of which resulted in duels with aggrieved husbands). The release from banishment made Pushkin more creative, but far less prolific. Of his major works during this time, he managed to complete only the first chapter of *Eugene Onegin*. Pushkin's time in Odessa came to an end when the government intercepted a letter in which Pushkin

had written a thinly-veiled support of atheism. This time, the government exiled him to his family's estate in Mikhailovskoye.

Exile in Mikhailovskoye (1824–1826)

Pushkin arrived in Mikhailovskoye in August of 1824, under both shame and government surveillance. His relations with his parents became utterly antagonistic, and by November, they had abandoned him. He lived alone for much of the next two years, with the occasional outing to a nearby town and visits from St. Petersburg friends to alleviate his solitude. His only constant companion was his childhood nurse, who had remained on the estate to look after him. She told him many folk tales during this time, and it is believed that her stories are the root of recurring folk themes in Pushkin's works.

Despite being under surveillance, or perhaps as a result, Pushkin's two years at Mikhailovskoye were rich in poetic output. It was during this time that he wrote the narrative poem *Poltava*, began but never finished the novel *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great*, composed the tragedy *Boris Godunov*, and completed six more chapters of *Eugene Onegin*.

Freedom and Maturity (1826-1831)

On December 14, 1825 Russian army officers led 3,000 soldiers in protest against Nicholas I's assumption of the throne following the abdication of his brother Constantine. During the Decembrist Uprising, Pushkin was still under surveillance at Mikhailovskoye. Even so, he was implicated in the rebellion because each of the Decembrists carried copies of his early political poems. Fearing for his life and that of his friends, Pushkin destroyed papers and writings that might prove dangerous. In late spring of 1826, he sent a petition for his release to the Tsar. After an investigation proved that Pushkin had been basically behaving himself, Nicholas I summoned him for an interview. Pushkin swore to never again publish anti-government literature; the Tsar accepted the promise, but assumed personal censorship of Pushkin's works. In return, Pushkin was freed from exile. This arrangement was agreeable to the Tsar and his government, but Pushkin regretted it almost before he had left the palace.

Pushkin believed that, censorship aside, his freedom would be unequivocal. However, Nicholas I appointed Count Benkendorf, the head of Russia's civil police, to babysit Pushkin. The poet was not permitted to make any trip, participate in any journal, publish any works, or read in any literary circles without advance permission. Benkendorf regularly brought Pushkin in for interrogations about poems he wrote. Essentially, Pushkin spent the rest of his life on parole.

His dreams of returning to a bohemian life hobbled, Pushkin turned to settling down and finding a wife. In 1830, he proposed to one of the most beautiful women in Russia, Nathalia Goncharova. For her part, Nathalia refused to marry Pushkin until his situation with the government was settled. As a wedding gift, Pushkin was given permission to publish *Boris Godunov*. Seeing that Pushkin would not be imprisoned, exiled, or executed for his poems, Nathalia accepted an official betrothal on May 6, 1830.



Pushkin secured a loan from his future in-laws, as well as land and a house. His father's wedding gift of half an estate in Kistenevo required Pushkin to visit the neighboring estate of Boldino, in east-central Russia; while there, he was quarantined for three months by an epidemic of Asiatic cholera. From September to December 1830, he recaptured the productivity of his youth, writing the five short stories of *The Tales of Belkin*,

the verse tale *The Little House in Kolomna*, his famous 'little tragedies' *The Avaricious Knight*, *Mozart and Salieri*, *The Stone Guest*, and *Feast in the Time of the Plague*, the first of his fairy tales in verse, *The Tale of the Priest and His Worman Balda*, and the eighth and final chapter of *Eugene Onegin*.

Eugene Onegin, his most famous work, took seven years to complete.

Freedom and Decline (1831-1837)

The post-Boldino years saw a significant decline in Pushkin's output. He married Nathalia in February 1831. The marriage started on the wrong foot, with a disagreeable honeymoon overcrowded by in-laws and society matrons. The newlyweds fled to Tsarskoe Selo just outside of the capital, where Pushkin hoped to live well but inexpensively in inspirational solitude. The cholera epidemic in St. Petersburg caused the Tsar and his entire court to take refuge in Tsarskoe Selo, and Pushkin once again moved, this time to an apartment in St. Petersburg. The Pushkins would live in this apartment for the remainder of their lives, raising four children together.

Pushkin's obligations kept him away from home for long periods, though he and Nathalia corresponded through letters. The 78 surviving letters—all but one of which are from Pushkin to Nathalia—are friendly but without passion or love. Pushkin dedicated several poems to his wife, but their marriage grew increasingly miserable. A celebrated beauty, Nathalia drew the attention of many admirers, including the Tsar himself. When Pushkin was made a Kammerjunker—an intermediate court rank—he was certain it was only so that his wife could attend the court balls. This insult became humiliation when Nathalia miscarried in March 1834, the pregnancy most likely the result of an affair with the Tsar. Pushkin wrote letters to his friends in which he vented his indignation. These letters were intercepted by the police and sent to the Tsar; in fury, Pushkin resigned from government service, but fear of retribution by the Tsar forced him to retract the resignation.

Pushkin's unhappy marital life was compounded by increasing financial obligations. In addition to his wife's expensive habits, Pushkin was the sole provider for her two sisters and responsible for the debts of his own father and brother. Much of the poetry Pushkin produced during this time was written to appeal to popular tastes and thus provide income. In 1836, he applied to the Tsar for permission to either retire to the country for four years, or else for a loan and publishing permission to cover his debts; the former was refused, but Pushkin was given 30,000 rubles and allowed to publish a quarterly literary journal, *The Contemporary*. It is likely that Pushkin used the Tsar's affections for Nathalia to get what he wanted, but the journal was not a success and only compounded Pushkin's financial and political problems.

In 1835, Nathalia met French immigrant Georges-Charles de Heeckeren d'Anthès. Their relationship became a scandal amid unproven rumors of an affair. D'Anthès eventually married one of Nathalia's sisters, but the rumors persisted and finally Pushkin challenged d'Anthès to a duel. On January 27, 1837, the two men fired their pistols at one another. D'Anthès was grazed, but Pushkin, a veteran duelist, died two days later from his wound. The Tsar buried Pushkin in secret for fear of an uprising, settled the poet's debts, endowed Nathalia with a pension, and expelled d'Anthès from Russia.

Pushkin wrote very little during the years of his marriage. Nathalia, who would later remarry, was accused by Pushkin's admirers of not understanding his greatness, causing his financial troubles, and eventually killing him through her frivolous social involvements. Whatever the truth of this, Nathalia did keep, and later released for publication, every letter Pushkin wrote to her.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

The composer



Born three years after Pushkin's death, Tchaikovsky (May 7, 1840—November 6 1893) is one of Russia's most celebrated cultural icons. During the course of his life, he produced a wide-range of works, including symphonies, instrumental and chamber music, theatrical music, songs, ballets, and operas.

Tchaikovsky was born into a large middle-class family. His mother, Alexandra, was the second of his father's three wives. She and her husband Ilyich had six children of their own plus a daughter from Ilyich's previous marriage. Tchaikovsky,

noted in many accounts as an unusually sensitive child, was particularly close to his sister Alexandra and his twin siblings Modest and Anatoly.

From Civil Servant to Musician

Tchaikovsky displayed musical ability early, beginning the piano at the age of five. His parents encouraged his piano studies, and even employed a tutor for him. However, as was common for children of middle-class Russian families, Tchaikovsky was intended for a civil service career, and his parents eventually put an end to his musical pursuits. He was sent to the Imperial School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg, where he spent seven years. Although there are conflicting accounts of the type of mother Alexandra was, Tchaikovsky admitted that his separation from her for school and her death from cholera a few years later had "a huge influence on the way things turned out" for him. Stricken by a melancholy over her loss that lasted the rest of his life, Tchaikovsky began his first serious efforts at composition: a waltz in his mother's memory.

Though music was not a part of the School of Jurisprudence curriculum, Tchaikovsky attended theatre and operas in his free time, developing a fondness for the works of Rossini, Mozart, and Verdi. He received limited formal instruction from a piano manufacturer the School kept as a token music teacher. In 1855, he employed respected piano teacher Rudolph Kündinger as a private tutor. When questioned about Tchaikovsky's potential by Ilyich, Kündinger told him that while the boy's improvisation techniques were admirable, there was no future for Tchaikovsky as a composer or even a professional pianist. Ilyich instructed his son to finish school and apply for post in the Ministry of Justice. Tchaikovsky obeyed, and performed well in his position at the Ministry of Justice, though without particular merit.

From 1859 until 1863, Tchaikovsky worked as a civil servant while taking classes in music theory at the Russian Musical Society, which became the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. In 1863, Tchaikovsky quit his civil servant job and became a full-time student at the Conservatory. His career at the Conservatory was undistinguished, as Tchaikovsky's work did not impress the conservative music establishment and went mostly unnoticed by more progressive sections of Russian musical society. He graduated in 1865, after which he wrote his First Symphony, which was criticized by his former teacher but well-received at its Moscow performance in 1868.

Tchaikovsky and The Five

During his time at the Conservatory, Tchaikovsky studied under Anton Rubinstein, who taught composition in the style popular with the West. Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven were the ideals to which Tchaikovsky aspired, but he wanted to imbue his works with a distinctively Russian voice and character. As a result of this goal, Tchaikovsky managed to alienate both Western-loving Rubinstein and a group of five nationalistic Russian composers.

The Five (formed in 1856) wanted to produce a thoroughly Russian form of music, and eschewed the musical forms that they viewed as imitations of European music learned in European-style schools. They heralded as Russian icons musical contemporaries Chopin, Liszt, and Schumann. The Five believed the Russian folk music and the exotic musical elements from the far-flung parts of middle- and eastern-Russia should be the base of all Russian compositions.

Although Tchaikovsky employed folk music in his work, he followed Western traditions in music and, unlike The Five, was also trained in composition. The Five considered academicism a threat to musical progress and freedom, and focused their attacks on Rubinstein's most promising student and a professor in his own right, Tchaikovsky.

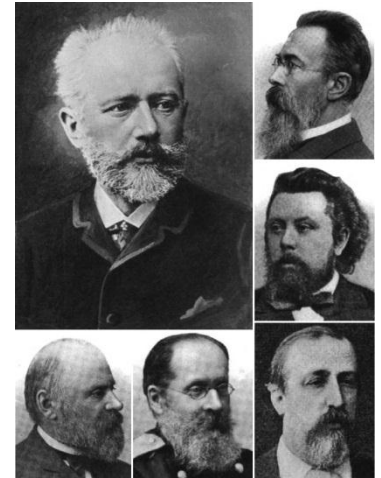
After Rubinstein left the Conservatory, Tchaikovsky began a working relationship with one of the Five, Mily Balakirev, which produced Tchaikovsky's first recognized masterpiece: the fantasy-overture *Romeo and Juliet*. The Five adored the work, but Tchaikovsky remained ambivalent about The Five and their philosophy. He remained on friendly terms with the group, but his differing goals and personal aesthetic remained a gulf between them. Over time, the Five grew apart both as friends and comrades, eventually disbanding in 1870. Tchaikovsky continued to defend them and support them as their separate careers matured, but it was the leaders of their replacement group, the Belyayev circle, with whom Tchaikovsky forged a lasting relationship. Like Tchaikovsky, the Belyayev circle believed that a distinct Russian musical form could and should exist alongside Western-style training and musical traditions.

Coming Into His Own

From 1867 to 1878, Tchaikovsky was a Moscow Conservatory professor, critic, and composer, working alongside his mentor, Anton Rubinstein. Tchaikovsky composed his famous First Piano Concerto between 1874 and 1875, which he dedicated to Rubinstein's brother and head of the Moscow Conservatory, Nikolai. Nikolai initially rejected the work as ill-composed and unsuitable for playing. Tchaikovsky re-dedicated the piece to Hans von Bülow, a pianist whose talent had impressed Tchaikovsky, who gave the premiere in Boston. Nikolai later reversed his opinion and became the finest interpreter of the work.

Tchaikovsky and the Rubinstein brothers had a close professional relationship, all three part of Anton Rubinstein's private club, the Artistic Circle. Over the eleven years that Tchaikovsky spent teaching in Moscow, he enjoyed considerable status and celebrity among friends and fellow artists. He published often and quickly, and his works were performed almost as soon as the publisher released them. Nonetheless, Tchaikovsky felt overshadowed by Rubinstein's reputation, and began to move away from his mentor and friend in an effort to maintain an independent standing of his own.

Tchaikovsky was notable for his emotional sensitivity, and many of his works can be traced to intense or trying circumstances in the composer's life. During 1875, when Tchaikovsky was grappling with his need to break free of Rubinstein and the financial and mental difficulties of teaching, he produced many of his



most profound works, including the *Variations on a Rococo Theme*, the Moscow Opera-commissioned ballet *Swan Lake*, Third Symphony, and competition-winning opera *Vakula the Smith*.



At the end of this blisteringly successful year, Tchaikovsky was contacted by wealthy widow Nadezhda von Meck to compose a few chamber pieces for her. So impressed with his work was she that von Meck began a regular correspondence with the composer. At von Meck's insistence, the two never met in person; they maintained an epistolary relationship—or a “friendship of letters”—for nearly fourteen years.

When Tchaikovsky asked von Meck for a loan in 1877, she suggested instead an annual subsidy of 6,000 rubles (about \$45,000 today). By comparison, his salary at the Ministry of Justice had been a little under 350 rubles per year. In 1878, with von Meck's funding, Tchaikovsky was able to resign his teaching position at the Conservatory and concentrate on his artistic works.

Sexuality and The Question of Relevance

It is well known that Tchaikovsky was homosexual. However, the influence his sexuality had on his work and tumultuous psychology is debatable, complex, and largely academic. Tchaikovsky wrote of his sexuality in letters to his siblings and select friends, saying little of it other than that he was aware of it and could do no more than reconcile his mind “to the impossibility of reforming himself.”

Whatever Tchaikovsky's most private feelings about his sexuality, he did have two notable relationships with women. For a brief period in 1868, Tchaikovsky entertained marriage with Belgian soprano Désirée Artôt. For many reasons—most of which involved the difficulties of two highly accomplished and in-demand professionals building a life together—the engagement never came to fruition. Reputedly, the unattractive but musically gifted, intellectually astute, and utterly charming prima donna was the first woman to arouse attraction in Tchaikovsky, and it is said the composer identified Artôt for the rest of his life as the only woman he ever loved.

The second woman of romantic significance in the composer's life was his wife, Antonina Milyukova.

Life Imitates Art

1877 was perhaps the most turbulent year of Tchaikovsky's life. In less than twelve months, Tchaikovsky married a mentally unstable student, attempted suicide by walking into the Moskva River, and wrote his seminal masterpiece *Eugene Onegin*.

At a dinner party in early May 1877, contralto Yelizaveta Lavrovskaya commented to Tchaikovsky that an opera based on Pushkin's verse novel *Eugene Onegin* would be wonderful. In a letter to his brother Modest, Tchaikovsky confessed to thinking the woman daft for even suggesting the greatest work of Russian literature—only 47 years old by that time—be turned into an opera and dismissed the idea as “wild” and far too risky. It was the telling, not the tale, that had made Pushkin's work so important and attractive. The plot, after all, was rather slender, hardly the stuff of operatic greatness.

Even so, Tchaikovsky re-read Pushkin's novel in verse after that very same dinner party and became entranced with the narrative quality, richness of characterization and, above all, Tatiana. He spent a sleepless night imagining the scenario that would bring Pushkin's literary treasure to the stage.

Tchaikovsky wrote Tatiana's letter scene in one evening and used it as the basis for a proposal to librettist Konstantin Shilovsky. Tchaikovsky approached Pushkin's work with reverence, and used much of Pushkin's language in the libretto. As *Eugene Onegin* developed, Tchaikovsky found that he identified more and more with Tatiana—her passion, her sincerity, and her heartbreak. He found in the character a muse and a sympathetic heroine, and he was inspired by her courage and indignant at Onegin, whom he felt did not deserve to be the object of so pure a love.



As he was composing *Eugene Onegin*, Tchaikovsky was receiving letters from his former pupil, Antonina Milyukova. Tchaikovsky lost and forgot about Antonina's first letter, and it was not until her second letter, in which Antonina threatened to commit suicide if he did not reply, that Tchaikovsky began to regret his attitude toward Antonina. The similarities of Antonina's letter to Tatiana's confession of passionate love did not escape Tchaikovsky, who admitted to Modest that he associated the innocent Antonina with Tatiana. Tchaikovsky told Antonina that he could never offer her more than brotherly love, which Antonina promised she could accept.

It is likely that a combination of horror at hearing Onegin's words in his own mouth as well as his frustration with gossip over his sexuality spurred Tchaikovsky to propose to Antonina. The two were engaged by late May 1877. The composer immediately retired to Shilovsky's estate to continue work on *Eugene Onegin*. By the time of his marriage in July 1877, two-thirds of the opera had been completed.

The marriage proved a terrible mistake. Shortly after the wedding, the composer walked into a river with the hopes that he would contract pneumonia and die. Tchaikovsky and Antonina lived together in an unconsummated marriage for only 20 days before Tchaikovsky fled to his sister Alexandra's estate. He returned to Moscow a few weeks later, but after 12 more days with his new wife, Tchaikovsky left for good. He traveled to Switzerland and Italy, where he completed *Eugene Onegin* in January 1878.

Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Modest, his sister Alexandra, and his patroness von Meck of his repulsion for his wife. He hated Antonina's topics of conversation, the sound of her voice, her cultural naiveté and intellectual inferiority, and, above all, her insistence that he break his abstinence. Tchaikovsky may well have married Antonina for her lack of sophistication and willingness to engage in a marriage-of-convenience, but it is likely that Antonina did not know about or understand her husband's sexuality and that much of her behavior toward Tchaikovsky was born of confused frustration. Whatever occurred between them during those six months of marriage, it aroused in Tchaikovsky an uncharacteristic vitriol, and for the rest of his life any reference to Antonina drove him to hysterics.

Due to the strict divorce laws of the time, Tchaikovsky and Antonina separated but remained married until his death. The issue of divorce was broached, but Antonina resolutely refused, even when von Meck offered her 10,000 rubles as an incentive. Tchaikovsky did not pursue the matter, and continued to send Antonina an allowance, even after the birth in 1881 of a child out of wedlock gave him grounds for an uncontested divorce. The child— along with two others born to Antonina— were given to orphanages. None of her children survived to adulthood.

Antonina's memoirs were published in 1894, and again in 1913, and gave rise to a debate over her mental health. Although Modest described her as eccentric and unstable, her memoirs, according to one Tchaikovsky scholar, reveal a woman of little intelligence but genuine heart who spent her life grappling with the notion that what occurred between she and her husband was the result of a misunderstanding. Whatever the state of Antonina's mind, she spent the last 20 years of her life in an asylum, her room and board paid for by the 100-rubles per month pension Tchaikovsky left her in his will.

Final Works and Death

The same year that Tchaikovsky completed *Eugene Onegin*, he also wrote the *Violin Concerto*. Although Tchaikovsky had experienced considerable acclaim during his life, he remained something of a pariah in his native country, viewed as a composer overly-dependent on Western influence and approval. When novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, speaking at the commemoration ceremonies for Pushkin's monument, charged that the poet had called Russia into "universal unity" with the West, popular and critical opinion of Tchaikovsky underwent an about-face. In response to a request by Nikolai Rubinstein for a grand commemorative piece to accompany important festivities occurring in Russia between 1880 and 1882, Tchaikovsky composed the *1812 Overture*. Tchaikovsky's self-described "very loud and noisy" piece commemorated Russia's defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Borodino. The composer confessed to von Meck that he wrote the piece without warmth or love, and told its conductor he would not be at all offended if the piece was judged unsuitable for symphony concerts. Despite his indifference, the *1812 Overture* is probably Tchaikovsky's most well-known work.

The 1880s saw a decline in Tchaikovsky's compositional output, though his international fame grew. His works during the period include *Manfred* in 1885; the *Fifth Symphony* in 1888; another successful opera, *Pique Dame (The Queen of Spades)* in 1890; and the *Casse-Noisette* ballet in 1891. He made an international conducting tour in 1888.

In 1890, von Meck broke off all contact with Tchaikovsky. In severely debilitated health and mired in financial troubles after the mismanagement of her estate by her son, von Meck was forced to end her patronage. Her final letter, delivered by a trusted servant rather than the usual postal mail, contained a year's subsidy and an entreaty not to forget her. One-third of Tchaikovsky's income came from von Meck's patronage, though he had known of her financial troubles for well over a year before her final letter. Nonetheless, it was not the money that Tchaikovsky mourned. His patroness had provided Tchaikovsky a venue for airing the most intimate aspects of his thoughts, his hopes and regrets. It was von Meck who had bolstered his courage when it failed him and encouraged his genius when he doubted it. There is no clear reason why von Meck put such an abrupt and complete end to their relationship, and Tchaikovsky remained bewildered and hurt for the remaining three years of his life.

In 1891, Tchaikovsky came to New York and conducted his own works at the ceremonies of the opening of Carnegie Hall. In 1893, he completed the *Pathetique Symphony No. 6* and conducted it in St. Petersburg. Although it would later become an overwhelming success, its initial performance received an unenthusiastic response. That same year, Tchaikovsky died by contracting cholera after drinking tainted water. His funeral was attended by 8,000 mourners.

Eugene Onegin remains one of Russia's most prized operas and is increasingly popular around the world. Tchaikovsky wrote of his opera: "If ever music was written with sincere passion, with love for the story and the characters in it, it is the music for *Onegin*.... If the listener feels even the smallest part of what I experienced when I was composing this opera, I shall be utterly content and ask for nothing more."

Want to know more?

Opera Up Close: The *Eugene Onegin* Preview

Sunday, October 30, 2011, 1-3p.m., Madison Museum of Contemporary Art Lecture Hall

\$20 general admission

Join Madison Opera for a behind-the-scenes look at *Eugene Onegin*, including a multimedia look at the music and life of composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, hosted by General Director Kathryn Smith with commentary from director Candace Evans, Maestro John DeMain, members of the cast, and special guest Alexander Dolinin, professor of Slavic Languages and Literature at UW Madison.

Pre-Opera Talks

Friday, November 4, 2011, 7 p.m. and Sunday, November 6, 2011, 1.30 p.m., Wisconsin Studio at Overture, Free to ticket holders

Attend an introduction to *Eugene Onegin* one hour prior to curtain to learn about the music, story, cast and design of Madison Opera's production.

MadOpera Blog | <http://madisonopera.blogspot.com/>

Follow Madison Opera's blog over the weeks leading up to *Eugene Onegin* to learn more about the artists, production, opera, and special events surrounding *Eugene Onegin*!