

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Realism (Verismo)

Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky

Eugene Onegin

## CODES

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Musorgsky's extremist realism was something that eventually had to be recoiled from because of its literalistic concept of truth—truth to empirical experience, to the conditions of daily life, without possibility of compromise. Art, the composer learned, lives in the compromise. It trades not in verbatim transcripts of existence but in metaphors. The Russian composer who understood this best was Chaikovsky. In *Eugene Onegin*, an opera based, like *Boris Godunov*, on a work by Pushkin, Chaikovsky created the other great monument of Russian realism in music.

But since the literary model in this case was not a Shakespearean historical drama but a novel of (almost) contemporary Russian society and mores, “monument” is not quite the right word. Its scale is small. Originally intended for performance by the Moscow Conservatory's opera workshop, it makes modest technical demands. Its remarkable emotional potency comes from its canny manipulation of symbols that interrelate genres of popular art with their associated social milieus. If Chaikovsky was the “great poet of everyday life,” and “a genius of emotion,” to quote two critical comments that have stuck to him, it was not because he alone found poetry in everyday life (every novelist does that) or because he was a genius at having emotions (we're all geniuses at that). It was because he knew how to channel life and emotion with great power and precision through coded conventional forms.

To describe him thus somewhat belies his reputation as a romantic artist, for romanticism distrusted conventions and sought to portray people (especially romantic artists) as uniquely free and spontaneous beings. Chaikovsky, as a realist, viewed people primarily in social contexts, as did Pushkin, and drew his power of expression from irony: that is, he took great delight in showing to what extent the emotions we subjectively experience as our own unique spontaneous experience are in fact mediated by social codes and standards of group behavior.

Pushkin's novel is famously short on plot. The title character, a dandy from the city, meets Tatyana, an openhearted country girl; she is smitten, he brushes her off; six years later he is smitten, she is married. There is also a subplot about the fop's friend, a country squire who dabbles in poetry and fancies himself a uniquely sensitive soul, and the country girl's sister, a shallow beauty with whom the poetaster is in love. Fop and friend fight a pointless duel over the sister and friend is (for no good reason) killed. It is the highpoint of the action in both novel and opera, but—another irony—it is only a distraction from the main concern, suggesting that the essence of life is not in dramatic events but in the small daily round, and that we learn to function happily in the social world not by giving our emotions free reign but by learning to sublimate them in conventional behavior. Once we have been successfully “socialized,” our feelings are never entirely spontaneous but always mediated by the conventions and constraints, as often learned from literature as from “life,” to which we have adapted. Therein lie both the tragedy (the constraints) and the salvation (the adaptation) of human society.

Chaikovsky embodied this worldly, unromantic but not unconsoling message in his opera by abstracting its musical idiom from the characteristic melodic and harmonic turns that identified the music of its time and place. In a book called *Musical Form as Process*, the Russian musicologist Boris Asafyev coined the word “intonation” (*intonatsiya*) to denote these characteristic stylistic components. Linguists would call them “morphemes,” minimal units that convey meaning within a conventional sign-system. Chaikovsky used these units to “sing” his opera in the musical language of its—its, not his—time. The period flavor that pervades the music becomes the carrier of Pushkin's novelistic irony.

The most conspicuous period “intonation” or morpheme in *Eugene Onegin* is the characteristic use of melodic sixths in shaping melodies, either as direct skips or as filled-in contours. The interval abounded in the so-called “household romance” (*bitovoy romans*) of the 1830s and 1840s, songs composed not for the professional recital stage but for sale as sheet music for amateur performance at home. The outstanding composer of these sentimental popular songs at the time of *Eugene Onegin's* action was Alexander Varlamov (1801–48). Ex. 12-6 contains two of his most famous melodies, one in the major, the other in the minor, with their constituent sixths bracketed for eventual comparison with Chaikovsky's music.

The first music sung in *Eugene Onegin* is an imitation Varlamov romance by Chaikovsky, sung offstage by Tatyana and her sister to an early lyric poem by Pushkin called “The Poet” (Ex. 12-7a). At the end of the verse it incorporates a reference to a tune already heard at the beginning of the opera's prelude (Ex. 12-7b), which will function throughout the drama as Tatyana's leitmotif. It, too, outlines a descending melodic sixth, showing the first stage of the interval's abstraction from its “natural habitat” in Varlamov (or imitation Varlamov) into the musical ambience that suffuses and symbolizes the lives of Chaikovsky's characters.

Umerenno skoro (Allegro moderato)

mp N.B. N.B.

Ne shey ti mne, ma - tush - ka, kras - niy sa - ra - fan,

N.B. N.B.

ne vkho - di, ro - di - ma - ya, po - pu - stu - viz' - yan.

ex. 12-6a Alexander Varlamov, *Krasniy sarafan* (romance)

Umerenno skoro (Allegro moderato)

*p* N.B. N.B.

Na za - re t• ye - yo ne bu - di,

*p*

N.B.

na za - re o - na slad - ko tak spit;

ex. 12-6b Alexander Varlamov, *Na zarye ti eyo ne budi* (romance)

6 TATIANA  
Sli - kha - lil' vī za ro - shchey glas noch - noy pev - tsa lub -

OLGA  
Sli - kha - lil' vī za ro - shchey glas noch -

9 T.  
vi, pev - tsa svo - ey pe - cha - li! Kog - da pol - ya vchas ut - ren - nī mol -

O.  
noy pev - tsa lub - vi, pev - tsa pe - cha - li! Kog - da pol - ya e - shchē mol -

12  
T. cha - li, svi - re - li zvuk u - ni - liy i pros - toy Sli - kha - li'

O. cha - li, svi - re - li zvuk u - ni - liy i pros - toy sli - kha - li' vi? \_\_\_\_\_

16  
T. vi? Sli - kha - li' vi? *cresc.* Sli - kha - li' vi? *cresc.* Sli - kha - li'

O. Sli - kha - li' vi? \_\_\_\_\_ Sli - kha - li' vi? *cresc.* Sli - kha - li' vi?

19  
T. \_\_\_\_\_ *p* tog - da svi - re - li zvuk u - ni - liy : pros - toy, sli - kha - li' vi,

O. Sli - kha - li' vi *f* tog - da svi - re - li zvuk u - ni - liy : pros - toy, *p* sli - kha - li'

21

T. slī - kha - lil' vī, ————— slī - kha - lil' vī, — slī - kha - lil' vī?

O. vī? Slī - kha - lil' vī, slī - kha - lil' vī, slī - kha - lil' vī?

**TATIANA:** Have you not heard the forest nightingale?  
 All through the night, he sang of love and sorrow;  
 when dawning light foretold a new tomorrow,  
 a shepherd's flute rehearsed his simple tale.  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard?  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard  
 the song that echoed in the dawn, the shepherd's tale?  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard?  
 Have you not heard, have you not heard?

**OLGA** Have you not heard the forest nightingale?  
 He sang all night of love and sorrow;  
 when dawning light foretold a new tomorrow,  
 a shepherd's flute rehearsed his simple tale.  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard?  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard  
 the nightingale that sang his song  
 and in the dawn the shepherd's tale?  
 Have you not heard? Have you not heard?  
 Have you not heard, have you not heard?

ex. 12-7a Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *Eugene Onegin*, beginning of Act I (first verse of "Slikhal li vi" with sixths labeled)

N.B.

ex. 12-7b Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *Eugene Onegin*, Tatyana's leitmotif

The full meaning of Chaikovsky's sixths is revealed when Tatyana has her most private and personal moment onstage, the so-called Letter Scene, in which she recklessly pours out her heart on paper to the object of her infatuation. One of the most extended arias in all of Russian opera, it is actually a string of four romances linked by recitatives:

- 1. *Puskai pogibnu ya* (Even if it means I perish): Allegro non troppo, D ♭ major, da capo form (eighteen measures).

- 2. *Y ka vam pishu* (I'm writing you): Moderato assai quasi Andante, D minor, strophic form (fifty-six measures, including recits)
- 3. *Net, nikomu na svete ne otdala bi serdtse ya* (No, there is no one else on earth to whom I'd give my heart): Moderato, C major, (accompaniment in ), da capo form (eighty measures, including recits and transitions)
- 4. *Kto ti: moy angel-li khranitel'?* (Who art thou—my guardian angel?): Andante, D  $\flat$  major, , da capo form (75 measures, 129 counting orchestral introduction and orchestral/vocal coda)

The resonances between the music of this scene and the duet-romance at the outset are many, conspicuous, and calculated: they are the resonances between Tatyana's inner and outer worlds. Both incorporate Tatyana's leitmotif (in the Letter Scene it comes in the middle of the last romance), but the leitmotif is already a bearer of a more generic resonance embodied in the melodic sixth. As Ex. 12-8 illustrates, the role of Tatyana (with that of Lensky, the doomed poetaster) is perhaps the "sixthiest" in all of opera.

N.B.                      N.B.

Pu-skai po - gib - nu ya  
Even if it means I perish . . .

**ex. 12-8a** Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky, *Eugene Onegin*, sixths in Tatyana's letter scene, beginning of first romance

N.B.

Za-chem, za-chem vi po-se - ti - li nas?  
Why, oh why did you visit us?

**ex. 12-8b** Tatyana's letter scene, second romance, beginning of second strophe

N.B.                      N.B.

Net, ni - ko - mu na sve - te ne ot - da - la bi serd-tsa ya!  
No, there is no one else on earth to whom I'd give my heart!

**ex. 12-8c Tatyana's letter scene, beginning of third romance**

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. The first system consists of three measures. Above the first measure is 'N.B.' with an asterisk. Above the second measure is 'N.B.' with an asterisk. Above the third measure is 'N.B.' with an asterisk. The second system consists of two measures. Above the first measure is 'N.B.' with an asterisk. Above the second measure is 'N.B.' with an asterisk. The music is in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major. Dynamics include 'P' and 'espress.'. There are also some markings like 'y' and '3'.

**ex. 12-8d Tatyana's letter scene, introduction to fourth romance**

In Ex. 12-8 d, melodic sixths are nested within a harmonic idiom that displays a very telling “sixthness” of its own: the constant use of the minor submediant  $\flat$  VI (for “flat sixth”; of course you’ll use the flat sign) as alternate harmonic root or tone center. As we have known since the time of Schubert, this alternation can take the form of an immediate local progression, as shown, or it can be projected in the form of a subsidiary key governing large spans within the tonal structure. The orchestral prelude to act I of *Eugene Onegin* sets the precedent: its development section is all within the key of the submediant, which resolves to the dominant by way of “retransition” through a portentous descending semitone in the bass. In the Letter Scene, the whole vocal coda (*Konchayu! strashno perechest’*, “Finished! I dare not reread”) is cast within the key of the starred chord in Ex. 12-8d, spelled enharmonically as A major.

The melodic-harmonic idiom is only one of many genre resonances that tie Tatyana's Letter Scene to the opening duet and thence to the whole sentimental world of the Russian romance. The harp-heavy orchestration of the first two sections is another. But the harp does more than evoke the sounds of domestic music-making. The harp chords that punctuate the woodwind phrases in Ex. 12-9, the actual letter-writing ritornello (at the ends of mm. 2, 4, 6, and 8), take their place within a marvelously detailed sound-portrait of the lovesick girl, in which Chaikovsky shows himself an adept practitioner of Mozart's methods of “body portraiture”—the realism of an earlier day—as outlined in the famous letter from Mozart to his father about *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. As in the case of Mozart's Belmonte or Osmin, we “see” and “feel” Tatyana—her movements, her breathing, her heartbeat—in her music. This iconicity shows off music's advantages especially well: what the novelist or poet must describe, the composer (unlike the dramatist, who must depend on the director and the cast) can actually present.

And yet the use of the romance idiom signifies even more than we have noted up to now. It is more than just evocative. It also sets limits on scale—both the formal scale of the aria and the emotional scale of the character. However touching her portrait, Tatyana remains (like all the characters in the opera) the denizen of a realistic novel, not a historical spectacle or a “well-made” romantic drama. Compared with Chaikovsky's grander operas, or even with *Boris Godunov* in its revised form, *Eugene Onegin* exemplifies to excellent advantage the special late-nineteenth-century wedding of melancholy or poignant content and comic form.



Moderato assai quasi Andante (♩ = 84)

ex. 12-9 Pyotr Ilyich Chaikovsky *Eugene Onegin*, letter scene, “writing music”

**Citation (MLA):** Richard Taruskin. "Chapter 12 Cutting Things Down to Size." *The Oxford History of Western Music*. Oxford University Press. New York, USA. n.d. Web. 24 Nov. 2024. <<https://www-oxfordwesternmusic-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-012005.xml>>.

**Citation (APA):** Taruskin, R. (n.d.). Chapter 12 Cutting Things Down to Size. In *Oxford University Press, Music in the Nineteenth Century*. New York, USA. Retrieved 24 Nov. 2024, from <https://www-oxfordwesternmusic-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-012005.xml>

**Citation (Chicago):** Richard Taruskin. "Chapter 12 Cutting Things Down to Size." In *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press. (New York, USA, n.d.). Retrieved 24 Nov. 2024, from <https://www-oxfordwesternmusic-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-012005.xml>

Oxford University Press  
Copyright © 2010. All rights reserved.

Access brought to you by: University of Kansas

POWERED BY: PUBFACTORY