

Tchaikovsky's *Yevgeny Onegin* in Britain, 1892 and 1906: Slipping between High and Low, Future and Past, East and West

Tamsin Alexander

The first run of Tchaikovsky's *Yevgeny Onegin* in Britain passed by without much furore. It opened on 17 October 1892 at the New Olympic Theatre, featuring modest sets and, unusually for a Royal Italian Opera season, an English libretto. With attendance dwindling and critical opinion split, *Onegin* was abandoned after just seven performances.¹ Fourteen years later, a second attempt at the opera was made. This time, it came from the Moody-Manners company, led by the husband and wife team, Fanny Moody and Charles Manners, who had played Tatyana and Gremin in 1892. Again, the venture made little lasting impact in terms of inscribing *Onegin* into the canon – but it did provoke a storm of heated debate. The opera divided critics once more, but now the prevailing question was whether or not the opera was worthy of Tchaikovsky's genius, and (more importantly) whether it was worthy of being labelled truly »Russian«.

This shift is revealing. For one, it brings key nuances to our understanding of the international spread and reception of Russian music. One of Richard Taruskin's most important contributions to the field of Russianist musicology has been to highlight that Western writers have tended to validate Russian music in terms of its supposed Russian quotient (identified in the presence of folksongs), and that audiences have long been drawn to the repertoire for its alleged mystique.² This state of things certainly stands following Diaghilev's *Saisons Russes*, which successfully branded Russia as exotic to audiences across the globe after 1907. But the 1892 British premiere of *Onegin* betrays that sounding Russian was once not such an attraction, and that factors beyond the Russian allure initially brought this opera to London. What is more, when »Russianness« had become a point of wider interest by 1906, the concept did not just denote the exotic: in the midst of new ideas about the nature of Russian culture, Tchaikovsky came to be judged also by his modernising and democratising potential.

My objective here is to historicise »the myth of otherness« Taruskin has identified by investigating specific points at which *Onegin* moved westward, how it changed on relocation, and the impact it had on arrival. In so doing, I build on work by Philip Bullock, Gareth Thomas and Stephen Muir, who have already begun to flesh out Taruskin's narrative by examining the reception of Russian music in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century.³ As yet, however, their studies have not extended to opera, possibly because the introduction of this repertoire was so slow and sporadic in comparison with that of Russian instrumental music. In what follows, therefore, I also explore what it was about British operatic culture that

1 Both Philip Ross Bullock in »Untranslated and Untranslatable? Pushkin's Poetry in England, 1892–1931«, in: *Translation and Literature* 20 (2011), pp. 348–372, here p. 367, and Gareth Thomas in *The Impact of Russian Music in England 1893–1929*, PhD thesis, University of Birmingham 2005, pp. 7–8, state that *Onegin* received generally favourable reviews in 1892. In fact, reviews were negative to mixed. Thomas presents an article from 1893 – by which time Tchaikovsky's symphonies had brought him new fame in Britain (see later in this article) – erroneously presented as a review from 1892, as evidence. Bullock, meanwhile, takes the word of Arthur Jacobs' *Henry J. Wood: Maker of the Proms*, Methuen 1994, which uses reviews taken from Wood's press-cuttings scrapbook.

2 See Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays*, Princeton/NJ 1997, p. xiv.

3 See for example, G. Thomas, *The Impact of Russian Music* (see note 1); Philip Ross Bullock, *Rosa Newmarch and Russian Music in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century England*, Farnham / Surrey 2009 and Stephen Muir, »About as wild and barbaric as well could be imagined...: The Critical Reception of Rimsky-Korsakov in Nineteenth-Century England«, in: *Music & Letters* 93 (2012), pp. 513–542.

made it difficult for Russian operas to find a permanent place, considering in particular how *Olegin's* reception was shaped by intensifying debate over what the artistic and social function of opera in Britain ought to be. It was only around 1906, I will propose, that the expectations for opera and the attitudes that accompanied a new enthusiasm for Russian culture would align to render Russianness desirable in the opera house.

As noted by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman, there has been a tendency in transnational studies to imply »a fixed frame of reference including points of departure and arrival.«⁴ This means that national responses begin to be categorised, thus resorting to the very nationalist narratives the field seeks to challenge. By generating thick descriptions of two transnational moments, I seek to expose the dangers of generalising about a Western or even British reception of Russian music. And instead of presenting Britain and Russia as separate poles, I intend to draw attention to the networks that connected the two, and show that, rather than emphasising difference and distance, critics were keen to consider Russian music's significance for and within British operatic life.

How *Olegin* came to the Olympic

Olegin was not the first Russian opera to be performed in London. Anton Rubinstein's *Demon* and Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* had been performed at Covent Garden in 1881 and 1887 respectively, meaning that, by 1892, London had hosted more Russian operas than any other city outside of Russia, except Prague.⁵ It might be tempting to assume that this early introduction was a symptom of British »Russomania« – a wave of enthusiasm for Russian culture typically identified as having taken off in the 1880s when left-leaning literary circles became enamoured by the elusive »Russian Soul« via the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.⁶ And yet, this nascent fascination with all things Russian cannot be easily transferred to the audiences of London's Royal Italian Opera seasons, held traditionally at Covent Garden, Her Majesty's and Drury Lane. These summer seasons (as opposed to other more socially accessible, year-round lyric entertainments), were gathering places for the few, where audiences attended in the hope of catching sight of luminaries of fashionable society in the boxes and international star singers on the stage.⁷ For many of the subscribers who held influence here, the operas performed were not expected to bear lofty philosophical or political weight. And even if political implications were sought out, such audiences were unlikely to be drawn to the concept of a nation brimming with anarchic political and artistic ideas. Russia was, what is more, a colonial rival, its growing strength in the East posing a threat to British territories.⁸ With Russian opera by no means in vogue abroad, and with Russia a hostile and little-understood nation, the premieres of *Demon* and *A Life* had not been framed as Russian exotica, but Italianized to become »Il Demonio« and »La vita per lo Czar«. Both had lasted just one season, with critics declaring them too unfathomably Russian for British ears.⁹

4 Michael Werner / Bénédicte Zimmerman, »Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity«, in: *History and Theory* 45 (2006), pp. 30–50, here p. 36.

5 I have explored Prague in *Tales of Cultural Transfer: Russian Opera Abroad, 1866–1906*, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge 2015, pp. 24–80.

6 Various dates have been suggested for the beginnings of »Russomania« in Britain: John Slatter and Peter France take 1880 as their start date (J. Slatter, »Bears in the Lion's Den: The Figure of the Russian Revolutionary Emigrant in English Fiction, 1880–1914«, in: *Slavonic and Eastern European Review* 77 [1999], pp. 30–55, here p. 37; and P. France, »Introduction to Russian«, in: Idem [ed.], *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, Oxford 2000, p. 582). Donald Davie has argued that »the awakening of the Anglo-Saxon people to Russian literature« occurred between 1885 and 1920 (»Mr Tolstoy, I Presume?« The Russian Novel through Victorian Spectacles«, in: D. Davie [ed.], *Slavic Excursions: Essays on Russian and Polish Literature*, Manchester 1990, p. 276); and Anthony Cross suggests dates of 1890–1930 in his introduction to *A People Passing Rude: British Responses to Russian Culture*, Cambridge 2012, p. 1.

For discussion of left-wing interest in the Russian novel and »Russian Soul« from the 1880s, see Carol Peaker, »We are not Barbarians« – Reading Revolution: Russian Émigrés and the Reception of Russian Literature in England, 1890–1905«, in: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 3 (2006), pp. 1–18; and Ruth Livesey, »Socialism in Bloomsbury: Virginia Woolf and the Political Aesthetics of the 1880s«, in: *The Yearbook of English Studies* 37 (2007), pp. 126–144.

- 7 As long as the subscription list included a royal patron, an opera house could use »Royal« in their season title; »Italian« referred to the language in which all the operas were sung. For more on opera culture in London in this period, see Paul Rodmell, *Opera in the British Isles, 1875–1918*, Farnham/Surrey 2013, pp. 35–74.
- 8 See Jimmie Cain, *Bram Stoker and Russophobia: Evidence of the British Fear of Russia in »Dracula« and »The Lady of the Shroud«*, Jefferson/NC 2006, pp. 70–79.
- 9 See Tamsin Alexander, »Too Russian for British Ears: *La Vita per lo czar* at Covent Garden, 1887«, in: *Tekst. Kniga. Knigoizdanie 2* (2014), pp. 30–48.
- 10 David Brown, *Tchaikovsky: A Biographical and Critical Study*, vol. 4: *The Final Years: 1885–1893*, London 1991, p. 183. The translation – by Henry and Margaret Sutherland-Edwards – was the first to be made directly from English to Russian, rather than via Italian.
- 11 As reported by the Magazine of Music, 1.2.1888: »Our old friend, Signor Lago, has been bold enough to start a season of Italian Opera at St. Petersburg«.
- 12 Both the German productions were reported in prominent music journals in Britain. The *Musical Times*, for instance, mentioned the Hamburg premiere in February 1892 and the Darmstadt performances in June 1892.
- 13 Daily Chronicle, 18.10.1892.
- 14 Star, 18.10.1892.
- 15 St James Gazette, 18.10.1892.
- 16 Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, 29.10.1892.
- 17 For instance, »Piccolo« of the *Star* (18.10.1892) remarked that it should not have been put forth as »the battle-horse in a season of opera«.
- 18 Morning Post, 4.11.1892.

It was not excitement over the Russian mystique, then, that encouraged the impresario Joseph Lago to include *Onegin* in his Royal Italian Opera season for the Olympic in 1892. Indeed, it was not so much difference as interconnections that enabled *Onegin* to reach Britain. The idea of producing the opera had initially come from the pioneering impresario of English-language grand opera, Carl Rosa. He commissioned a translation of the libretto shortly after Tchaikovsky visited London to conduct the Philharmonic Society in 1888, but died before any performances took place.¹⁰ The project was then taken up by Lago, who may well have been familiar with the opera, having spent his winters working as an impresario in St Petersburg since 1888.¹¹ Access to the score also played a role. It was in 1892 that Tchaikovsky's publisher Jurgenson first released the parts for *Onegin*, helping the opera make its first German appearances in Darmstadt and Hamburg that year. It is likely that awareness of the opera's gradual spread across Europe also contributed to Lago's decision to stage *Onegin* in London.¹² Only once the opera became more accessible in practical terms then, through the easing of the transfer of peoples and objects between Russia and Western Europe, could *Onegin* spread.

Anglicising Russian Opera

Further evidence that being Russian was not a primary draw in 1892 can be found in the reviews. Many critics declared *Onegin's* plot, scenario and characters incomprehensible (as they had *Demon* and *A Life*). A critic for the *Daily Chronicle*, for instance, asserted that: »an opera written by a Russian for his own countrymen [...] »Eugène Onegin« brings before an English audience society and manners with which it is unfamiliar«.¹³ Not only this, but difference was commonly treated as a marker of backwardness: in the *Star*, a critic signing himself »Piccolo« wrote that »an extraordinary naïveté which characterise[d] both book and music [was] starting to an English mind«.¹⁴ The usual othering stereotypes of wildness and barbarism also surfaced. In the *St James Gazette*, Lensky was described as a »member of the irritable race«¹⁵, and the critic for the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* attempted to persuade his readers that the two ballroom scenes were proof that »the Russians« were »most excitable, almost barbaric, dancers«.¹⁶

That said, neither did *Onegin's* Russian status dictate its fate. Critics offered various explanations for the season being cut short. Some blamed Lago's failure to book enough star singers; others suggested that Lago should have chosen a safer option to head the season, such as *Lohengrin* or *The Magic Flute*.¹⁷ In a letter to the papers, Lago himself blamed the »exceptionally inclement« weather.¹⁸ One of the greatest problems, however, was competition from Covent Garden. Holding Royal Italian Opera seasons in the autumn was a new endeavour: traditionally, these were restricted to the period from around April to July, when the gentry came to the capital for the parliamentary session. By October, potential audiences were much diminished, and with two seasons running in tandem,

they would be split further. Not only did performances clash, but Lago's season was bound to compare unfavourably with that at the other house. Four years earlier, Covent Garden had come under the management of Augustus Harris, who spent extravagantly on refurbishing the interior, as well as the set and costume departments, and employed some of the most famed singers of the day (such as the de Reszke brothers). He won over numerous influential patrons in the process and by 1892, Covent Garden had become the focal point of high society.¹⁹

By comparison, Lago's venture bore the hallmarks of a subordinate enterprise. The Olympic had never hosted (and would never again host) an opera season, being known instead for melodrama, burlesques, variety shows and pantomimes.²⁰ As such, it did not boast an interior designed for society to mingle in, leading a critic writing for the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* to lament that there was »nothing to induce the audience to leave their places between the acts«, in contrast to the newly fitted out Covent Garden.²¹ The staging afforded problems too. Now that Harris had raised standards at Covent Garden, audiences for the Royal Opera, as the *Sunday Times* columnist Herman Klein reflected in his memoirs, would not appreciate »opera on the cheap«. ²² In reviews of *Onegin*, critics complained that the orchestra and chorus were under-rehearsed; that the theatre's technical effects were weak – scene changes were excessively slow, and the lights failed to come up gradually to represent the sunrise in Tatyana's letter scene²³; and that many of the cast wore the same costumes throughout, despite the change of location and five-year time gap between the second and third acts.²⁴

The combination of the unglamorous staging and unfashionable venue encouraged critics to associate *Onegin* with the sort of lighter entertainments that were typical of the theatre. Being sung in English and by a largely English-speaking cast exacerbated the problem: English was rarely heard at Royal Opera seasons, and though in the 1880s Carl Rosa's opera company had come a long way in convincing the public that English grand opera could be a success, the project had gone into decline since his death in 1889.²⁵ A reviewer for the *St James Gazette* consequently compared the performance of *Onegin* to a »pantomime«²⁶, while George Bernard Shaw in a review for the *World* remarked that »the whole thing reminded [him] of The Colleen Bawn«²⁷, a popular melodrama dating from 1860. A number likened *Onegin* to the outmoded ballad operas of the Anglo-Irish composer Michael Balfe, and the critic for the esteemed theatrical journal, the *Era*, suggested outright that »Tschai'kowsky[']s songs [...] reminded the hearer of an opera by a native composer.«²⁸ Far from being exoticised, in the context of the Olympic stage and staging, *Onegin* came to be aligned with familiar British entertainments.

As much as the Olympic assumed a confused position somewhere between a grand opera house and repertory theatre, *Onegin* itself disconcerted critics for appearing to slip between serious and light genres.²⁹ In the 1880s and 90s, critics were becoming increasingly eager to categorise what should and should not be counted as opera. One cause was the new preoccupation with the notion of an »English Musical Renaissance«,

19 After 1892, Covent Garden maintained a monopoly on Royal Opera seasons. For more on Harris's tenure, see P. Rodmell, *Opera in the British Isles* (see note 7), pp. 53–61; and Harold Rosenthal, *Two Centuries of Opera at Covent Garden*, London 1958, pp. 222–273.

20 See Raymond Mander / Joe Mitchenson, *The Lost Theatres of London*, London 1968, p. 254.

21 *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 19.10.1892.

22 Herman Klein, *Thirty Years of Musical Life in London, 1870–1900*, London 1903, p. 208.

23 Complaints about lighting and staging were made, for example, in: *Fun*, 26.10.1892 and the *Star*, 18.10.1892.

24 *World*, 26.10.1892.

25 See P. Rodmell, *Opera in the British Isles* (see note 7), pp. 48–53. Note that Moody and Manners also sang with the Carl Rosa Company.

26 *St James Gazette*, 18.10.1892.

27 *World*, 26.10.1892.

28 *Era*, 22.10.1892. Gremin's da capo aria, »To Love all Ages are Obedient«, was frequently described as being »of a Balfeian pattern« (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 22.10.1892).

29 For similar criticisms in the Russian press over *Onegin*'s proximity to »the mundane stretches of prose fiction (jam) or the frivolous space of operetta (cuckolded husbands)«, see Julie Buckler, *The Literary Lorgnette: Attending opera in Imperial Russia*, Stanford/CA 2000, pp. 122–123.

- 30 One critic remarked proudly that it was »a characteristic indication of the tone and temper of the audience who frequent Wagnerian opera, that when a cat appeared on the stage in the last act, there was not the faintest ghost of a giggle throughout the vast auditorium« (Musical Times, 1.7.1892). Note that Wagner's operas (such as *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*), had already gained repertory status in London, but the music dramas had not fared well before 1892. For more on Wagner's British reception, see Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s*, Oxford 2002, and Anne Dzamba Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English*, Rutherford etc. 1979.
- 31 *Observer*, 18.10.1892.
- 32 *Daily Telegraph*, 18.10.1892.
- 33 *Musical Times*, 1.10.1892.
- 34 *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 29.10.1892.
- 35 See, for instance, R. Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (see note 2), p. xvii.

pursued not only by encouraging home-grown composers, but also by seeking to improve the nation's listening habits. Following a successful German season featuring Wagner's music dramas at Covent Garden in the summer of 1892, an unprecedented number of critics began to declare that these were the standard by which serious opera should be measured, and this the repertoire capable of attracting a cultural, rather than social, elite to the opera house.³⁰ A review in the new socialist-leaning daily paper, the *Star*, thus took *Onegin* to task for failing to adhere to Wagnerian dramatic principles. The pseudonymous Piccolo complained in particular about what he called »dramatic awkwardness«, a lack of innovation, and Tchaikovsky ruining the »»psychological moment«« in the third act with Gremin's ponderous aria in admiration of Tatyana. For Wagnerites, such traits rendered Tchaikovsky, to quote from the *Observer*, »merely a manufacturer of music, devoid of any inspiration«.³¹

But many, from leading music critics to those writing brief notices in fashion journals, maintained that opera should be entertaining and accessible, not progressive or challenging. Among these was the influential critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, Joseph Bennett – a staunch defender of Gilbert and Sullivan's Savoy operas, and frequent denigrator of the social elitism of the Royal Italian Opera and the cultural elitism of Wagnerism. While he admired Tchaikovsky's tunefulness, he regretted moments in *Onegin* which »resort[ed] to restless tonality«, »to harmonies sometimes more than a little crabbed, and to figuration so abundant that it often obscures what should be clear«.³² The author of a preview article in the *Musical Times*, meanwhile, objected to the most basic of quirks, from the lead being a baritone to the duel being fought with pistols (which are »so unmusical«).³³ Even the arioso passages proved too novel for some. The ever-traditional critic for the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* ascertained: »I am afraid [...] that, advanced as the public may be in its musical tastes, it likes a broader line than Tchaikovsky sometimes draws between what is and what is not recitative«.³⁴ Therein lay the problem: *Onegin*, not intended for the grand stage, and not even classified by Tchaikovsky as an opera (rather as »lyric scenes«), did not fall comfortably on either side of the pressing debates that prevailed in British music criticism at that time. It was too straightforward for defenders of Wagnerian opera, too unusual for the champions of accessibility. And presented in a Royal Italian Opera season, but sung in English at the Olympic, *Onegin* would inevitably slip in between the emerging (though not yet classified) notions of »high« and »low« culture.

Not Russian Enough

Fourteen years later, however, the parameters by which *Onegin* would be judged had shifted significantly. When the Moody-Manners company revived the opera in 1906, the question driving each review was that which Taruskin has pinpointed as long having consumed Western criticism: »How Russian is it?«.³⁵ The issue sparked an extensive back-and-forth in

the *Saturday Review*, beginning with a scathing review by Harold Gorst. Tchaikovsky, he declared, was »one of the giants of musical history«, one of »the greatest and most venerated names on the roll-call of music«; but *Onegin* had the potential to damage this reputation. The reason? »If the music possessed distinctive national character«, Gorst affirmed, »the fact would certainly have enhanced the interest, and to some extent the worth, of the opera«.³⁶ The next issue featured an outraged response by the Russian translator, Annette Keeton. She defended the opera by avowing that it contained »the very essence« of a concept that had become much revered: »the Russian soul«.³⁷ Two further letters of retort appeared the following week, again asserting that this was a true Russian opera and accusing Gorst of the crime of being, by default of criticising something Russian, pro-German. One of the responders, Alexander Kinloch (an author of Russian-language learning texts) advised: »so much nonsense is constantly being written about Russia and the Russians by our indifferently informed press that for Heaven's sake let us try to keep it out of music«.³⁸ How, then, had being Russian switched from a hindrance to a badge of honour? And why was Tchaikovsky, in particular, expected to embody the »Russian soul«?

Russian Culture as Politics

Where in 1892 reviewers had balked at the concept of a Russian opera, in 1906, some were saying that the opera's nationality alone ought to inspire public support. One wrote:

»It may be hoped that, as our British musical opinion is fully awakened to the beauty and power and originality of the best products of the Slavonic spirit in music, ›Eugene Onegin‹ will hold the stage among the elect operatic masterpieces.«³⁹

This warming towards Russian culture at the turn of the century was stimulated, in part, by political events. The tensions that had plagued Russo-British relations had not dissolved altogether: the Eastern Question prevailed and fears were brewing over the balance of power in Europe.⁴⁰ But following the 1905 Revolution and heavy losses during the Russo-Japanese War, the Russian threat had waned. Germany, with whom Britain had been locked in an arms race since the 1890s, was the greater concern; by 1906, Britain was on the verge of signing the Anglo-Russian convention, which would form, with France, the Triple Entente against Germany, Austro-Hungary and Italy.

The »awakening« of British opinion to »the Slavonic spirit in music« had been fuelled by new enthusiasm for Tchaikovsky. Back in 1892, another limitation on Lago's enterprise had been that Tchaikovsky was relatively unfamiliar. Despite having travelled to London to conduct concerts of his own works in 1888 and 1889, and despite his songs and piano pieces being popular in the home, one reviewer of *Onegin* even commented that the »music of Tschaikowsky [was] new to Londoners«.⁴¹ While *Onegin* had done little for his British renown, the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Symphonies,

36 *Saturday Review*, 12.5.1906.

37 Annette Keeton, »Sham v. Genuine Russian Music«, in: *Saturday Review*, 19.5.1906. This was followed by a response from Gorst (26.5.1906) and, in the same issue, two more letters defending *Onegin* by Alexander Kinloch and Gregory Bloch. Yet another letter from Keeton supporting *Onegin* was printed on 2 June.

38 *Saturday Review*, 26.05.1906.

39 *Musical Opinion and Musical Trade Review*, 1.4.1906.

40 See J. Cain, *Bram Stoker and Russophobia* (see note 8) and Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History*, New York 1992, p. 367.

- 41 Moonshine, 29.10.1892.
- 42 The rise of Tchaikovsky's popularity in Britain has already been detailed in G. Thomas, *The Impact of Russian Music* (see note 1), pp. 5–13, and P. Bullock, *Rosa Newmarch* (see note 3), pp. 32–33.
- 43 See G. Thomas, *The Impact of Russian Music* (see note 1), p. 10.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Musical Times, 1.2.1899.
- 46 See G. Thomas, *The Impact of Russian Music* (see note 1), pp. 13–18; Philip Ross Bullock, »Tsar's Hall: Russian Music in London, 1895–1926«, in: Rebecca Beasley / Philip Ross Bullock (eds.), *Russia in Britain, 1880–1940: From Melodrama to Modernism*, Oxford 2013, pp. 113–119; and S. Muir, »The Critical Reception of Rimsky-Korsakov« (see note 3), pp. 514–518 and 531–537.
- 47 See Leanne Langley, »Agency and Change: Berlioz in Britain, 1870–1920«, in: *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 132 (2007), pp. 306–348, here p. 341. She notes that works by Tchaikovsky were performed at the Queen's Hall Proms 611 times between 1895 and 1914, just behind Beethoven at 681, and far behind 2383 excerpts from Wagner operas.
- 48 Richard Alexander Streatfield, *Modern Music and Musicians*, London 1906, p. 315.
- 49 P. Bullock, »Tsar's Hall« (see note 46), p. 116.
- 50 See P. Bullock, *Rosa Newmarch* (see note 3), pp. 71–98.
- 51 See Ezequiel Adamovsky, *Euro-Orientalism: Liberal Ideology and the Image of Russia in France (1740–1880)*, Oxford 2006, pp. 120–122 and 134–136.
- 52 For more on the society, see C. Peaker, »Reading Revolution« (see note 6), pp. 4–9.
- 53 See P. Bullock, »Pushkin's Poetry in England« (see note 1), p. 352. The intrigue *Free Russia* generated was so powerful that similar journals were published: *Darkest Russia* (1891–1893) and *The Anglo-Russian* (1897–1914).

premiered in 1893–4, took concert halls by storm.⁴² Tchaikovsky's death in 1893 only heightened interest: to British audiences, it appeared that the composer had been struck down in his prime.⁴³ According to Thomas, by 1897, the *Pathétique* Symphony was being performed across the country on average once every four weeks.⁴⁴ The success of Tchaikovsky's symphonies prompted »a flood of Russian music« into Britain.⁴⁵ Leading the way was Henry Wood (who had conducted the 1892 *Onegin*) and his Promenade Concerts at the Queen's (dubbed the »Tsar's«) Hall.⁴⁶ Of all the Russian composers introduced in this period, Tchaikovsky reigned supreme. Between 1897 and 1905, there were regular »Tchaikovsky Nights« at the Proms – the only composers performed more frequently were Beethoven and Wagner.⁴⁷ And by 1906, even after the introduction of music from composers such as Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov and Borodin, music histories were still declaring: »[Tchaikovsky's] music to Western ears has as strong a Slavonic flavour as that of any of his compatriots.«⁴⁸

The nature of Tchaikovsky's posthumous fame engendered a new set of expectations for his music. Wood's endorsement of Russian composers, as Bullock has indicated, was not merely a reflection of personal preference: he believed »that this repertoire could form the basis for encouraging and establishing an intelligent and committed audience for serious music«.⁴⁹ This same view had been espoused forcibly since the late 1890s by Rosa Newmarch, Britain's first authority on Russian music. In numerous articles, translations and programme notes, Newmarch linked nationalism with progressive politics, arguing (like so many others) that national music had the potential to unite and educate the masses. In this way, she professed that British composers had much to learn from Russian national composers. She championed Tchaikovsky in particular in the belief that symphonies such as the *Pathétique* could transcend class divides due to their immediate emotional appeal.⁵⁰

As indicated above, Russian artists had first been praised as inherently political among Britain's socialist groups. Indeed, leftist thinkers had voiced increasing enthusiasm for Russia throughout the nineteenth century due to their conviction that the peasant commune could be upheld as a social model and a potentially anarchic force against the old European order.⁵¹ From the late 1880s, the connection between Russian culture and socialist politics was explored with new vigour by a group of Russian émigrés headed by Sergey Mikhaylovich Stepnyak-Kravchinsky. In 1889, Kravchinsky, popularly known as »Stepniak«, founded the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom with the British politician Robert Spence Watson. Though their principal aim was to raise awareness of the sufferings of the Russian populace, the group also sought to promote and shape British interest in Russian culture.⁵²

Their key mouthpiece was the journal, *Free Russia*, established in 1890. Its pages were filled with tales of revolutionaries, Siberian horrors, persecutions, jailbreaks and captures. It also promoted new translations of Tolstoy, Turgenev and Dostoevsky novels, thus helping canonise the view that the Russian national character was predominantly melancholic and realist.⁵³ The captivating image the journal cultivated of Russia as an

empire brimming with revolutionary unrest meant that, by the turn of the century, the British public were beginning to distinguish between Russia's despotic leadership and its long-suffering people: rather than uncultivated upstarts, Russian artists, authors and composers came to represent a wealth of creative voices caught in a heroic struggle against »tsarist repression«.⁵⁴

This depiction of the Russian artist, combined with Tchaikovsky's reputation as a democratising force in music, rendered *Onegin* an apt choice for the Moody-Manners troupe. The company was known as a provider of opera for the masses (or at least the educated middle classes), and was often touted by supporters of schemes to nationalise opera. As a touring company, singing most operas in English, the Moody-Manners troupe could feasibly bring opera to »the million«, rather than the »upper ten« at Covent Garden.⁵⁵ Their 1906 tour included stops in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Newcastle, Liverpool, Birmingham and Sheffield University, as well as London⁵⁶, and they offered, according to John Runciman (the outspoken critic for the *Saturday Review*), »ambitious« programmes aimed at »lovers of opera«, in contrast to Covent Garden, attended by those who wanted »to admire royalty and be-diamonded ladies«.⁵⁷ In addition to *Onegin*, the company had chosen a series of what would have been considered »serious« (Germanic) operas: *Siegfried*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Lohengrin*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Greystone* by Nicholas Gatty. And *Onegin* was thought, by Runciman at least, to be the most »ambitious« of them all. Provincial opera-goers, he declared, would once »have given all but our eyes and ears to hear ›Siegfried‹ and ›Tristan‹; while such things as ›Eugen Onegin‹ lay far outside the domain of our maddest dreams«, indicating that Russian opera had overtaken even Wagnerian music drama as the yardstick of operatic innovation (even though none had been heard in full since 1892). Expectations were high, therefore, that *Onegin* – an opera by a Russian composer, and performed by the people's opera company – would appeal to and enrich national tastes.

But with its merry, ornamental serfs, bourgeois protagonists and love triangles, *Onegin* did not fit the politicised image of Russian culture that won the admiration of figures like Runciman.⁵⁸ The same problem had already hindered the appreciation of Pushkin's original verse novel in Britain; Pushkin's politics, as Bullock has argued, and »polishedly European«⁵⁹ style did not match the Russia popularised in *Free Russia*, or the literature it canonised. By 1906, the operatic *Onegin* likewise appeared insufficiently profound and tragic for a Russian artist – especially for the composer of the *Pathétique*, which, following rumours about Tchaikovsky's untimely death, had been nick-named the »suicide symphony«.⁶⁰ The critic for the *Musical Standard* proclaimed that the story of *Onegin* was of »the short six-penny magazine order« making it unsuitable for »the national genius of Tchaikovsky«.⁶¹ Gorst, in his review entitled »Sham Tragic Opera«, assumed that *Onegin* was a failed attempt at a tragedy. Far from reaching the psychological depths of the Russian novel or of Tchaikovsky's symphonies, the opera contained, according to Gorst, an »idiotic and artificial plot« concerned only with »tin-pot emotions and false sentimentality«.

54 As described in the editorial for the first issue of *Free Russia* in August 1890.

55 »The million« denoted the general public, as opposed to »the upper ten«, or »upper ten thousand«, used to refer to the aristocracy and gentry.

56 This schedule can be traced through notices in contemporary music journals such as the *Musical Standard* between February and June 1906.

57 *Saturday Review*, 17.3.1906. William H. Cummings, a critic and the principal at the Guildhall School of Music, remarked similarly in an article on the company that »the educational advantages of the scheme [were] obvious«, in: *Musical Standard*, 23.12.1905.

58 Though *Free Russia* was quick to promote Russian culture, and though Stepniak attended the premiere, there was no mention of the 1892 *Onegin* in its pages.

59 P. Bullock, »Pushkin's Poetry in England« (see note 1), p. 371.

60 The symphony was given this label, for instance, by James Huneker in his *Mezzotints in Modern Music: Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Richard Strauss, Liszt and Wagner*, London 1899, p. 86.

61 *Musical Standard*, 28.4.1906.

- 62 Saturday Review, 12.5.1906.
 63 Edward Dannreuther, »Tschai-kowsky«, in: *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 4, Macmillan 1889, p. 183.
 64 Smart Society, 26.10.1892.
 65 Era, 22.10.1892.
 66 The expression first appeared in Dannreuther's programme notes for the British premiere of the First Piano Concerto at the Crystal Palace in 1876 (reprinted in: *Musical Standard*, 18.3.1876).
 67 Daily Telegraph, 18.10.1892.
 68 *Musical Standard*, 28.4.1906.
 69 This can be found in the fourth part of *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. For more on Herder's enthusiasm for the Slavs, see Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford/CA 1994, pp. 305–338.

For this reason, he argued, performances of *Onegin* could »injure the reputation« of the »Russian master«.⁶²

Nationalness and Modernity

The music was also deemed not national enough for Tchaikovsky the »Russian master« and »national genius«. While the lack of local colour had garnered some comment in 1892, it was not a prominent theme in the reviews. At this time, Tchaikovsky was already considered a national composer. As is well known, since the 1860s, the Mighty Handful and their mouthpiece, Vladimir Stasov, had promoted the view that they were the representatives of an authentic, Russian national sound, while composers such as Tchaikovsky and Rubinstein, were inauthentic cosmopolites. But this perspective had not yet percolated abroad, largely because the music of the Kuchka was so little performed outside Russia. Indeed, in the first edition of George Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, published between 1879 and 1890, Tchaikovsky's music was described as fully representative of »the Slavonic temperament«.⁶³

As a result, critics wondered that »with the exception of an interesting peasants' chorus and the nurse's song, [*Onegin*] show[ed] no trace of Russian national influence«⁶⁴, instead following, »the plan of European composers«.⁶⁵ Neither did the opera live up to the phrase that had become synonymous with Tchaikovsky's name since appearing in Grove's *Dictionary*: »fiery exaltation on the basis of languid melancholy«.⁶⁶ Bennett quoted the catchphrase, before clarifying that this had »little to do with the music of ›Eugene Onegin‹«.⁶⁷ There were, therefore, some mutterings that *Onegin* was uncharacteristic; but at a time when there was still scant interest in Russian composers, when Tchaikovsky was little known and when sounding »too Russian« was something of a deterrent, the most critics expressed was mild surprise.

In 1906, by contrast, reviewers scrambled to make excuses for the apparent dearth of local colour. The critic for the *Musical Standard*, in rhetoric reminiscent of articles in *Free Russia*, claimed erroneously that »the evil political conditions of Russia« had prohibited the »public expression« of national feeling in the period Tchaikovsky composed *Onegin*. The »bastard Russo-Italo-Teuto-French stuff« that resulted, he continued, was »not Tchaikovsky at all«:⁶⁸ a marked contrast to gentler comments in 1892 that the opera was rather European sounding, and an indication that the myth of otherness – of the existence of purely Russian music – was becoming entrenched.

It was not just the lack of national colour that troubled critics in 1906. As well as soulfulness and profundity, the Russian artist was expected to exhibit a conviction for modernity. For over a century, premonitions had been made in and outside Russia about the country's impending cultural significance. Famously, Johann Gottfried von Herder had suggested in 1791 that the »Slavs« were Europe's upcoming people.⁶⁹ As the music of Glinka and Rubinstein began to spread abroad in the 1860s, such suggestions

became more pronounced, particularly among French critics advocating an alternative musical future to that posed by Wagner.⁷⁰ These sentiments migrated gradually to Britain, impelled in the 1890s by an increasing familiarity with the music of the *Kuchka*.⁷¹ At the same time, Tchaikovsky's immense popularity meant that, for many, he remained the benchmark of modern Russian composition, and was thus expected to display an equal dedication to innovation. In 1904, Keeton had written an article in which she described all Russian composers, Tchaikovsky included, as knowing

»how to assimilate and utilise all the best qualities of opera as existent in Western Europe, whilst at the same time [breathing] into their creations that unanalysable and unfathomable Slav spirit which renders these works an absolutely unique type of modern music.«⁷²

To be representative of Tchaikovsky's best work, therefore, as well as to be nationally representative, *Onegin* needed to be modern. For Gorst, the opera's traditionalisms consequently became a marker of inauthenticity:

»The chief impression made upon the mind was that the composer had endeavoured throughout to follow conventional models and to produce [...] a popular success according to prevailing taste.«⁷³

Keeton retorted that both Pushkin and Tchaikovsky's versions of *Onegin* had »struck such an entirely new note« when they first appeared that it was some time before they were understood even in Russia. She thus treated Gorst's hostility as proof in itself of the opera's modernity: »all that is best in Russian art«, she reasoned, »is still obviously quite beyond the range of English sympathy and comprehension.«⁷⁴ As such, assumptions of incomprehensibility due to backwardness that had formerly plagued responses to Russian composers were flipped on their heads: if British audiences could not understand Russian works, it was because this was the music of the future.

Others found further evidence to suggest that *Onegin* was more forward-looking than it might first appear. »Common Time« of the *Magazine of Music* confessed that he had not appreciated *Onegin* in 1892 because »we younger men were all for Wagner.«⁷⁵ Now, he continued, it seemed that »Tchaikovsky had stumbled nearly thirty years ago on an aspect of the operatic art which is of much moment«⁷⁶ – *verismo*. From the late 1890s, the realist operas of the so-called New Italian School, particularly those of Puccini, had overtaken even Wagner in popularity in London.⁷⁷ Therefore, although *Onegin* had aged further since 1892, it was now described by one critic as »a fine specimen of modern operatic music«, due to its ordinary characters and situations, and diegetic musical moments.⁷⁸ Moody and Manners appear to have been well aware that drawing out *Onegin*'s similarities with *verismo* would appeal to their audiences: for some performances, the finale was changed so that, rather than Onegin simply running off stage, he shot himself. By aligning *Onegin* with a trend that emerged after the opera was written, company and critics alike indicated that Tchaikovsky was truly ahead of his time.

70 See Tamsin Alexander, »Decentralising via Russia: Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* in Nice, 1890«, in: *Cambridge Opera Journal* 27 (2015), pp. 35–62, here pp. 47–48.

71 See P. Bullock, *Rosa Newmarch* (see note 3), pp. 86–89 and S. Muir, »The Critical Reception of Rimsky-Korsakov« (see note 3), pp. 537–540. Borodin's Symphony No. 2 at its British premiere in 1896, for example, was described as foreshadowing the »music of the future«, in: *Musical Times*, 1.4.1896, in G. Thomas, *The Impact of Russian Music* (see note 1), p. 15.

72 *Contemporary Review*, 1.4.1904.

73 *Saturday Review*, 12.5.1906.

74 *Saturday Review*, 19.5.1906.

75 *Musical Opinion and Musical Trade Review*, 1.4.1906. »Common Time« was a collective pseudonym.

76 *Ibid.*

77 For evidence of the influx of Puccini operas see, for instance, listings in Alfred Loewenberg, *Annals of Opera, 1597–1940*, Calder 1978.

78 *Musical Opinion and Musical Trade Review*, 1.4.1906.

Conclusions

It was only in the early twentieth century, then, that British responses to *Onegin* appeared which match the picture Taruskin has so often described – of Western audiences only interested in Russian opera for its Russian quotient. Importantly, where Taruskin has argued that Western listeners have deciphered Russianness only in the presence of folksong, here, critics also argued over whether *Onegin* was profound enough, tragic enough and modern enough to be labelled Russian. These traits, what is more, were not just desirable of Russian music, but for any opera that could form a repertoire worthy of uniting and enlightening the British public. Russian music at this time, therefore, represented more than something exotic – on the contrary, it was something that British composers might learn from, and that might edify the nation. In other words, such imports represented a sort of cosmopolitan nationalism, whereby international repertoire had a part to play in nation building.

Although it was a long time before *Onegin* became a staple in Britain's opera houses, the discussion these performances provoked about the nature of Russian music would prove formative in the coming years. There was a fine line between Russians being viewed as the future of music and as barbaric; as democratising musical culture and debasing taste; as offering a model of national music to inspire British composers, and being incomprehensible. The reason was, of course, that these oppositions were mutually dependent. The concept of Russia being the future was bound up with the idea that it was closer to its ancient past. To attract the masses, human interest and accessibility were tantamount. And the badge of nationalness was won by being nationally specific – the more unfathomable to outsiders, the better. Despite causing problems for the early reception of Russian operas in Britain, it was amidst these contradictions that the groundwork for the eventual appreciation of Diaghilev and Stravinsky as modernists was laid: their modernity was defined, paradoxically, by their primitivism.⁷⁹

Ken Hirschkop has argued that many of the earliest efforts to support Russian culture in Britain were short-lived because »those who listened most attentively were not in a position to make it stick.«⁸⁰ Individuals such as Lago, who was edged out by competition from Harris, or Moody and Manners, whose company held little cultural clout, were unable to secure a place for *Onegin* in the repertoire. Indeed, despite claims by Runciman and Newmarch that Russian opera was the ideal repertoire for »the million«, it was only once the audiences of Covent Garden became enamoured with *Boris Godunov*, *Khovanshchina* and *Prince Igor* during Diaghilev and Thomas Beecham's seasons in 1913–14 that Russian operas could begin to »stick«.⁸¹

79 R. Beasley / P. Bullock, »Introduction«, in: *Russia in Britain* (see note 46), p. 9.

80 Ken Hirschkop, »Afterword«, in: *ibid.*, p. 268.

81 See Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, Oxford 1989, pp. 302–329, and Gareth Thomas, »Modernism, Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes in London, 1911–1929«, in: Matthew Riley (ed.), *British Music and Modernism, 1895–1960*, Burlington/VT 2010, pp. 67–92.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag vergleicht die zwei ersten britischen Aufführungen von *Evgenij Oegin*: eine aus dem Jahr 1892, als Čajkovskij noch wenig bekannt war, und eine weitere aus dem Jahr 1906, als sich posthum sein Ruhm verbreitete. Die differierende Rezeption von Čajkovskijs Oper zeigt, dass Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts die sogenannte »Russomanie«, die in den 1880er Jahren im Zusammenhang mit der russischen Literatur entstanden war, sich auch im Operndiskurs des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts verankerte. Čajkovskijs wechselhafte Reputation wurde auch durch aufkommende Debatten zum Stellenwert der Oper in der Gesellschaft geprägt. Als Folge dieser veränderten Wahrnehmung beginnt sich jenes Image zu zeigen, welches Richard Taruskin beschrieben hat – die Beurteilung Čajkovskijs durch ein westliches Publikum aufgrund eines ausschließlich »russischen« Wertes. Und doch waren es nicht nur die von Čajkovskij zitierten Volkslieder, auf welche sich die Kritik stürzte, sondern auch die Frage, ob *Oegin* tiefsinnig, tragisch und auch modern genug war, um als eine russische Oper durchzugehen.

