

Tchaikovsky, Onegin, and the Art of Characterization

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Abstract: Tchaikovsky enjoyed composing *Yevgeni Onegin*. He expressed his fulfillment in a famous letter to Sergey Taneyev. What could his enthusiasm convey about the content of the project? Music criticism has taken Tchaikovsky's words as proof for the thesis that the opera is connected to autobiographical circumstances. In this mode of thinking, the quality of Tchaikovsky's music is the result of the composer's identification with the subject matter. Despite the objection of several Tchaikovsky scholars, the autobiographical paradigm remains very much alive in the reception of Tchaikovsky's music. As an alternative, Tchaikovsky scholarship has explored a hermeneutical approach that would link his music to its context in Russian society and culture. In this paper, I present another possible reaction to Tchaikovsky's statement: an exploration of the composer's approach to musical characterization. Analysis of some key scenes reveals that the definition of characters and situations by musical means is more precise than standard interpretations of the opera would concede. This discovery may lead to a new assessment of characterization as a critical tool to refine the definition of Tchaikovsky's position in European music history. The method may be applied to examples outside his operatic output, such as *Serenade for Strings* and the *Fifth Symphony*.

Keywords: Tchaikovsky; Russian Opera; musical characterization

1. A Burst of Enthusiasm: For What?

In January 1878, Tchaikovsky expressed his enthusiasm for a creative project that had occupied him since May 1877. In a letter to his colleague Sergey Taneyev he wrote:

"If ever music was written with sincere passion, with love for the story and the characters in it, it is the music for Onegin. I trembled and melted with inexpressible delight while writing it. If the listener feels even the smallest part of what I experienced when I was composing this opera, I shall be utterly content to ask for nothing more." (Poznansky 1991, p. 210)

Since this opera has become a staple of the operatic repertoire, Tchaikovsky's words ring true. But what do they actually convey? Their meaning seems straightforward enough. He enjoyed his work on *Onegin*. But do we really grasp their importance? Do we know what they *really* mean?

For a long time, we thought we knew the answer. In both popular and critical dealings with Tchaikovsky's music, the quality of his best works has been explained on the basis of the ideal of self-expression. Critics have tended to use the degree to which works reveal the composer's empathy with the subject matter as a critical yardstick. Tchaikovsky became the personification of an artist who brings his inner emotional stirrings to the surface in his work. The understanding of music as confession of the inner self in turn influences the image of the person. Alexander Poznansky, Tchaikovsky's eminent biographer, refers to this tendency for myth making and sensationalism in biographical writing and in Tchaikovsky's case in particular, "*featuring a revelation of 'secrets' where non really existed. . . This dilemma is most evident in cases of truly complex figures, those who clearly had psychological dimensions that are by no means obvious, and it is to that category that Pyotr Tchaikovsky belongs.*" (Poznansky 1991, p. xiii).



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The opera *Yevgeni Onegin* offers fertile ground for speculation on Tchaikovsky's alleged projection of his inner self on his subject matter. Both the plots of Alexander Pushkin's eponymous "novel in verse" and the composer's personal experiences during the period of the composition revolve around a common point: a letter from a young woman to a man she adores. In *Yevgeni Onegin*, it is the iconic letter that the character Tatiana writes to the Saint-Petersburg dandy Yevgeni Onegin. She has barely met him, but projects her most vivid idealizations (nurtured by her avid reading of romantic novels) on the man.

In Tchaikovsky's life, it was also a letter by a young woman in love that set a plot in motion. Not just one letter; in his case, three letters from Antonina Milyukova, addressed to him, have been preserved. Antonina's declaration of love started a chain of events that would lead to Tchaikovsky's proposal, marriage, its subsequent failure, separation, and Tchaikovsky's flight to the creative havens of Switzerland and Italy. The reason for this failure is no secret. Tchaikovsky had to learn that his homosexuality was incompatible with heterosexual marriage. He learned it the hard way. His decision to marry may have been spurred on by examples of others who managed in some way to make this combination work. For himself, the obstacle proved insurmountable. He came to realize that he should not attempt to be someone other than he was by nature. The insight would stay with him for the rest of his life (Poznansky 1991, pp. 270–71).

Tchaikovsky did his share to give us the impression that the opera was linked to his personal life. To Nikolay Kashkin, he had confessed that the character of Onegin was partly responsible for his decision to propose to Antonina Milyukova. The fictional character turned away Tatiana's love. Tchaikovsky considered such behavior too rude to repeat (Poznansky 1999, pp. 121–33). His account seems plausible enough, but biographical research has stumbled on some loose ends. Alexander Poznansky demonstrated that Tchaikovsky's involvement with Antonina predates his consideration of *Yevgeni Onegin* as a viable subject for an opera:

"It seems evident, then, that Tchaikovsky, consciously or not, later falsified to some extent the course of events in order to fit them into a Pushkinian literary framework. Betraying the inherent romanticism of his mind, this wishful reversal reshaped events to accord more completely with artistic notions of coincidence and destiny. Fate, not his own folly, became for him the instrument of his undoing." (Poznansky 1991, p. 211)

Antonina Milyukova, for her part, also contributed to this romantic view on the opera's genesis. She attributed the quality of the music to their love:

"A week later he asked my permission to go to his friend's estate near Moscow in order to write more quickly an opera he had already begun to compose in his head. This opera was Yevgeny Onegin, the best of all his operas. It is good because it was written under the influence of love. It is based directly on us. He himself is Onegin and I am Tatiana. His operas written before and afterward are not warmed with love, they are cold and fragmentary. There is no wholeness in them. This one is the only one that is good from beginning to end." (Poznansky 1999, p. 116)

Both accounts were written considerably long after the facts, Antonina's in 1893 and Kashkin's in 1918 (published in 1920). Antonina Milyukova's warm memory of the composer must have been colored by a certain amount of wishful thinking. She is certainly correct that *Yevgeni Onegin* is particularly successful among Tchaikovsky's operas. To attribute its success to her own influence on the composer is hardly credible, considering the rapid decline of their relationship.

After the single point of overlap between the two plots, the narratives immediately depart ways. What really matters in Tchaikovsky's process was his decisive acceptance of his homosexual identity. This turn of events is nowhere foreshadowed in Pushkin's narrative. The poet tells the story of two young people who love each other, but sadly not at the same time. When the girl declares her love, the young man is not ready to answer

her feelings. When he himself arrives at that stage, time has wrecked his chances. The die is cast. The impressive woman the provincial girl has turned into is no longer available. According to the rules of her married state, there is no return, except through scandal.

To adhere to the autobiographical model, commentators have interpreted Tchaikovsky's investment in Pushkin's plot as a sign of his recognition of the impossibility of love, with his homosexuality in the role of unshakable fate.¹ This story, however, is not the one Pushkin tells. The reason why Onegin is not ready to answer the call of passionate love resides in his character. He has not yet cultivated any sense of responsibility and commitment. The flaw in his character obscures his recognition of the possibility of love when it presents itself.

Recent scholarship has questioned the perception of Tchaikovsky as a composer whose works were based on personal experiences. Richard Taruskin has objected to its distorting effects: "*He remains a controversial, poorly understood figure in the West. . . Attempts to assimilate him to conventional notions of 'Russian music' have diminished him, as attempts to assimilate his works to the story of his life and loves have diminished them.*" (Taruskin 1992a, p. 669) Roland John Wiley followed suit in declaring that "*the premise that all of Tchaikovsky's music had immediate and profound motivation in his life cannot be sustained.*" (Wiley 2009, p. xviii) Nevertheless, he grants that his most famous pieces, including *Yevgeni Onegin*, *The Queen of Spades*, and the symphonies from No. 4 onward speak to particular issues in his life (Wiley 2009, p. xviii). There may be some agreement on the necessity of dismantling the autobiographical paradigm in Tchaikovsky's case, but its effects seem to linger on. The search for autobiographical secrets in his work seems hard to resist. Music is often listened to as a kind of inner confession in tones—a mode of first-person expression—as Mark Evan Bonds has demonstrated in his *Beethoven Syndrome* (Bonds 2020).

The endurance of the autobiographical paradigm in Tchaikovsky's reception may be explained, in part, by uncertainty in the development of alternatives. The greatest challenge to date to the standard reading was offered by Richard Taruskin in 1997. In the place of romantic self-expression, he identified eighteenth-century attitudes towards art and its social functions in Tchaikovsky's music. He explained their persistence through the context of the last eighteenth-century state Tchaikovsky worked in, imperial Russia of the nineteenth century (Taruskin 1997, pp. 239–307). Taruskin's revisionist reading made history within the discipline, but it should be noticed that his interpretation has been of little consequence in the reception of Tchaikovsky's music by critics and audiences alike. Since Tchaikovsky did not partake in the nationalistic project of his Russian peers, the precise relationship between his music and its Russian context seems harder to fathom. Critics have had to resort to rather subtle distinctions in explaining the *raison d'être* of Tchaikovsky's music, be it on the question of cultural attitudes at large, or on the precise relationship between a work like *Yevgeni Onegin* and its immediate cultural surroundings.

An example of a nuanced take on cultural attitudes is Poznansky's evaluation of romanticism in Tchaikovsky's Russia. He calls late nineteenth-century Russia "*a society permeated by a cult of emotion in which Romanticism found so fertile a soil that it continues, often imperceptibly, to affect the lives of ordinary Russians to the present day.*" (Poznansky 1991, p. xiii). His characterization of the composer's personality links him profoundly to the culture of the Russian *fin de siècle*:

"For his part, Tchaikovsky was temperamentally different from such Romantics as Byron and Beethoven. He lacked their grandness of ego and their heroic, passionate exuberance. His nature, owing in large part to his family upbringing, was more 'sentimental' in Friedrich Schiller's sense, which was still widespread in music, literature and the other arts all over Europe in the latter nineteenth century. It is no accident that Tchaikovsky's music found acceptance and popularity toward the end of the century." (Poznansky 1991, p. 349)

From this perspective, the appeal of Tchaikovsky's music is not restricted to its immediate Russian context. The cosmopolitan ambitions of the composer have never been doubted. To rectify the image of Tchaikovsky as a nationless composer, commentators have gone a certain length to ground his work in its Russian environment. Richard Taruskin argues for

the Russianness of *Yevgeni Onegin* on the basis of its reliance on the salon romance, a genre that was cherished in the social milieu the opera portrays. While it resonated with a genre associated with the Russian upper class, Taruskin argues that the opera also drew parallels to the realist wave in Italian and French opera. However, he makes the distinction “*that it stands higher in its national tradition than they in theirs.*” (Taruskin 1992b, p. 1190).

Among Tchaikovsky’s stage works, *Yevgeni Onegin* is the most faithful to its literary source. Nevertheless, the iconic status of Pushkin’s *Onegin* has made commentators cautious. Most notorious is Vladimir Nabokov’s dismissal of the libretto as Italianate and silly. Lumping the opera together with Ilya Repin’s painting of the duel scene, he concludes: “*As in the opera, everything in the picture insults Pushkin’s masterpiece.*” (Pushkin 1964, p. 42).

The most distinguished of Nabokov’s successors in literary studies did not extend their criticism to this extent. Scholars like Caryl Emerson, Emily Frey, and Boris Gasparov, however, maintain that the discrepancies between the opera and those qualities that make Pushkin’s novel in verse a pinnacle of Russian literature should be accounted for (Emerson 1995, pp. 6–20; Frey 2013; Gasparov 2005; Asafyev 1941–1942; Maes 2023).

Caryl Emerson reads Tatiana not as a realistic character, but as a muse—an almost silent voice that inspires both the author and the character of Onegin. Most famously, she understands the final monologue of Tatiana, in which she states to Onegin where things stand and then departs, as happening in Onegin’s imagination. Tatiana speaks not for herself, but as a voice of Onegin’s inner self (Emerson 1995, pp. 6–20).

As a consequence, all staged adaptations become problematic. Tatiana speaking for herself is bad enough. How much worse is the emotional exhibitionism personified in the performance of an operatic soprano?

Emily Frey took the difference in musical portrayal between Tatiana and Onegin as a point of departure for her observations. While Tatiana remains silent in the novel, she expresses her emotions directly in the opera in a distinctive musical voice. Onegin, by contrast, has no musical voice of his own. Emily Frey weighs this lacuna against contemporary readings of the characters around the time of Tchaikovsky’s composition. The problem of the deficiency in the musical portrayal of Onegin she solves with a reference to Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*: “*Like that of Mozart’s Don Giovanni, Evgeny’s musical psychology is all impulse, action divorced from reflection, with no guiding principle other than the whim of the moment*” (Frey 2013, p. 224). This reading is based on Wye Allanbrook’s analysis of *Don Giovanni*, but downplays somewhat the observation that the Don uses musical codes connected to social class intentionally to mimic the behavior of his intended victims (Allanbrook 1983).

The effect of Nabokov’s scathing criticism has never disappeared completely. Richard Taruskin goes as far in his defense that he hears an equivalent for Pushkin’s ironic narrator in the music (Taruskin 1992b, p. 1193). The most convincing demonstration of irony he finds is the moment of Onegin’s recognition of his infatuation to the tones of the music with which Tatiana had started the writing of her letter. Since Onegin could never have witnessed that moment—and never have heard that music—the quotation must be an ironic aside by the musical narrator (Taruskin 1997, p. 60).

The reading of this particular passage as an ironic aside is based on the critical issue of the extent to which characters in an opera actually “hear” the music that surrounds them. In the case of Onegin’s moment of recognition, one could justifiably argue that Tchaikovsky does not invest so much in the irony of the moment, but in the symmetry between the developments of the two characters. The quotation marks Onegin’s moment of recognition: he becomes aware that he recognizes in himself the same feelings that Tatiana had previously expressed to him. Symmetry between Tatiana’s and Yevgeni’s development is essential to Pushkin’s narrative. Sadly for them, it is a symmetry that is thwarted by the course of time.

All attempts to redefine the content of Tchaikovsky’s music according to its connection to its immediate context do not solve the most pressing question of this music’s range of meaning beyond the traditional autobiographical paradigm. Tchaikovsky’s reception

remains based on a remarkable paradox. On the one hand, his work counts among the most played and loved within the Western canon. On the other hand, the critical vocabulary that should define its value remains frustratingly poor. I shall argue that the quality of Tchaikovsky's art could best be understood as the result of an exceptional mastery in musical characterization.

The challenge to turn music into an instrument of characterization is especially strong in opera. Every composer faces the demand to distinguish in music between characters and dramatic situations. The art of characterization implies the ability to modify musical features to the extent that they are perceived as referring to a specific realm of meaning. Since characterization runs counter to an aesthetic that tends to universalize musical means a part of an idealized formal discourse in tones, it has not received the attention it deserves. The development of topical theory in the study of eighteenth-century music has decisively altered the field. But even there, analysts have to defend their attention for particulars in musical expression against the universalizing claims of much music theoretical writing. Wye Allanbrook, one of the defenders of topical analysis, states that the musical topic continues to be understood as "*an ancillary compositional device employed on certain special occasions, just one step away from local color*" (Allanbrook 2014, p. 115).

The term characterization is usually limited to the definition of characteristic music. The concept refers to musical works that are neither overtly programmatic nor absolute music in the strictest sense. Characteristic music is thought of as referring to a poetic idea or to a specific emotional atmosphere. In current discourse, characterization is considered subordinate to the still dominant criteria of structure and form.

A closer look at Tchaikovsky's *Yevgeni Onegin* might give us an unobstructed view of how characterization works. Tchaikovsky's statement to Taneyev reveals its importance. Tchaikovsky found joy in this composition precisely because it made him attune his musical ideas even more closely to the demands of the story.

2. Character Drawing in Tones

Pushkin's narrative has an open ending. The narrator says goodbye to his characters. The ending could not be called tragic in the traditional sense. Onegin's subsequent fate remains undecided. Tchaikovsky's opera is not a real tragedy either, since it does not end in death and destruction. Nevertheless, the opera tends more to the tragic than Pushkin's narrative. It revolves around one of the defining moments in tragedy: the point of recognition. In the context of the plot, that moment could indeed be labeled tragic, because it marks the recognition of a point in life that turns out to be irreversible. The delayed flowering of Onegin's feelings is immediately blocked by the fact that Tatiana is no longer available to respond to them.

The accusation of disloyalty to Pushkin haunts Tchaikovsky's opera. Nevertheless, of all Tchaikovsky's theatrical works, this opera remains closest to its literary source. The other operas involving interpretations of Pushkin's literary works, *Mazeppa* and *The Queen of Spades*, add new elements to the original plot. In *The Nutcracker*, Hoffmann's original tale is but a distant memory. In *The Maid of Orléans*, Tchaikovsky changed the ending of Schiller's tragedy. *Yevgeni Onegin's* libretto only employs situations that are either literally present in Pushkin's original, or slightly modified to fit them into the new framework. Real additions, such as the song and dance of the peasants and the aria of Tatiana's husband, may offend the most literally minded of Pushkin critics, but remain within the orbit of the plausible. The aria of Prince Gremin, as Tatiana's husband is called in the opera, has come under heavy criticism because it lends weight to a character that has neither a name nor a face in Pushkin's narrative. However, his noble portrayal may not be as implausible as it seems. There are also literary critics who speculate that Tatiana's husband must have had at least some appreciation for his wife's special qualities. As the daughter of an impecunious family, Tatiana would not otherwise have been a suitable match for a prominent aristocrat from the capital:

“Whoever he may be, and whatever his girth, Tatiana’s husband has at the very least to be commended for his discriminating choice of partner. Although now justifiably proud of his wife’s social success, it was clearly not for this that Prince N married an unsophisticated girl of scant means and no connections who failed to attract much attention at the time of her Moscow debut. Independent of those appearances to which Eugene remains enslaved, the Prince proved capable of appreciating Tatiana in the guise of an ‘uezdnaia baryshnia’ (country miss) no less than in the radiant figure of Princess N that she becomes. In this, as in his many accomplishments, he is surely the better man.” (Hasty 1999, p. 207)

Tchaikovsky’s choice to start the opera with the meeting in the garden may be less astonishing than literary critics would lead us to believe. It is true that Tchaikovsky does not develop the character of Onegin before he enters the plot, but with good reason. As a dandy who does not commit himself to any cause, Onegin is not a dramatic character. Adaptations of Pushkin’s work that do integrate this part of the story—such as Krzhizhanovsky’s play with music by Prokofiev (1936) (Emerson 2008, pp. 60–189), Martha Fiennes’ film *Onegin* for her brother Ralph Fiennes (1999), and John Neumeier’s ballet *Tatiana* (2014)—cannot escape their aura of high-brow literary self-consciousness. In the way Pushkin describes him, Onegin is a fully fledged character. Dramatically, however, he comes to life when he is challenged by someone who manages to question him in his fundamental way of being. This challenge only occurs through his encounter with Tatiana.

Tchaikovsky’s treatment of the story comes into focus when we ask at what point in Pushkin’s narrative the opera actually begins. What is the starting point? What sets the action in motion? Pushkin’s story starts with Onegin receiving the news of his uncle’s impending death. The moment initiates a sequence of events: his move to the countryside, his friendship with the poet Vladimir Lensky, and finally his visit to the Larin family. Tchaikovsky’s drama does not start at the same point. When Onegin actually meets Tatiana, the drama is already underway. The orchestral introduction indicates the point that sets the drama in motion: Tatiana’s act of reading.

The introduction’s music is often explained as an expression of Tatiana’s class-bound sentimentality. The connection is explained by its resonance with the genre of the salon romance. The introduction, however, does more than setting the scene. The music represents action. It quite literally acts out the physical and mental actions of reading: the movement of the eye and mind following sentences, stopping at an interpunction; consequently, identifying with the emotions and the plight of the characters, getting excited, then returning to a contemplative state, taking in the impact of the words and the story. . . . All this is graphically encoded in the music of the prelude. We know for sure that this music represents the act of reading, because Tchaikovsky refers to it in every instance in the subsequent scenes in which Tatiana mentions her fondness for reading.

Pushkin’s Tatiana reads to develop her inner self. Tchaikovsky depicts this process in tones. Tatiana empathizes with her reading, she thinks with the characters, she appropriates emotions. The musical theme of the reading combines the act with its emotional consequences: Tatiana’s imagining of the inner state of the characters with whom she identifies. Pushkin primes the reader to delve into Tatiana’s psyche by referring to the literature she employs to construct her inner self. Tchaikovsky remains faithful to Pushkin by emphasizing the centrality of the act of reading in comprehending Tatiana’s character. Most commentators assert that this music represents her inner world. It goes further than that, one could argue, because it also depicts the actions, both inner and outer, through which she constructs that inner world.

The act of reading in the prelude is a necessary prerequisite for an understanding of the drama that follows. In the opera, Tatiana’s infatuation with Onegin is immediate. She recognizes him as her lover upon first view. Without the preparation provided by the representation of her reading, this reaction would be implausible and lack dramatic justification. Tatiana’s reaction is justified, however, through the projection of her literary

ideals onto this real man. This dramatic development does not come out of the blue. It has been prepared.

Before the curtain rises, we are already accustomed to the portrayal of Tatiana as a girl immersed in the world of literature. As the musical theme expands, it also comes to represent the flight of her imagination. Pushkin's Tatiana cultivates a remarkable capacity for reading. The process of her self-discovery through reading extends well beyond the confrontation with Onegin and the fatal duel that disrupts life on the Larin estate. In a passage from Pushkin's work that Tchaikovsky did not include in his opera, Tatiana wanders through Onegin's abandoned house. She hopes to discover who he is. It is her remarkable ability to read that guides her in her quest. In his library and especially in his annotations she comes to realize that she has nothing in common with the man.

Tchaikovsky's portrayal of Tatiana's actions does not include this point. Yet he remarkably draws her character in tones. The crucial letter scene and her conversations with the nurse play a decisive role in this process.

The musical elaboration of the letter scene is structured around two crucial points: Tatiana's discovery that she is indeed in love, and her projection of the ideal romantic lover onto Onegin.

Tatiana starts her conversation with the nurse in the idiom of the theme of her reading. The nurse does not understand the emotions that haunt her. In an instant, Tatiana realizes that she must be in love. The theme that accompanies her outburst could be labeled as the theme of falling in love. The new theme indicates that Tatiana realizes that her feelings are real and transcend the literary empathy she had previously cultivated.

In the letter scene she questions her emotions. Tchaikovsky does not begin it with the actual words of Pushkin's letter. His Tatiana tries in vain to find her own words to express her emotions. The passage could be called a false start. She soon realizes that pure emotion will not help her to put her feelings on paper. The music indicates graphically that she tears up the page. She calls her mind to order.

The real letter—that is, in the exact words as preserved by Pushkin's narrator—begins with an oboe solo that accurately mimics her graceful handwriting, complete with punctuation and all. What else would the subtly placed harp chord on the second half of the fourth beat stand for?

The graceful oboe solo marks the action, but also conveys Tatiana's effort to control herself. Her introspection results in a new theme. It occurs in the passage in which she imagines Onegin in the idealized guise of the romantic lover, who could be both saving angel and fatal seducer. At that moment in Pushkin's letter, Tatiana's literary ideal overlaps with the concrete person of Onegin. We can label this new theme as the theme of the ideal. The characterization is not just melodic. Tonally it moves to the distant key of D-flat major. Tchaikovsky uses key structures as a means to distinguish between the ideal and reality.

Onegin's moment of soul searching occurs later. After the fatal duel, his escapist travels do not offer him any consolation. His mind stays as restless as before. He understands the duel as something that has happened to him, but for which he had no moral responsibility. It is again left to Tatiana to confront him with his way of being. His meeting with her in her new identity as a respected Saint-Petersburg princess starts a process of recognition that is comparable to the one the young Tatiana underwent before. She had been in love with an ideal. Onegin is also confronted with the image of an ideal. At first, he cannot believe that this impressive lady could be the same person as the provincial girl he once knew. Tchaikovsky marks the moment of recognition with a recapitulation of the theme of Tatiana's false start—an outburst of uncontrolled emotion.

Tchaikovsky's dramatic plan prepares Onegin for his meeting with the new Tatiana through the aria of Prince Gremin. For Pushkin connoisseurs, the aria might seem to be an anomaly. However, it has a function in Tchaikovsky's dramatic design. Gremin's expression of his deepest love and admiration for Tatiana reminds Onegin of what he has missed out on. What Gremin describes is nothing less than the ideal of fulfilled romantic love.

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).

In a modern reading of the story we prefer to see Tatiana's marriage as a patriarchal cage to her free and independent spirit. We do not know to what extent Tatiana shares Gremin's feelings. Her new theme, however, does give a hint of a certain understanding between the two spouses. The theme of the new Tatiana resonates with phrases of Gremin's aria. Both Pushkin and Tchaikovsky indicate that Tatiana takes her new role seriously. The theme that presents the new Tatiana at the ball makes it clear that she has adapted to her new life. Pushkin drives this point home by emphasizing her natural dignity, her unique "*du comme il faut*". Tchaikovsky conveys the same aura of naturalness by drawing her portrait in a softened version of the polonaise rhythm that had set the tone for the ball scene.² The ceremonial polonaise with its dotted rhythms makes way for a softer variant. Tatiana's appearance as an ideal of courtly manners acts as a trigger for Onegin's unacknowledged feelings.

How could their relationship go any further? Pushkin makes no secret of the fact that the soul of the former Tatiana still lives within the new version of herself. When Onegin appears before her unannounced—in the literary space of her intimacy—she gives him an insight into her feelings. However, she does not trust his motives. An opportunity for mutual happiness had presented itself once, she knows, but it is too late. She leaves him without giving him a chance to respond.

Tchaikovsky's Tatiana begins her great monologue in a similar fashion. The music shows that she is still in control of herself. Onegin, however, inserts himself into the dialogue. In his replies, Tchaikovsky incorporates the text of the letters Onegin had written to her. The Tatiana of the opera has a harder time resisting Onegin than her literary prototype. Tchaikovsky locates the moment of recognition of the missed opportunity in the key of B-flat minor. This key is the relative minor to the key of the ideal.

In the next phase, Tatiana is overwhelmed, but manages in time to return to reality. Once again, Tchaikovsky's ingenious key plan is at work here. Both partners seem to find themselves within the ideal key of D-flat major, but Tatiana brings them back to reality in the key of E minor. The key scheme indicates that she will no longer succumb to her past desires. She arrives at a realistic assessment of the situation. Onegin promises that he will become the ideal she had once cherished, but that promise no longer affects her. Tatiana remains steadfast, even during the short duet that refers for the last time to the seductiveness of an eventual union. Onegin has no choice but to express his powerlessness to heavy final chords.

3. Characterization as a Criterion for Criticism

Within current musicological research, the above analysis may come across as merely descriptive and not very explanatory. Yet this descriptive level is what is most left out. The current approach uses hermeneutics as its preferential model. It looks for connections and resonances within the broader cultural field in which music is made and received.

Carolyn Abbate has rightly pointed out the danger of projecting various cultural observations onto music. By designating the prevailing approach as soft hermeneutics, she indicates that researchers are usually aware that claims of cultural significance seldom have a hard, irrefutable basis. Despite the often professed recognition of a certain relativity to any claim of musical meaning, the hermeneutic approach continues to keep the romantic view of music alive. This view holds that meaning in music is based on some rather elusive or mysterious essence (Abbate 2004). This also happens in analyses of *Yevgeny Onegin*. The opera is said to revolve around the status of subjectivity in the context of Europe's last autocracy (Frey 2013, pp. 209–30). In this interpretation, Tatiana's music refers to the intertwining of the ego with the norms and values of her social class. The connection between her Leitmotif and the genre of the Russian salon romance is presented as the musical argument that supports this point. The code of the polonaise, in its turn, refers to

the interweaving of her new social status with the values of the Russian autocratic state (Taruskin 1997, pp. 282–91).

A closer look at the effect of the music in relation to the characters' actions indicates that Tchaikovsky's music operates on a more tangible level than the prevailing hermeneutic interpretation suggests. The precision of Tchaikovsky's musical choices brings the implications of his comments to Taneyev into sharper focus. If this analysis, as demonstrated above, reveals anything, it is the extent to which Tchaikovsky was a master of the art of characterization.

The insight that *Yevgeni Onegin* provides can serve as a starting point for a deeper understanding of Tchaikovsky's artistry as a whole. The music-historical positioning of Tchaikovsky in his European context remains an unresolved issue. The place of his music in its immediate Russian context has been clarified to some extent. While his output may not rank highly in the direct expression of Russian nationalism, it does show sufficient connections with the objectives of the Russian autocratic state. Richard Taruskin's characterization of Tchaikovsky as the musical representative of the last eighteenth-century state summarizes this relationship in a succinct way (Taruskin 1997, p. 276). Taruskin's phrase succinctly connects the Russian and European ambitions of Tchaikovsky. Both are sides of the same coin. By relating nineteenth-century Russia to the multi-ethnic empires of the late eighteenth century, Taruskin makes sense of Tchaikovsky's adherence to artistic values and practices of patronage that Mozart and Beethoven could have recognized. However, for a more precise definition of Tchaikovsky's position within a pan-European view of music history, the picture has its loose ends.

One of the reasons for the ambiguity regarding Tchaikovsky's historical positioning is the relative importance musicological discourse attributes to the principle of characterization.

4. Serenading as a Musical Act

In the study of eighteenth-century music, we are dealing with fixed modes of expression. A specific form of characterization is associated with a specific domain of cultural function or meaning. In the nineteenth century, however, the relationship between figure and meaning became more flexible. Composers still used the traditional types of characterization, but may have incorporated them in contexts that provide new nuances to their field of signification. Tchaikovsky's music offers a useful starting point for research into the relationship between musical figures with fixed meaning—such as in the topoi of the eighteenth century—and the poetic suggestion in which nineteenth-century music is thought to excel.

Richard Taruskin offered a starting point to this line of research in drawing attention to the role of socially coded forms in Tchaikovsky's output. The composer operated with forms of expression his audience would recognize and understand. The special value of his work lies precisely in the way he managed to “channel life and emotion with great power and precision through coded forms” (Taruskin 1997, p. 247).

Two examples of his instrumental works may illustrate this point: *Serenade for Strings* and the *Fifth Symphony*. According to a hierarchical assessment of musical genres, both works do not appeal to the same standards. Strictly according to their genre, *Serenade for Strings* would belong to the margins and the *Fifth Symphony* to the center. Tchaikovsky took both of them equally seriously. His extraordinary sense of characterization is operative in both.

Serenade for Strings is remarkable in the way the characteristics of the genre interact with its musical content. A serenade is meant to provide pleasure or even homage to its listeners. To serenade is a musical act. It can be offered to a lover, to a party of people on a special occasion, or to an imagined audience that is implicitly invited into an emotional exchange.

Tchaikovsky underlines this quality of the serenade as a musical act from the beginning. The first idea is not so much a musical theme, but a gesture. The very act of string playing as a performative deed is immediately demonstrated in the broad and forceful bowings of

the string players. This is string playing at its most impressive: a *premier coup d'archet*, if ever there was one. The gestural opening prepares the listener for the reception of what follows as an act of serenading. The fact that Tchaikovsky modeled the first movement on the sonatina adds to this impression. A sonatina implies that the movement lacks a development section. The *allegro moderato* is not presented as music that should be heard as a demonstration of high-brow intellectual qualities, but in its appeal to immediate enjoyment.

5. Et in Arcadia Ego

The critical assessment of the *Fifth Symphony* still has not completely shed the acrimonious criticism it has received from the most vocal supporters of the ideal of absolute music. Carl Dahlhaus, notoriously, called the theme of the second movement a demonstration of kitsch:

“Triviality is a necessary but not sufficient condition of kitsch. Tchaikovsky’s cantilena succumbs to kitsch because it goes even further than pure emphasis. The instrumentation, the sound of the horn over deep string chords, conjures romantic distance, the ‘mysterious Sanskrit of nature expressed in tones, which fills the human chest with infinite longing’. The melody, however, does not speak in Sanskrit, but in an operatic tone; the sobbing accents and fervent tone repetitions are those of a tenor.” (Dahlhaus 1967, p. 63)

Adorno provided further ridicule of the movement by underlying a sentimental operatic plot to it (Adorno 1963, pp. 64–66). He described the music as a prototype of modern cinema and mass culture. This music appealed to the uncultured, which he defined in shockingly xenophobic terms:

“The emotional listener—perhaps under the spell of musical cultural respect—seems to be less characteristic in Germany than in Anglo-Saxon countries, where the stricter pressures of civilization force them to escape into uncontrollable inner emotional realms; it is also likely to play a role in Slavic countries... The immediacy of his reaction goes hand in hand with a sometimes defiant blindness to the thing to which he is reacting. He doesn’t want to know anything and is therefore easy to control from the start. The musical culture industry preys on him.” (Adorno 1968, p. 19)

Both Adorno and Dahlhaus dismissed Tchaikovsky for not living up to the standards of what a symphony should be. Dahlhaus had a point in observing that Tchaikovsky’s *Andante cantabile* does not speak a language of mystery. It is fairly precise in its characterization. The phrasing and dynamic markers of the theme played by the horn bring it as closely as possible to the expressive nature of a singing voice. The dynamic emphasis that Dahlhaus lamented precisely serves this function. There is no need, however, to hear it as a paradigmatic opera scene without words, as Adorno did (Adorno 1963, pp. 64–66). The specifics of Tchaikovsky’s characterization hint at another sphere of signification. The choice of the 12/8 m refers to the topic of the pastoral. What follows confirms that impression. The first clarinet joins in a duet with the horn. Their exchange is suddenly interrupted by the first oboe, which introduces a new theme, to which the horn responds. The interruption in itself marks the scene as a performative exchange between musicians. Clarinet and bassoon add their responses to the new melody.

Until this point in the *Andante cantabile*, Tchaikovsky combines the markers of the pastoral with the image of musicians exchanging their musings. The music is not abstract in the sense that it merely introduces musical ideas for contemplation. It focuses on musicking as a performative act. In this way, the *Andante cantabile* evokes the image of an eclogue: shepherds musing, playing their instruments, and conversing with each other. One does not have to take the image literally. What matters is the performative aspect, as marked by the dialogues between individual musicians.

In the context of the *Fifth Symphony* as a whole, the idea has its logic. The first movement exploits the contrast between two topics: the funeral march of the introduction

and the *siciliano* of the main theme of the *allegro con anima*. In the first movement, the pastoral is not an end in itself, but a means to explore tensions that go far beyond the blissful image of the pastoral. Great pastoral art explores precisely that tension between idealization of innocence and the reality of human emotion and frailty. By juxtaposing a funeral march with a pastoral theme, the first movement introduces the general poetic theme that is known by the Latin phrase *Et in Arcadia ego*: also in the ideal landscape, I (meaning: death) am present.

The second movement explores this idea further. When the violins take over from the solo winds, the music may be experienced as the expression of a personal emotional response to the initial scene. The music leaves the representation of a dialogic scene behind. What follows could be heard as the interior voice of a subject. The emotions represented in the opening scene are internalized and developed by a subject.

Tchaikovsky interrupts the emotional exploration twice with the funeral march that started the symphony. The interruptions may be heard as a new reference to the idea of *Et in Arcadia ego*. Tchaikovsky's working program for the *Fifth Symphony* is well known. In his first jottings, he speaks of the role of fate and providence in life (Poznansky and Langston 2002, p. 154). The reference to the Arcadian theme is not in contradiction with the outlined program. It could be understood as a means to specify the generally conceived idea in poetic terms.

Considering the *Fifth Symphony* in the context of the works that surround it, the near quotation of the first movement's theme at the beginning of *The Queen of Spades* hints at a connection between the two works. The resemblance is no coincidence. The poetic imagery of *The Queen of Spades* also refers to the idea of *Et in Arcadia ego*. That is precisely the theme of the song that Polina sings in the second scene of the first act. Konstantin Batiushkov's poem, called *Epitaph for a Shepherdess*, refers to the presence of death in the Arcadian landscape. It might have been modeled on Nicolas Poussin's great painting of *The Arcadian Shepherds* at the Louvre, the source for Erwin Panofsky's classic essay on the subject (Panofsky 1955, pp. 295–320).

What makes Tchaikovsky's musical imagery Arcadian and not tragic is the fact that the pastoral world contains the promise of restoration. Like the cycle of the seasons, pastoral nature has the power of recovery. The pastoral plot does not end in destruction and despair. It finds ways for redemption. Tchaikovsky recapitulation of the second theme at the end of the *Andante cantabile* brings this point home.

The exploration of Tchaikovsky's music as an art of characterization develops further the line of inquiry initiated by Richard Taruskin in his centennial essay on the composer; *Chaikovsky and the Human* (Taruskin 1997, pp. 239–307). His initiative to draw attention to Tchaikovsky's use of coded forms as semiosis still needs further precision and development. A certain step back from the high ideals of hermeneutics to the concrete level of characterization in his music recommends itself. It is there that Tchaikovsky's artistry shows itself most prominently.

Yevgeni Onegin is a good place to start. The content of the opera appeals to modern sensibilities. We may regret that Tchaikovsky employed his remarkable gift too often on subjects that are no longer with us. Theatrical practice may redeem *Mazeppa* and *Iolanta* to a certain point, but *The Enchantress* and even *The Maid of Orléans* will remain dated curiosities. Luckily, the right subject matter crossed Tchaikovsky's path at the right time. We may be thankful that, after initial skepticism about the feasibility of an opera on *Onegin* and a sleepless night, he set to work on this great opera.

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Notes

- ¹ Most influential was David Brown's reading of the opera along these lines: (Brown 1982, pp. 159–217).
- ² The new theme could be called a *polonaise tendre*, in analogy with the nuance between the rigorous *gavotte* and the pastoral *gavotte tendre* in 18th-century styles of theater dance.

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