



From Poetry to Opera: Pushkin And Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin in A Holistic Accordance

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ABSTRACT: The present article examines Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin to demonstrate how a holistic approach can deepen the performance of opera; the approach integrates the composer's dramaturgical strategies, the literary source, and critical scholarship into a unified interpretive framework. The discussion focuses on Onegin's rejection aria and establishes that Belinsky's characterisation of Onegin as an "involuntary egoist" reshapes the performer's vocal and dramatic choices. By tracking how contextual understanding directly informs decisions of vocal colour, articulation, and phrasing, the article illustrates the practical necessity of a holistic approach in which interpretation and technical execution are inseparable.

KEYWORDS: Pushkin, Tchaikovsky, Eugene Onegin, aria, superfluous man

The name Eugene Onegin illuminated both the Russian literary and operatic world. Through Eugene Onegin, Pushkin, with his elevated and natural, poetic yet conversational language, broke away from the overly formal and French-influenced style that had dominated Russian literature of his time, allowing the Russian language, for the first time, to articulate the intricacies of emotions and cogitations in their entirety. Dostoevsky once called Pushkin "the creator of the Russian language," and Eugene Onegin stands as the finest example of this linguistic revolution. Belinsky referred to this novel in verse as the "encyclopaedia of Russia"

Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin revolutionised Russian operatic tradition, marking the transformation of Russian opera from national epic to psychological realism and profoundly influencing generations of composers to come. Many Russian composers, including Glinka, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin, frequently depicted the inner world of their protagonists within the context of significant events in Russian history or within the setting of fairy tales.

Nevertheless, the opera Eugene Onegin provides a valuable illustration of the potential for depiction of individual emotional states, focusing on the intricacies of the characters' inner lives rather than on the more grandiose historical events. Tchaikovsky approached this topic with enthusiasm, recognising its inherent challenges. He described the work as "lyrical scenes in three acts", with a focus on musical expression rather than the grandiose spectacle of works such as Verdi's Aida.

In letters to his patron Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky acknowledged the opera's potentially "simple" visual effects, but remained committed to its lyrical approach, prioritising emotional depth.

In addressing the challenges posed by adaptation, the primary impediment is identified as the "narrator". The novel under scrutiny is heavily dependent on this figure. The narrator is presented as a distinct character within the narrative, exhibiting a multifaceted tone that encompasses empathy, wit, irony, and sarcasm. He employs a variety of non-narrative discursive techniques, including digressions, background explanations, and personal judgements, with a view towards shaping the story, analysing characters, and guiding the reading role's emotions. This voice is one of the primary artistic forces employed to regulate the overall narrative structure. The removal of this authorial voice risks the narrative becoming devoid of its soul.

Taruskin's famous plot abbreviation captures how bare the narrative becomes without this voice: "a dreamy country girl falls in love with a young fop from the big city; she impulsively pours out her feelings to him in a letter; she is rebuffed and humiliated; five years later the two encounter each other again and fop is smitten; by now, country girl has become a society matron who will not abandon her husband for her old flame. There is also a subplot involving fop's friend, a provincial poetaster, and the country girl's vacuous sister, over whom the two young men duel needlessly, and the friend is meaninglessly slain."²

² Taruskin, Richard, *On Russian Music*, Chapter 7 Chaikovsky and the Literary Folk: A Study in Misplaced Derision ISBN: 9780520249790, University of California, pp.107-108



Fortunately, Tchaikovsky provided the story with another perspective through means of his music.

The voice and the orchestra engage in a constant dialogue. The music comments, remembers, anticipates, and sometimes reveals what the characters themselves do not yet understand. This is evident in Tatyana's Letter Scene. The orchestra does not merely provide a backdrop to the vocalists' performances; rather, it serves to define the nuances of Tatyana's emotional states, including her hesitation, excitement, and flights of fancy.

A similar function appears in Lensky's two contrasting moments. In the first act, when he expresses his chaste love for Olga and vows to marry her, the orchestra is buoyant; the music is sincere but contains an instability. When combined with the tragic moment in the second act, the earlier sincerity acquires a retrospective tragic meaning.

Tchaikovsky also exploited the inherent irony of the two "falling in love" and two "rejections". Tchaikovsky used the musical recurrence to highlight the irony of Onegin's later falling in love. In the letter scene, where Tatyana expresses her earnest and unalloyed desire for Onegin's love, a melody originally belonging to her is given to Onegin. In the third act, it is Onegin who cannot resist the impulse to pursue Tatyana, despite the morally ambiguous situation.

Besides, the *écossaise* that follows his passionate outburst sharpens the irony further and compromises Onegin's sincerity. And when Tatyana sings "how humbly I listened to your lecture" in their final duet, the orchestra plays Onegin's melody from the rejection scene. As Taruskin declared, in this opera, the music is the Narrator.³

Those dramaturgical arrangements can reveal Tchaikovsky's comprehensive and cohesive vision: in Onegin, nothing exists in isolation; all elements — music, text, and staging — work together to serve the unity of the drama. The opera is characterised by a distinct musical style, marked by the use of harmonies and orchestration that incorporates Russian folk elements, including rural dances and peasant songs. These elements serve to immerse audiences in the social landscape of 18th/19th-century provincial Russia. The dances are also organically integrated into the narrative, functioning not as decorative interludes. "They contribute to the action, give impetus to the drama, and support the musical organization of the entire work."⁴

In addition to serving the irony discussed earlier, Tchaikovsky's use of motivic recurrence further enhances the opera's coherence. As Taruskin has observed, though Tchaikovsky had repeatedly expressed his dislike of Wagner's music, he also acknowledged his greatness.⁵ The echoing effect created by the recurring melodies, while different from the Wagnerian leitmotif, which continues an extensive narrative network, is merged into the plot. For instance, the leitmotif of Tatyana is the initial melodic phrase that is introduced in the orchestral introduction, and this motif subsequently reappears throughout the opera.⁶ Taruskin further points out that "even before its specific, gradually revealed association with Tatyana is made clear, the leitmotif bears a generic resonance", which "more than any other defines the idiom of the bitovoy romans, the Russian domestic or household romance of the early nineteenth century."⁷

The characters are interconnected by tonality, thereby unveiling their relationships and a prevailing sense of unity. Roland John Wiley associates Onegin and fate with G major and E minor. This association is evident in the following instances: his entrance in Act I, the cotillion that precedes his conflict with Lensky, and his reappearance in Act III. B-flat major is associated with the concept of rejection; however, Tchaikovsky's utilisation of it in the *écossaise* serves to augment the prevailing sense of irony, a sentiment that resonates from Act I to the culmination of Act III. In contrast, Tatyana's association with D-flat major symbolises the irreconcilable dissonance of their fates, as they are a tritone apart from Onegin's G major. It is also pointed out that E minor, the

³ "Thank you very much, but that formulation shows magnificent incomprehension of what the music in an opera does—and particularly in this opera, where the music, quite simply, is the narrator." Ibid, p. 107

⁴ Wiley, Roland John. The Dances in 'Eugene Onegin' Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research, no. 2 (1988): 48–60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1290736>, p.48

⁵ "Like most other Russians, Chaikovsky felt a powerful aversion to Wagner, while never denying Wagner's greatness (a concession, as we shall see, that cost him little)." Taruskin, Richard, "Chaikovsky and the Human: A Centennial Essay," in *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, p.253.

⁶ It is the very first melodic phrase presented to the audience in the opera's orchestral introduction; it is echoed in the last line of each stanza of the duet romance, and it is echoed again in the middle section of the last, climactic romance in the Letter Scene." Taruskin, Richard, *On Russian Music*, Chapter 7: Chaikovsky and the Literary Folk: A Study in Misplaced Derision ISBN: 9780520249790, University of California honour, p. 110

⁷ Ibid.



tonality linked to fate, appears when Lensky reproaches Onegin and later "laments over his fate" in Scene 2, and in the last scene where Tatyana decides "to remain faithful to her husband"⁸. The young poet is also connected to E major and C-sharp minor. As Wiley observes, Lensky's "love for Olga, expressed in E major, is intimately related to his death, in C-sharp minor."⁹ The relative relationship between the two tonalities connects his love with his death, and seems to suggest that the fatal outcome develops from the same emotional idealism that defines his character.

Gremin's deep love for Tatyana has also been given an important position in this tonal network. As Francis Maes observed: "Tchaikovsky makes this point even more clear by having Gremin sing his aria in the key range of the ideal (G-flat major, a step beyond the D-flat of Tatiana's theme of the ideal)."¹⁰

Tchaikovsky's engagement with Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin" has been depicted as a "significant turning point, where he found a personal resonance with the characters and their dilemmas, leading him to create an opera that was not just a routine project but a deeply felt expression of his own experiences".¹¹ During the period of composition, he endured a period of profound personal turbulence: his student Antonina Milyukova's confession letter, the ensuing hasty marriage, and the mental torment following its failure. Scholars generally agree that, in shaping the character of Onegin, Tchaikovsky projected his own inner conflicts and self-loathing. In a certain sense, Onegin becomes a mirror of the composer's inner contradictions.

In his letters to Nadezhda von Meck, he explicitly expressed his admiration for Tatyana, whose aria was, in fact, the first part of the opera he completed, but he also emphasised the importance of sincerity and truthfulness in composing the music. However, Tchaikovsky's clear preference for Tatyana does not imply that "Evgeny's musical impotence then becomes a product of Chaikovsky's inability to portray convincingly in music a character dissimilar to his own"¹², as Emily Frey summarises a recurrent critical attitude towards the composer. To use such interpretation to suggest that Tchaikovsky's personal bias compromised the opera's musical integrity, thereby rendering Onegin musically inferior, is superficial. It fails to acknowledge the diverse characterisations employed by the composer.

Tchaikovsky's personal involvement did not serve to restrict the opera; on the contrary, it served to accentuate the contrast between the characters' musical languages. This, in turn, serves to underscore their divergent personalities and heighten the dramatic tension.

One might posit that the character of Onegin is of a highly complex nature, defying facile classification as either a conventional hero or villain. The character's narcissism and hypocrisy are prevalent themes throughout the opera. He is a quintessential "superfluous man". The concept of the "superfluous man" emerged in nineteenth-century Russian literature as a result of the decline of the aristocratic feudal system. This literary figure, which transcends historical boundaries, symbolises the spiritual crisis experienced by the Russian aristocracy, caught between societal change and personal pursuit. The concept of the "superfluous man" serves to underscore the feelings of loneliness and helplessness that many individuals experience in contemporary society. For those engaged in the performance of such works, the ability to capture and convey this emotional resonance is of paramount importance.

Pushkin described Onegin as a man already accustomed to the social life of St. Petersburg and tired of the extravagant routines. He has observed a considerable amount, derived great pleasure from his experiences, and consequently, he finds it challenging to be surprised by anything. Onegin's external facade, cultivated through his Western-style education, serves as a social mask, a strategy of adaptation that, as Belinsky observes, masks a deeper hollowness.

He never establishes authentic connections with those around him; even Lensky, the only individual capable of engaging his interest in conversation, remains emotionally detached. From the outset, Onegin appears to engage in persistent acts of harm towards others or the creation of disorder. However, these actions are not driven by malevolence. His behaviour towards Tatyana is initially motivated by a sense of honesty, yet it is also driven by self-importance. In contrast, his interactions with Olga are driven by a combination of a lack of awareness and a competitive spirit, although he does not anticipate the repercussions of his actions.

⁸ Wiley, The Dances in 'Eugene Onegin' Dance Research, p. 56

⁹ Ibid, p. 53

¹⁰ Maes, Francis, "Tchaikovsky, Onegin, and the Art of Characterisation" Arts 13, no. 3, 2024: 82. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13030082>, p. 8

¹¹ Gasparov, Boris, Eugene Onegin in the Age of Realism, in Five Operas and a Symphony: Word and Music in Russian Culture, pp.58-94

¹² Frey, Emily, "Nowhere Man: Evgeny Onegin and the Politics of Reflection in Nineteenth-Century Russia." 19th-Century Music 36, no. 3 (2013), p. 210



While he harbours no intention to kill Lensky, he accepts the challenge because social convention and personal pride prevent him from withdrawing. Ultimately, acting on irresistible feelings, he confesses his love to Tatyana, creating the final conflict. The paradox of Onegin has been identified by scholars such as Emily Frey: A title character who largely lacks a substantial, consistent musical presence within his own opera.¹³ Her attitude towards Onegin is largely critical. Onegin is portrayed as a "superfluous man", characterised as a "vibrant nonentity." The author highlights that Onegin often mimics others rather than possessing a distinct identity, which emphasises his inability to engage in self-reflection or to have an internally consistent self.

However, it is a prejudiced opinion. As Philip Ross Bullock noted in a lecture, Pushkin's treatment of the character poses problems for Tchaikovsky: "...Onegin gets a series of letters at the end, but he seems to me at least to be a more tacit character, more talked about than talking. We get several extended descriptions of his background and upbringing by the narrator, and he is the object of gossip and speculation..."¹⁴

Therefore, rather than a compositional failure, Tchaikovsky's treatment of Onegin can be understood as his way of preserving Pushkin's narrative distance around the character. The distance is translated into a sonic reality, thereby affirming Onegin's status as an aloof, lofty figure, whose true nature is revealed through the actions and words of other characters.

This detachment also makes Onegin's eventual collapse in the final scene more effective.

Consequently, the performer's challenge lies in making Onegin's characteristic insincerity, his self-alienation and emotional paralysis perceptible, rather than reducing him to a single attitude of coldness. Tchaikovsky's conceptualisation of this opera as "lyrical scenes" also underscores the need for the interpretation to be emotionally nuanced and credible.

Belinsky points to specific passages in Pushkin's novel to decode Onegin's personality. Tatyana challenges the notion of his identity as being in any way contradictory, posing the question of whether he could be considered 'a sad and dangerous eccentric, a creature of hell or heaven' (Pushkin, Eugene Onegin, Chapter 7)

Furthermore, the narrator observes that Onegin fails to resonate with the common opinions or passions of his peers. He is a patchwork of opposing forces: intellectual ambition stifled by societal superficiality, and personal emotion suppressed by a rigid class convention.

Consequently, Belinsky accurately defines him as an "involuntary egoist" (*Egoist po nevole*). His egoism and apathy are not innate traits; rather, they are a necessary defensive mechanism. The subject withdraws into self-interest due to the absence of an authentic outlet for his intellect or his complex emotional reality within the surrounding environment.

When evaluated through the lens of Belinsky's analysis, Onegin's response is revealed to be significantly more complex. Despite the fact that he appears to be indifferent to life, Onegin harbours complex emotions beneath his reserved exterior. The author's intention is not merely to reprimand Tatyana. The lecture, initiated by her authentic emotional response, functions as a mechanism of self-defence.

His response intertwines with his self-assurance regarding married life, harsh self-criticism of his own exhausted lifestyle, and the weight of his past experiences. This aria is fundamentally a moment of introspective confession of his own spiritual paralysis, revealing Onegin's damaged self in front of Tatyana and the audience. He himself is also a victim of his social conditioning and can be considered a classic "superfluous man".

Tchaikovsky's music actively supports this reading of internal conflict. The aria is saturated with a romantic expressiveness that would be inexplicable if Onegin were intended as a simple, cold-hearted villain in this scene. Despite the aria's symmetrical structure and relatively straightforward vocal lines, it is characterised by romantic harmonic colours that reflect the inner world of a noble character who is both experienced and disillusioned. The composer allocated a substantial portion of the piece to this text for a core dramatic purpose.

¹³ "Evgeny, on the other hand, passes through the opera leaving scarcely a trace of himself in the score—and this, in a work that provides (as Asafiev exhaustively demonstrated) a distinctive "intonational pattern" for virtually every other character." (p.210) "Evgeny, on the other hand, offers strikingly little in the way of musical consistency." (p.222)

Frey, Emily, "Nowhere Man: *Evgeny Onegin* and the Politics of Reflection in Nineteenth-Century Russia." *19th-Century Music* 36, no. 3 (2013).

¹⁴ "Tatyana and Lensky both get substantial instances of lyric expressions that lends themselves well to operatic realisation. Onegin gets a series of letters at the end, but he seems to me at least to be a more tacit character more talked about than talking. We get a number of extended descriptions of his background and upbringing by the narrator, and he is the object of gossip and speculation when he visits Tatyana's country estate as well as he returns to St. Petersburg high society at the end of the novel" Garsington Opera, 2016

In the recitative, Onegin's moral ambiguity is exposed.

His words seem caring but, in fact, serve to prepare the ground for his rejection. Tchaikovsky's music intensifies this contrast. For instance, the line "don't deny it" is marked *forte* with the vocal line rising into a higher range, emphasising his commanding tone, while the sudden shift to *piano* highlights the deliberate softness that matches the pretended compassion that follows. This contrast provides the performer with a significant impetus for a sudden change of vocal colour. Onegin feigns being moved by Tatyana's letter, but this is merely a transient illusion – as Pushkin himself writes, he was touched for "a minute".

Smooth sound and legato are the core vocal characteristics of the aria. Tchaikovsky constructs this lyrical contour also through his signature use of the sixth interval, employing it in both ascending and descending forms. These expressive *sixths* inherently demand a lyrical sense in the vocal delivery.

Another defining characteristic of this piece is Tchaikovsky's typical avoidance of firm closure at the ends of phrases. It generates a forward-moving musical flow, in which the melody refuses to stop. For the performer, this means that the aria cannot be treated as a series of isolated sentences. The singer needs to preserve this continuity of thought through the vocal line, sustaining the phrase across its boundaries through coordinated action of the whole vocal system.

The aria opens in B-flat major, marked *Andante non troppo*. The arpeggiated strings introduce a flowing line, and triplets in the strings create rhythmic displacement against the voice in duple time, evoking the sense of detachment of the "superfluous man."

The movement as a whole is characterised by its calmness, with minimal intervallic leaps, reflecting an appropriate and measured speaking manner. However, beneath this superficial tenderness lies Onegin's complex personality. The performer does not attempt this internal reality; rather, when navigating these poetic phrases and lyrical music, Onegin's fundamental contempt toward the institution of traditional marriage anchors the delivery. The utilisation of articulation as the primary expressive instrument is of paramount importance. The singer alters the vocal colour to place ironic stress on specific words, particularly those relating to constraint and the role of a husband, while simultaneously maintaining a velvet-like classical timbre. The fundamental conflict between Onegin's gentlemanly manner, his feigned kindness, and his resentment of domesticity is manifested on the stage through the articulatory shifts, rather than through exaggerated dramatic gestures. Onegin's mental profile suggests that he may also derive pleasure from the act of delivering his speech, which functions as an expression of self-assured superiority rather than mere detachment.

The line "I would seek no other bride than you" epitomises Onegin's insincerity, and perhaps also his narcissistic need to keep her admiration alive: he enjoys being adored. The melodic rise on "невесты" allows the singer to expose his falsity through a dolce yet pretentious sound.

As the aria develops, the text moves toward more bitter, personal territory: "soul," "torment", and the impossibility of lasting love change the emotional and musical temperature. If the previous part of the aria was built upon rhetoric that softens his rejection, here Onegin's tone exposes a sharper, sarcastic edge. Accordingly, a more incisive articulation is expected: for instance, "разлюблю тотчас" and "какие розы" call for a more forward, penetrating timbre that brings out his arrogance and disdain. The emotional climax is initiated with the *Più mosso*. This shift in tempo is indicative of an emotional realism that permeates the composition. The impetus for the narrative does not stem from external events, but rather from Onegin's internal escalation.

Following a period of self-indulgence in which he delivered a lecture on the futility of marriage, he now moves towards a more direct attack on Tatyana's hope.

Yet this attack also turns against himself. It is a moment of self-exposure: in pronouncing his incapacity for love, Onegin is passing judgment on himself. His bitterness, ostensibly aimed at Tatyana's naivety, is inseparable from his own recognition of emotional sterility. The irony lies in the fact that the music's most passionate expansion coincides precisely with the moment in which Onegin declares to be beyond passion.

The repetition of the lines "Dreams and youth will never return" and "I love you like a brother" mixes Onegin's ambiguity (sugarcoating his rejection as brotherly love as a moral substitute for passion), his honesty (admitting his incapacity for love), and self-criticism (proclaiming his emotional sterility). For the performer, the high notes on "нет возврата", "любовью брата" therefore cannot be treated merely as vocal climaxes. They are the dramatic centres of the phrase and require the singer to prepare the whole vocal line towards them, allowing the voice to build the dramatic weight.



With the return to tempo I, the music and character both revert to calmness and gentleness. Onegin resumes his habitual self, but without ceasing to give Tatyana condescending moral instruction. Especially the final line “Мечтами, мечтами легкие мечты!” is marked *pianissimo*. Instead of sincerity, it captures rather a self-satisfying moment for his preaching. This also informs how the *pianissimo* is presented. The singer maintains full bodily engagement while reducing airflow to create a piano sound that is concentrated rather than weak, soft but not vulnerable.

A comparison of this aria with Onegin's first entrance, the duel scene with Lensky, and his final confession of love reveals the performer encountering different aspects of Onegin's emotional world, each marked by its own rhythm and colour. These shifts in character are not merely indicative of moral and emotional change, but can also unveil the inner logic of the character in question. It is only possible to recreate Onegin as an organic whole, rather than as a series of disjointed scenes, if the performer can perceive the character from a holistic perspective.

In this process, interpretation emerges through each musical and dramatic moment, and it ultimately falls upon the singer to translate this understanding into a tangible vocal form. Indeed, the pursuit of dramatic truth appears to be the driving force behind the art of singing, rather than the quest for vocal perfection alone.

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