

IN PLACE OF HAPPINESS AND LOVE:

**But it is sad to think that to no purpose
Youth was given us,
that we betrayed it every hour
that it duped us;
that our best wishes,
that our fresh dreamings
in quick succession have decayed
like leaves in putrid autumn.
(Chapter 8, xi)**

When an opera is made from a familiar poem or play, the director is often tempted by the text. I tried to stop myself this time, as I knew from past reading that Pushkin and Tchaikovsky were far apart in terms of temperament, and far enough apart historically to make any kind of assumptions problematic. In terms of the latter, slavophilism had taken on different meanings as the nineteenth century advanced; in terms of the former, Tchaikovsky's libretto and music seems to me not ironic, and Pushkin's is elusive and ironic at every point.

That said, the audience for whom Tchaikovsky wrote the opera would have known the poem - not just the story, but the tone. This enabled the composer to prepare so successfully a sequence of 'lyric scenes' knowing that the audience could fill in ellipses - like the hero's barren foreign tour between Lensky's death and the Petersburg ball at which he meets Tatiana again, or even like the visit to Onegin's library that changes Tatiana's opinion of Onegin during the same absence. The audience would know of Olga's easy wooing after Lensky's death; they might even have learned by heart the text of Onegin's letter to the Petersburg Tatiana, balancing her own letter to him in more innocent times.

What this signals to me is that it serves to be familiar with the poem, but to respect the different

creative temperaments of the composer and the poet. Small details from the poem I have allowed to influence the production directly. Tatiana's letter scene, for example, has suggestions of bedroom and garden:

**The ache of love chases Tatiana
and to the garden she repairs to brood
and all at once her moveless eyes she lowers
and is too indolent to further step;...
Tatiana in the darkness does not sleep
and in low tones talks with her nurse.
(Chapter 3, xvi)**

I also looked to the poem to help with with genuine motivational problems in the opera. Why does Onegin - a man who has given hours of time and sympathy to one friend, the naïve young poet Lensky, in preference to all others - so lightly and callously torment his friend at the Larin's ball. Sure it's boring and provincial, and people talk about him, but how does he let it go so far? Onegin's arrival at the ball, it seems, has a bad effect on Tatiana, 'a doe in the moonlight... on the verge of collapse'. Tatiana's tears provoke Onegin, as much as the big party (he had been promised a small supper, and had reluctantly agreed in order to humour his friend) and Lensky's gloomy jealousy.

**Tragiconnervous scenes,
the fainting fits of maiden tears,
long since Eugene could not abide:
enough of them he had endured.
The odd chap, on finding himself at a huge feast,
was cross already. But the dolent girl's
quivering impulse having noticed,
out of vexation, lowering his gaze,**

**he went into a huff and, fuming,
swore he would enrage Lenski,**

**and thoroughly, in fact, avenge himself.
(Chapter 5, xxxi)**

Curiously, moments later the same sadness in Tatiana elicits a look from Onegin that is 'wondrous tender', and her hopes revive. This is a key moment. The poet says that he cannot (or will not) discern Onegin's true attitude, which could be coquettish or sympathetic, habitually insincere or momentarily disarmed. To Pushkin's narrator, Onegin is ever 'my strange travelling companion'. The guileless Tatiana is, on the other hand 'my true ideal'.

Though Tatiana is idealised by the composer as much as the poet, in the opera there is less chance to see that she is as damaged as Onegin by Lensky's death and the passage of years. Of his model for the character of Tatiana, Pushkin lamented 'Ah, fate has much, much snatched away!' Of Princess Gremina, the Petersburg Tatiana, he says:

**Of a constricting rank
the ways how fast she has adopted!
Who'd dare to seek the tender little lass
in this stately, this nonchalant
Legislatrix of salons?
(Book 8, xxv)**

The Onegin she meets there is lost, cursed. In his impassioned letter to her he explains:

**'From all that to the heart is dear
then did I tear my heart away;
to everyone a stranger, tied by nothing,
I thought: liberty and peace
are a substitute for happiness. Good God!
What a mistake I made, how I am punished!'**

What now draws the lost Onegin to the chilled Tatiana, the 'indifferent princess, the inaccessible goddess', so that he writes her a letter far more compromising than the one she once wrote him? Tatiana herself is ruthless in her reckoning:

**'But now!... what to my feet
has brought you? What a little thing!
How, with your heart and mind,
be the slave of a trivial feeling?
(Book 8, xlv)**

Tatiana loves him; she says so, and in Tchaikovsky's music that motive soars. That does not mean that she is not cold, disillusioned, dutiful and unhappy, and it does not mean that she does not despise the love Onegin at last offers her. Despite her feeling for him, she is even more concise and honest than he was with her, and she knows him better than he knows himself. She has a compelling moral beauty, but the picture is not pretty.

What the poem helped me to understand about the opera is that it is about youth. Love in youth has grace, however misplayed are its moves: 'its impulses are beneficial as are spring storms to fields', and 'vigorous life gives both lush bloom and sweet fruit'. At 'a late and barren age' (and by this poet and composer mean in the later twenties and thirties!) 'sad is the trace of dead passion':

**Thus the storms of cold autumn
into a marsh transform the meadow
and strip the woods around.
(Book 8, xxix)**

Society, sophistication, experience: these are all loss to Pushkin, and to Tchaikovsky, 'chill dreams' and 'stern cares' in contrast to 'the delights, the melancholy, the dear torments, the hum,

the storms, the feasts' of 'my light youth'. While in youth all emotions are sheer, and all causes slight, maturity is a threat to the artist, who cries:

**Let not a poet's soul grow cold,
callous, crust-dry,
and finally be turned to stone
in the world's deadening intoxication
in that slough where with you
I bathe, dear friends.
(Chapter 6, xlvi)**

Lensky was fortunate to die young. As *Eugene Onegin* is an opera unified by sad, radiant descending scales, Eugene Onegin is a poem of repeated beatitudes, culminating in the bitter conclusion that it is better to die young, like Lensky, than to live to cold maturity like Tatiana and her mother, or to despair and isolation, like *Onegin*:

**Blest who's life's banquet early
left, having not drained to the bottom
the goblet of wine;
who did not read life's novel to the end
and all at once could part with it
as I with my Onegin.**

James Conway

THE SERAGLIO SYNOPSIS

The action takes place in the grounds of the Pasha Selim's palace, on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey.

Act One

Belmonte, a Spanish nobleman, is searching for his long-lost lover Constanza, who has been abducted by pirates along with his servant Pedrillo and Constanza's English maid, Blonde. Finding himself outside the Pasha Selim's palace, Belmonte meets Osmin, the Pasha's steward. Osmin flies into a rage when he is questioned about Pedrillo, who has ingratiated himself with the Pasha and become a gardener at the palace.

After Osmin's angry exit, Belmonte and Pedrillo meet. Pedrillo tells Belmonte that the Pasha bought him from the pirates along with Constanza and Blonde (whom Pedrillo loves). Constanza has become the favourite of the Pasha's harem, while Blonde has been given to Osmin. Pedrillo warns that it will be difficult to outwit the cunning Osmin. They plot to introduce Belmonte to the Pasha as a brilliant young architect in order to engineer an escape from the palace.

The Pasha arrives in great ceremony, accompanied by Constanza, whom he begs in vain to give him her love. She replies that it is separation from her beloved that is causing her grief, and leaves. Pedrillo introduces Belmonte to the Pasha, who agrees to give him an audience. Osmin furiously tries to prevent Pedrillo and Belmonte entering the palace but they finally get past him.

Act Two

Osmin tries to woo Blonde, but she is outraged at his crude advances and tells him it is tenderness, not force, that will win her love. She threatens to exploit Constanza's influence over the Pasha to have Osmin punished.

Meanwhile, Constanza defiantly resists the Pasha's threats of torture, resigning herself to death rather than betray her love for Belmonte.

Pedrillo tells Blonde of Belmonte's arrival and of their escape plan. While Blonde goes to tell Constanza, Pedrillo persuades Osmin to try some wine. Soon, Osmin has passed out and the four lovers are joyfully reunited.

Act Three

Belmonte, waiting to put the escape plan into action, reflects on the power of love. As a signal to the women, Pedrillo sings an 'oriental' serenade about a young knight rescuing a maiden held prisoner. Pedrillo and Blonde are caught by Osmin, whose guards also catch Belmonte and Constanza. Osmin exults in the prospect of their torture and execution.

The Pasha confronts the lovers and Belmonte pleads for compassion, explaining that he is from a noble Spanish family who will pay a large ransom. The Pasha realises that Belmonte is the son of his greatest enemy, who cruelly forced him into exile. He leaves them under guard, while Belmonte and Constanza welcome death as the only way they can remain together.

The Pasha returns to deliver his judgment. He tells Belmonte that he will repay injustice with mercy, and allows all four their freedom. Osmin is furious, but everyone else joins in praise of the Pasha and agrees that nothing is worse than revenge.