

## August 13, 2020 – Piotyr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*

Peter Tchaikovsky's best-known opera, *Evgeny Onegin* (*Eugene Onegin*), is featured on this week's Thursday Night Opera House. The idea of setting Alexander Pushkin's classic "novel in verse" was suggested to Tchaikovsky in 1877, and the opera had its premiere on January 23, 1881 at Moscow's Imperial College of Music. While working on *Onegin*, Tchaikovsky received a passionate avowal of love from Antonina Miliukova, a young woman he'd met while teaching at the Moscow Conservatory. Despite his *sub rosa* homosexuality, Tchaikovsky was determined not to emulate the caddishness of the literary character Onegin, so he entered into a loveless marriage. The results were disastrous: a nervous breakdown led to a permanent separation after less than three months of marriage.

As the opera opens in the garden of the Larin country estate, Tatiana (soprano **Nucia Focile**) and her sister Olga (mezzo-soprano **Olga Borodina**) are singing duets while their mother, Madame Larina (mezzo-soprano **Sarah Walker**), reminisces about her youth. The peasants have gathered the harvest, and now dance to amuse their mistress. Olga's suitor, Lenski (tenor **Neil Shicoff**), brings his friend Onegin (baritone **Dmitri Hvorostovsky**). Tatiana asks the nanny, Filipyevna (mezzo-soprano **Irina Arkhipova**), about her marriage. Unable to sleep, she writes an impassioned love letter to Onegin, which Filipyevna agrees to deliver. After receiving the letter, Onegin returns to the estate and coldly tells Tatiana he's just not the marrying kind.

At Lenski's insistence, Onegin attends Tatiana's name day ball. When people gossip about him, Onegin takes revenge on Lenski by flirting with Olga. Lenski is enraged and picks a fight with his friend. Reluctantly, Onegin agrees to a duel with pistols. The next morning, before the duel, Lenski wonders if Olga will shed a tear if he's killed. Onegin proceeds to fatally wound Lenski.

Several years later, Onegin--still bored with life--attends a ball in St. Petersburg, where he once again encounters Tatiana, who's now married to his cousin Prince Gremin (bass **Alexander Anisimov**). Her transformation from a naive country girl to a dazzlingly beautiful princess captivates him. Alone with Onegin, Tatiana accuses him of loving her now only because she is rich and famous. Admitting she still loves him, she nevertheless wishes to remain faithful to her husband. As the opera ends, the caddish Onegin is left wondering what might have been.

**Semyon Bychkov** conducts the Orchestra of Paris and the St. Petersburg Chamber Choir in this 1994 Philips Classics recording.

**Neil Shicoff** sings Lenski's poignant Act II aria, "Kuda, kuda vi udalilis":  
<http://youtu.be/UC-DK02tYgA>.

As a bonus we'll hear three excerpts from the first commercial recording of *Eugene Onegin*, made in 1937 in the Soviet Union.

Next Thursday, August 20th, please join us for an encore broadcast of Verdi's *Luisa Miller*, hosted by the longtime host of the WCPE Opera House, **Al Ruocchio** (1937-2007). **Anna Moffo** sings the title role, **Cornell MacNeill** is her father, **Carlo Bergonzi** is her lover Rodolfo, and **Ezio Flagello** is the dastardly Wurm. **Fausto Cleva** conducts the RCA Italiana Orchestra and Chorus in this 1965 RCA/BMG recording.

The Thursday Night Opera House is heard every Thursday evening at 7 o'clock in the Eastern time zone on 89.7 FM in central North Carolina. We're also streamed online at <http://www.theclassicalstation.org>, and you can listen to us on the WCPE Android or iPhone apps.

*Bob Chapman*

**W. Robert Chapman, Host of the Thursday Night Opera House**