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### An absorbing *Eugene Onegin* at Royal Academy Opera

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#### **Eugene Onegin** (Tchaikovsky)

Royal Academy Opera  
Royal Academy of Music Sinfonia

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**Jane Glover**, Conductor  
**John Ramster**, Director  
**Tereza Gevorgyan**, Soprano: Tatyana  
**Fiona Mackay**, Mezzo-soprano: Olga  
**Anna Harvey**, Mezzo-soprano: Madame Larina  
**Rozanna Madylus**, Mezzo-soprano: Filipyevna  
**Stephen Aviss**, Tenor: Lensky  
**Ross Ramgobin**, Baritone: Eugene Onegin  
**Stuart Jackson**, Tenor: Monsieur Triquet  
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For an opera school production, it's a good idea to choose a classic: something that will focus the audience on the quality of the singers and orchestra rather than on innovation in the piece or programming. It's better still if you can find a classic that was originally composed with a conservatoire performance in mind, and this is what Royal Academy Opera have chosen this term, in the shape of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, first performed in 1879 by students at the Moscow Conservatoire.



It's worth highlighting two of the things that make *Eugene Onegin* such a classic. Firstly, it highlights an emotion that is powerful and common to all humanity: regret at what might have been. We may not have much of a feel for the society of tsarist Russia; we may not even have suffered from the pangs of overwhelming but unreciprocated love, unbridled jealousy or infatuation with an old flame suddenly rekindled (as Tatyana, Lensky and Onegin do in Acts I, II and III respectively). But everyone other than the very young has moments of looking back at times past and wondering how things might have worked out differently.

The second point is this: Tchaikovsky expresses these sentiments with extraordinary elegance and balance. In the ancient question of "prima la parola" versus "prima la musica", Tchaikovsky achieves perfect parity, with music of the most passionate intensity allied to a poetic depiction, closely based on Pushkin's original verse, which equals it in power.

Royal Academy Opera chose to perform the opera in its original Russian. This must have been a challenge for the cast (other than a minority from countries near Russia), since the language is so different in sound, grammar and morphology from Western languages. But the challenge was overcome: while I can't comment on the quality of the accents, **it was a delight to hear the Russian text sung with crisp diction and fitted smoothly to the music. This was just one of many aspects of all-round quality of ensemble production.** Sound balance was always good, as was acting and movement around the stage. **The dancing, choreographed by Victoria Newlyn, was quite superb,** whether in the rustic peasant dance of Act I, the not-quite-elegant-enough waltzes in the provincial party of Act II or a superbly executed polonaise in the Act III grand ball. **I had to pinch myself to remember that these were students of opera, not ballet.**

John Ramster's staging was simple and effective, combining stunning period costumes with a set of Brechtian minimalism - a few items of furniture in the foreground, a giant frame in the background surrounding a panel brightly lit to evoke the different times of day and seasons. For the first half, a structure of roughly hewn wood placed us in the country rather than in town (some first night problems with this caused merriment but were soon forgotten).

And so to the talents being showcased. Generally, in this kind of production, one expects to hear singers with great potential who haven't quite reached the maturity and completeness that you might find in a professional production. While the whole cast were of high calibre in basic vocal technique, Stephen Aviss, as Lensky, seemed to me to be especially close to that completeness: when it was time for his big aria *Kuda kuda, vi udalilis* ("where have you gone, golden days of my spring?"), which precedes the fatal duel, he grabbed hold of the audience with a performance that was both authoritative and poignant. The succeeding duet with Ross Ramgobin's Onegin was almost as much of a tear-jerker.

But the performance that stole the show for me (apart from a splendid comic cameo by the larger-than-life Stuart Jackson as the ghastly Monsieur Triquet) was Rozanna Madylus's Filipyevna. It may not be the most demanding vocal part, but Madylus's singing of it was sprightly and thoroughly engaging – her Act I duet with Anna Harvey's Madame Larina was the other highlight of the evening – and her characterisation of the elderly nurse was totally believable. I was particularly impressed by a perfect rendering of the gait of a woman who is energetic but cannot walk so well any more.

As Tatyana, Tereza Gevorgyan isn't quite the finished article yet, but shows enormous promise. She was beautiful to listen to, acted well and did a good portrayal of the changes in Tatyana from head-in-the-clouds child to wistful adult. But she wasn't quite able to hold the attention in the crucial letter scene. It's a punishingly demanding scene simply on grounds of the length of time for which a single performer has to put the audience through the emotional wringer; Gevorgyan's grip on the audience was solid for the first half of the scene but I began to drift away towards the end.

Ross Ramgobin may also be a talent to watch, but not, I suspect, in this role. His baritone voice is elegant and delicious to hear, with hardly a flaw in pure vocal quality, but he did not engage me in his character. It's a tough job, to be fair – the performer of Onegin has to be in command of the stage and the audience's attention while being bored and weary of the world – and Ramgobin wasn't quite able to muster the required charisma and conviction.

The orchestra certainly did muster conviction. It may have been short of technical perfection – there were a number of fluffed notes in the winds and intonation whoopsies in the strings – but Jane Glover conjured up immense verve and clarity.

These performances at the Royal Academy's Jack Lyons Theatre are close to my favourite way to see opera. You get world class conductors and directors, a high quality orchestra in an intimate performance space where you can see every face and hear every note. You also get to hear singing talent that you know is going to go places in future. *Eugene Onegin* is a wonderful opera, and this performance didn't disappoint.

Submitted by **David Karlin** on 12th March 2013 

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Image credit: Tereza Gevorgyan as Tatyana © Hana Zushi, Royal Academy of Music

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