

## **Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*: A survey of the thirteen studio recordings**

by Ralph Moore

*Eugene Onegin* - more properly, "Yevgeny", but the westernisation of the name has stuck - is deservedly Tchaikovsky's most popular opera, brimful of wonderful tunes and suffused with Romantic sensibility and erotic passion. Tchaikovsky was understandably initially worried that audiences would not respond to its naturalistic, superficially uneventful action – the duel scene apart; after a lukewarm response to its first performance at the Moscow Conservatory in 1879, it was increasingly well received following its staging in St Petersburg in 1884; Mahler's conducting of it in Hamburg in 1892 in the presence of the composer and again in Vienna in 1897 following his death did much to boost its popularity abroad. Its lonely, aloof protagonist, who lives to regret bitterly his cold rejection of a woman devoted to him, continues to appeal to our poetic imaginations as an archetype of the confused modern man. For good measure and contrast, we have a headstrong, immature poet in Lensky and an aging aristocrat who finds true love in a May-December match with Tatyana, herself full of wild and conflicting emotions. The characters are vividly depicted in what is, by normal operatic standards and thanks to Pushkin's original script, a subtle and psychologically acute plot with a plausible but oddly anti-climactic conclusion. *Eugene Onegin* is the wisest, most literate and adult of operas, thanks to Tchaikovsky's highly intelligent and sensitive adaptation of Pushkin's verse (with some help from his friend Konstantin Shilovsky); for once a composer did not find himself hobbled by limp couplets, absurd coincidences and tired conventions - it really is an opera for grown-ups.

Although the popularity of *Pique Dame/The Queen of Spades* has risen in recent times, *Eugene Onegin* is still by far the most performed of Tchaikovsky's operas and there are correspondingly more recordings. There are around seventy in the catalogue but, as in days gone by the only way you would hear it performed was in the local vernacular, there are, for example, around a dozen recordings from the 50's and 60's in German, Italian and English. Today, when we are much more attuned to hearing a work in the language to which a composer set his music, I cannot see my way to recommending any which are not in Russian, so out they go – even though that means I must reluctantly part from Fritz Wunderlich's Lensky's; I recommend that you at least hear his haunting, plangent account of Lensky's aria, albeit in German. I have also taken the decision to restrict this survey to the thirteen studio recordings, on the grounds that they offer an experience superior in terms of both performance and sonics to the live recordings.

Unsurprisingly, the catalogue is dominated by Russian recordings; the first four studio recordings made were all from the Bolshoi and a further three emanate from Moscow, with one intervening recording from Belgrade, then a spate of what we might call Western-international recordings, the first of which was Solti's in 1974. There is of course a danger in entrusting the opera to non-native-speakers but most Western audiences will not be aware of any linguistic solecisms or dodgy Russian accents, so generally only listeners fluent in Russian have a problem with those international recordings; in any case, while vocal standards might not be what they once were, conservatory training in languages is more thorough than ever, so most modern singers make a good job of singing Tchaikovsky's libretto.

### **The Recordings**

**Vasily Nebolsin – 1936** (studio; mono) Great Hall; Cantus Classics

Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre

Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Eugene Onegin - Panteleimon Nortsov

Lensky - Sergei Lemeshev

Tatyana - Lavira Zhukovskaya

Olga - Bronislava Zlatogorova

Larina - Maria Botienina

Filippyevna - Konkordiya Antarova  
Gremin - Aleksandr Stepanovich Pirogov  
Triquet - I. Kovalenko

This was in fact the soundtrack of a film. The sound is tiny and blaring but listenable by those habituated to vintage recordings, even though it is very redolent of a vanished age. The voices are very good: neat, vibrant and devoid of wobble and the whole is driven along by Nebolsin's refusal to linger – indeed at times his propulsiveness borders on the absurd; I wonder if considerations of 78 rpm side length was a factor?

The main vocal attractions here must be Lemeshev's supple, plangent Lensky and Pirogov's lovely cameo as Gremin (despite his tendency to go sharp). I find Nortsov's Onegin to be beautifully sung but cool and detached to the point of non-involvement – perhaps that is at least initially deliberate to portray the disdainful haughtiness of Onegin's personality; he warms up a bit in Act Three. I will not belabour my appraisal as my MWI colleague Rob Barnett [reviewed the Great Hall issue](#) back in 2004 and I have little more to add beyond endorsing his verdict that "This set is inevitably for specialist collectors offering an invaluable and unique insight into 1930s performing and singing styles."

**Alexander Melik-Pasheyev/Alexander Ivanovich Orlov – 1937** (studio; mono) Naxos

Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre  
Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Eugene Onegin - Panteleimon Nortsov  
Lensky - Ivan Kozlovsky  
Tatyana - Yelena Dimitrievna Kruglikova  
Olga - Elisabeta Antonova  
Larina - Lyudmila G. Rudinskaya  
Filippyevna - Vera Makarova-Sevcenko  
Gremin - Maxim Mikhailov  
Triquet - Sergei Ostrauov  
Zaretzky - Maxim Mikhailov  
Captain - Anatoli Mineev

It is strange how often in Soviet Russia, recordings of the same work, sometimes with very similar or even the same casts, were re-made within a year or two of each other; so here you have a second Bolshoi recording with the same baritone who recorded it the previous year but otherwise a different cast – and the chance to hear Kozlovsky, the other great lyric tenor of their generation, instead of Lemeshev as Lensky. Apparently the conducting was split between two conductors; the sound here is considerably better than the filmtrack, especially as restored by Mark Obert-Thorn for Naxos.

As you would expect from a conductor of Melik-Pasheyev's pedigree, pacing and phrasing and are entirely authentic and satisfactory. We hear the same lyric baritone as for Nebolsin the year before and Kruglikova in predictably fresher voice than for Orlov a decade later and a supporting cast replete with voices of a quality that seemed inexhaustible in that era; even the solo tenor peasant is excellent. Then are a couple of advantages to this recording over the one from the previous year: I find Maxim Mikhailov's Gremin to be steadier and more beautiful than Pirogov's – what low notes! - and Melik-Pasheyev's greater flexibility preferable to Nebolsin, who is rather hard-driven, but Vera Makarova makes an oddly youthful-sounding Nanny and given the overlap of the Onegins and the quality of singing and playing common to both, there really isn't much to choose between this and Nebolsin's recording. The collector of vintage versions will want at least one of the three: this, Nebolsin or Orlov 1948.

**Alexander Ivanovich Orlov – 1948** (studio; mono) Myto; Arkadia; Preiser; Cantus Classics

Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre

Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Eugene Onegin - Andrey Alexeyevich Ivanov

Lensky - Ivan Kozlovsky

Tatyana - Yelena Dimitrievna Kruglikova

Olga - Maria Maksakova

Larina - Bronislawa Amborskaya

Filippyevna - Fayina Petrova

Gremin - Mark Reizen

Triquet - I. Kovalenko

This is the third Bolshoi recording with another outstanding cast, in much better sound than the previous two – in fact, there is so little hiss, swish or distortion that, apart from a little harshness, you will hardly notice that this is derived from 78's.

The conducting is excellent – you can immediately hear the drive, flexibility and sensitivity in the prelude. As an example of Orlov's mastery, try the conversation between Tatyana and her Nanny before the Letter Scene; everything is brought alive via rubato, varied dynamics and the command of the singers over the text. There are one or two eccentricities: the Peasants' Chorus first sounds so hushed and reverential that it is more like a monastic choir at Vespers, but it's very beautiful and soon turns suitably rumbustious; I also find the tempo of the waltz opening Act 2 too frenetic, but otherwise everything is really apt, with a real swing in the rhythms.

We have a fine array of voices here. Kruglikova has a rather plaintive, piping tone, but she sounds really young and girlish; her soprano is clean and powerful, and in common with all the female voices here, it is properly registered, able to make pleasing excursions into the lower register. The Olga is a little arch but characterful.

Among the men, the star is Kozlovsky; each of his three solo arias is a highlight. His sweet, seductive tenor sounds oddly androgynous until he swells into the big notes with surprising power and the "liberties" he takes with tempi are as nothing when the voice is this alluring and expressive. He caresses the long lines with lovely legato and contrasts so well with the plainer, virile baritone of Ivanov, whose fast vibrato and straightforward manner is in the line typical of Russian exponents of the role of Onegin. The Triquet has a twee tremolo but that's not damaging for that fey cameo. Best of all, is another cameo from the great Mark Reizen as Gremin: incomparable bass singing, beautiful, moving and technically flawless: perfection. (Incidentally, if you do not know it, go to [YouTube](#) to hear the astounding rendition Reizen gave of this aria as part of the celebrations of his 90th birthday at the Bolshoi thirty-seven years later in 1985.

To hear how this opera was performed at its best in Soviet Russia, try this or the Khaikin, reviewed next; they are in many ways similar and equally recommendable.

**Boris Khaikin – 1955** (studio; mono/Ambient Stereo\*) Melodiya; Opera d'Oro; Preiser; Pristine\*

Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre

Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Eugene Onegin - Eugene Belov

Lensky - Sergei Lemeshev

Tatyana - Galina Vishnevskaya

Olga - Larissa Avdeyeva

Larina - Valentina Petrova

Filippjevna - Eugenia Verbitskaya  
Gremin - Ivan Petrov  
Triquet - Andrei Sokolov  
Zaretzky - Igor Mikhailov

This 1955 Soviet recording was technically very good for its era in very clear, forward mono sound which captures perfectly that peculiarly Russian atmosphere so essential to the piece. It has been available in Melodiya's own transfer to CD and what is apparently a good transfer from master tapes on Preiser but I have not heard those. I have, however, owned the acceptable budget Opera d'Oro issue, which you can buy in its basic version or in the de luxe set with libretto. As it is just a straight transfer of LPs onto CD, without much in the way of re-mastering, there is some swish and crackle from time to time and a deadness to the acoustic which does not enhance the voices.

However, in this new "Ambient Stereo" re-mastering from the original Melodiya LPs, Andrew Rose has worked his usual magic for Pristine. Extraneous noise has been removed and the somewhat harsh and airless sound has been transformed to give the recording real depth in the lower frequencies and space around the voices. The volume level is appreciably higher than the Opera d'Oro CDs and as such we are given a more detailed sound-picture.

Conductor Boris Khaikin ensures that all kinds of subtleties emerge. To take an example at random, listen to the way he and the orchestra follow every accelerando, rubato and nuance of the peerless Lemeshev's first aria, "Ya lyublyu vas", his declaration of love to Olga. It's as if singer and instruments are breathing in concert. It is noticeable how quickly Khaikin moves things along - no dopey, droopy mooning and lingering. Depth of feeling is conveyed by the singer-actors inflecting the words with emotional colour and by the conductor's constant, minute attention to phrasing. No tempo is constantly sustained for more than a few bars before something is marked or emphasised. It never sounds contrived or artificial - this is singing as natural as speaking. I love the way Khaikin differentiates through orchestral style between the boisterous, provincial party hosted by the Larin family for Tatyana's name-day and the grand, elegant St Petersburg ball where Onegin re-encounters the mature Tatyana.

Vishnevskaya's bright, vibrant tones are perfect for the hysterical ingénue Tatyana in the first act. She matures wholly credibly into the grande dame of the last Act. Belov has been criticised as a dull stick of an Onegin but he, too, succeeds in convincing us of a transformation from aloofness to desperation. He evinces that directness and clarity with the text which characterises every member of the Bolshoi cast. His very forward, hard-edged baritone is perfect for the cocksure, patronising brute which is Onegin in the first act to the imploring wreck of the opera's last few pages. Onegin has doubtless been sung by baritones more intrinsically beautiful of voice such as Yuri Mazurok, Thomas Allen and Pavel Lisitsian, but Belov interacts sensitively with Vishnevskaya and certainly does not disappoint in the fervour of his appeal to Tatyana. The last scene builds to a thrilling and heart-rending climax.

The supremacy of this cast and performance is confirmed by a beautiful account of his great aria by Ivan Petrov as Prince Gremin. He manages to sound dignified, noble, mature and lovestruck all at once. What a treat to hear a true Russian basso profundo with the warmth, flexibility and top notes of a basso cantante. Lemeshev is without equal. His plangent, liquid tones and the ineffable sweetness of his tenor spoil you for all other interpreters of the super-sensitive Lensky. It's true that his conductor indulges him in some very elastic tempi during his two big arias, but when a voice is so beautiful, capable of such melting diminuendos and thrilling top notes, it craves indulgence. I wish M. Triquet sang his eulogising "couplets" for Tatyana in French rather than Russian as Michel Sénéchal does so memorably in the Solti recording but Andrei Sokolov here is another lovely tenor, so it's not really an issue.

This vintage account is surely one of the seminal, if not definitive, recordings by performers wholly immersed in Russian tradition and it has now been radically improved by Pristine. I have one little gripe, however: I cannot easily read the highly stylised “faux-Cyrillic” font that the Pristine designers have devised for the front cover artwork featuring the young Vishnevskaya. It's attractive and atmospheric but virtually illegible.

**Oscar Danon – 1955** (studio; stereo) Decca Eloquence

Orchestra - Belgrade National Opera

Chorus - Belgrade National Opera

Eugene Onegin - Dushan Popovich

Lensky - Drago Starc

Tatyana - Valeria Heybalova

Olga - Biserka Cvejic

Larina - Mira Vershevich

Filippyevna - Melanie (Mila) Bugarinovic

Gremin - Miroslav Changalovich

Triquet - Stephan Andrashevich

Zaretzky - Ilya Gligorievich

This is another first-time-on-CD release in the series of seven recordings of classic Russian operas made by Decca in Yugoslavia in 1955 and enjoys both good stereo sound and an excellent ensemble. That gives it a sonic advantage over the mono Bolshoi recording which, even in Pristine's excellent remastering, isn't as good as this.

Dušan Popović has a noble, rich-voiced baritone and is the most attractive singer here; he takes the eponymous, principal role in this recording and sings first a cool, elegant Onegin then permits an apt note of distraction to creep into voice. Several other singers made estimable contributions to the other recordings and are happily assembled in this recording to very pleasing effect. Valeria Heybal has a certain piercing, piping quality to her voice but is perfect here as Tatyana: febrile and girlishly impulsive in Act 1, and first regal then desperate in Act 3; her quick vibrato and vibrant tone easily suggest the depth of her pain and suffering as she struggles to overcome her feelings for Onegin. Their final duet is very moving. Drago Starc has a light, attractive tenor which convincingly suggests Lensky's impulsive immaturity; he has some steel in his voice, too, rising passionately to his jealous rupture with, and challenge to, his friend Onegin without necessarily eclipsing more famous exponents of the role. He may be no Wunderlich or Kozlovsky but he sings his big aria beautifully. Monsieur Triquet is nicely sung and characterised by Stepan Andrashevich even if his French is less than authentic. Miroslav Čangalović brings his steady, resonant bass to the role of Prince Gremin and sings feelingly of his love for Tatyana; it is a lovely cameo.

The orchestral playing is not without flaw: there is some poor intonation in the woodwind and flutes before the first duet and some occasional sour tuning in the strings but these recordings were made within a very tight time-frame so the odd blemish is understandable; they are in general very spirited and idiomatic. Danon's conducting is flexible and sensitive; he paces everything ideally, capturing the tension underlying the provincial jollities in the Larin household and the brilliance of the St Petersburg ball.

Its nearest rival is the 1955 Bolshoi studio recording; there are more glamorous recordings to be had and this recording does not supersede them, but as a whole it pleases in every department: singing, playing, conducting and sound. As such, it is entirely recommendable and a wholly satisfying account.

**Mstislav Rostropovich – 1970** (studio; stereo) Harmonia Mundi/Le Chant du Monde

Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre

Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Eugene Onegin - Yuri Mazurok

Lensky - Vladimir Atlantov

Tatyana - Galina Vishnevskaya

Olga - Tamara Sinyavskaya

Larina - Tatiana Tugarinova

Filippyevna - Larissa Avdeyeva

Gremin - Alexandre Ognivstev

Triquet - Vitali Vlassov

Zaretzky - Mikhail Shkapysov

Captain - Gennadi Pankov

This is currently unobtainable on CD and used copies are expensive, but you can download it and also hear it on [YouTube](#), apparently transferred from LPs.

It has obvious attractions but some find Rostropovich, in direct contrast to the last recording reviewed here, to be a sluggish conductor, taking twenty minutes longer than Friedmann (who is too brisk) and over ten minutes more than most others. He seems to be in a Bernstein-style “hug-it-to-death” mode here, caressing and etiolating every phrase, which creates a kind of luxurious languor but compromises the drama. Galina Vishnevskaya is only 53 here and still in good voice despite some passing flatness and incipient wobble, but she is clearly fresher in the Khaikin recording fifteen years earlier and a “bottled” quality obscures the clarity of her tone. Furthermore, five of the singers here recorded the same roles for Ermler in 1979, now issued by Melodiya in improved sound.

Having said that, the cast here is of real quality; the opening conversation between the two older women reveals firm, strong voices instead of wobblers and once you get over a flaccid First Peasant, one singer after another delights; these are Russian voices of the Old School, like Del Monaco in a fur hat (they loved him in Moscow). Rich mezzo Tamara Sinyavskaya is just about the best Olga I know; Atlantov deploys his Otello-voice to make Lensky much less of a wimpy whiner than usual but also sings softly and beautifully when required; Mazurok is in his youthful prime in a favourite role and more engaged than he sometimes could be – I love his clean, incisive baritone. The cameo roles are disappointing: Vitali Vlassov is a bit weedy and unsteady and doesn't sing any of his couplets in French – and Rostropovich pulls their tempi about strangely; Alexandre Ognivstev is gusty as Gremin and indulges the weirdest kind of throttled tone for the last stanza of his encomium to love.

In my original review on MusicWeb of the Ermler recording, I referred to this as “flawed” but as a voice-maven, I have to say that I still thoroughly enjoy the way Rostropovich indulges his singers in expressive rubato and extended top notes. The stereo sound is somewhat over-resonant but recreates a theatrical atmosphere rather than the claustrophobic effect of some studio recordings. This isn't a first choice but I wish it were re-released, cleaned up, on CD.

**Georg Solti – 1974** (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Covent Garden

Chorus - John Aldis Choir

Eugene Onegin - Bernd Weikl

Lensky - Stuart Burrows

Tatyana - Teresa Kubiak

Olga - Júlia Hamari

Larina - Anna Reynolds

Filippievna - Enid Hartle  
Gremin - Nicolai Ghiaurov  
Triquet - Michel Sénéchal  
Zaretzky - Richard Van Allan  
Captain - William Mason

I admit to a sentimental attachment to this recording as I was imprinted by it long before I made the acquaintance of any others, but I think its merits stand independent of my bias, despite its "international", rather than "authentically Russian" character. True, there is not a Russian in sight but the singers were surely well coached; the very clarity of their – presumably syllabically learned - Russian helps the listener to follow. Weigl puts in a strong, vibrant performance as Onegin, vividly depicting the haughty scorn then the desperation which overwhelms him, and the beat which began to mar his vocal production as his career progressed is at worst merely incipient. Stuart Burrows – ever an under-rated tenor, I think – is meltingly beautiful as Lensky and Teresa Kubiak gives her best performance on record as Tatyana, very credibly encompassing the wide range of emotions the character experiences. They are strongly supported by a warm-voiced Júlia Hamari as Olga, one of the best Gremins in the glorious, massively authoritative Nicolai Ghiaurov in a favourite cameo role and some excellent Covent Garden regulars in secondary parts. Michel Sénéchal remains my favourite Monsieur Triquet; he is elegant and amusing, his unique Gallic timbre contrasting well with the Burrows' lyrical voice.

Solti is by no means too hard driven; to my ears, drama and lyricism are in perfect balance and his tempi are ideal. There are no weaknesses here and many strengths; this recording has withstood the test of time.

**Mark Ermler – 1979** (studio; stereo) Melodiya; Alto  
Orchestra - Bolshoi Theatre  
Chorus - Bolshoi Theatre

Eugene Onegin - Yuri Mazurok  
Lensky - Vladimir Atlantov  
Tatyana - Tamara Milashkina  
Olga - Tamara Sinyavskaya  
Larina - Tatiana Tugarinova  
Filippievna - Larissa Avdeyeva  
Gremin - Evgeny Nesterenko  
Triquet - Lev Kuznetsov  
Zaretzky - Valery Yaroslavtsev  
Captain - Anton Japaridze

Of all the baritones who have recorded the eponymous (anti-) hero of this opera, few can encompass the vocal grace and elegance combined with hauteur required for the first Act, with the world-weariness of Act 2, then the desperation of Act 3. Thomas Allen comes close, but if I were to choose one has it all, it would be the great Yuri Mazurok in what became his signature role. He has long been a favourite baritone: I had the privilege of hearing him on stage at his peak as a patrician Conte di Luna at the Royal Opera House and recently glowingly reviewed this recital album, also on the Melodiya label, which includes the Act I aria from the recording of this opera.

Although made in 1979, this recording has the whiff of an earlier age about it; something to do with the rather harsh sound and an element of the old-fashioned "stand and sing" style in the delivery of the 100% Russian cast; indeed, five of the principal singers here are the same as are heard on Rostropovich's studio recording made nine years earlier. There are no problems with uncertain accents or verbal inflections here; these are artists with the music in their blood. The offstage, gradually coming

onstage, peasants' chorus at the opening of Act 1 is splendid. As is often the case, the rather mature Tatyana - Tamara Milashkina, around fifty here - is more convincing as the married woman than the naive ingenue of the first act, but she does mostly successfully lighten her voice to begin with and despite a few shrill top notes delivers a sympathetic portrayal very much in the style of a young Vishnevskaya, her rival and compatriot. She made a poor Tosca in the studio recording three years earlier with the same tenor and baritone partners but is on much safer ground with Tchaikovsky than with Puccini. She was clearly an intelligent artist and compensates for her occasional lack of vocal allure by her identification with a role which suits her voice type, where her slightly "ingolato" vocal production suits the idiom.

Her Onegin was blessed with an exceptionally attractive, vibrant, light baritone, yet Mazurok could be a maddeningly stand-offish singer, sometimes failing to make much effort to complement his beauty of tone with a comparable depth of characterisation. Here, however, he adopts a slow-burn approach, rather like the performance as a whole, so that by the time we get to that unbearably poignant final meeting of the *deux amants* manqués their desperation is palpable. Milashkina's real-life husband, Vladimir Atlantov, is as stentorian and hard of tone as ever, with little of the poet about him, but his tenor is admirably firm and secure. The slight break in his voice credibly suggests Lensky's instability and immaturity and manages a lovely diminuendo at the end of his big aria. The Olga, Tamara Sinyavskaya, has a rich, vibrant mezzo-soprano. Nesterenko's resonant bass gives us a lovely vignette of Gremin, although no-one in my experience has approached the grave sincerity and nobility of Ghiaurov's bass except the mighty Mark Reizen.

Mark Ermler knows just how this piece should go, making the right contrasts between the provincial jollity of the dance music in the Larin household and the frenetic brilliance of the St Petersburg society ball - and speaking of provincial, there are fewer such moments from the orchestra than one might have feared, despite some quavery horns and wobbly strings, and they, too, really get the bit between their teeth in the final scene. It's a pity, however, that Monsieur Triquet's couplets plod and that he doesn't sing them in French, as he should; Michel Sénéchal for Solti is ideal, bringing out the comedy and charm of this cameo role and singing exquisitely.

The Melodiya remastering has tamed a lot of the shrillness and peaking which marred the original LPs and subsequent CD issues and has provided a warmer ambiance. Voices are very forward and "in your face" but instrumental detail is still apparent. The standard, attractive Melodiya cardboard digipack provides notes and track listings in Russian, French and English but no synopsis, let alone a libretto.

As a whole, this might not be a set to rival the excitement of Khaikin's famous 1955 mono recording or to match the brilliance of Solti's 1974 set, but it is a thoroughly authentic and enjoyable version of this wonderful opera and mandatory for admirers of Yuri Mazurok.

(Incidentally, the super-bargain Alto label issued this recording in 2009 as a "First issue in the West" but miscredited the conducting to Gennady Cherkasov and mistakenly gave the recording date as 1984. The sound is superior in the Melodiya re-issue, in any case.)

**Vladimir Fedoseyev – 1986** (studio; digital) Audiophile Classics  
Orchestra - Orchestra of the USSR Central Radio and Television  
Chorus - Chorus of the USSR Central Radio and Television

Eugene Onegin - Yuri Mazurok  
Lensky - Alexander Fedin  
Tatyana - Lydia Chernykh  
Olga - Tamara Sinyavskaya  
Larina - Emma Sarkisyan  
Filippyevna - Raisa Kotova



Gremin - Alexander Vedernikov  
Triquet - Jannis Sprogis  
Zaretzky - Vladimir Matorin  
Captain - Vladimir Silaev

A 100% Russian recording conducted by an acknowledged master of the idiom starring the foremost Onegin of his age, albeit somewhat late in his career, must be worthy of esteem and serious consideration. The names in the cast list, Mazurok apart, are not especially well known to Western audiences and collectors but a surprise is in store. Certainly, first impressions are excellent: superb digital sound, beautiful playing from the Moscow radio orchestra and four lovely female voices in the first ten minutes set this recording on course to give the listener great pleasure. Those first impressions are confirmed and enhanced by the entrance of a lovely peasants' chorus with a fine tenor soloist. Olga's solo is an absolute delight sung by Tamara Sinyavskaya's rich, velvety mezzo with its vibrant top. I have never previously encountered Lydia Chernykh – she does not seem to have done or recorded much else - but I am very impressed by her full, warm soprano; she fully rises to the demands of the Letter Scene, the urgency and pathos of her vibrant appeals complemented by the propulsion and flexibility of Fedoseyev's accompaniment. The flicker in her vibrato is most affecting and her top notes are powerful and secure. Alexander Fedin has a typically incisive Russian tenor: light and somewhat nasal but powerful, and it falls by no means unpleasantly on the ear; he sings strongly with ringing top notes, excellent diction and infectious passion. The artistry of singing stands comparison with some illustrious predecessors. Whereas there are some slight signs of wear in his recording for Tchakarov two years later, here Mazurok is still in great voice, cool, detached and elegant, then desperate. I could listen to him sing all day. As a welcome bonus, we need have no concerns about the Russian accents here, all the performers being native speakers. The one disappointment – and I'm afraid for me it's quite a big one – is the lugubrious, laboured delivery of Gremin's aria from veteran Alexander Vedernikov. The voice is big and sonorous but the singing is clumsy.

The recorded sound is very close and full – clearly not a live, theatrical performance but a studio product - but there is a good balance between voices and instruments so that the listener feels immersed in proceedings, especially if listening on headphones.

I am thrilled by the dynamism and lyricism of Fedoseyev's direction and the sheer élan of the recording as a whole. There is always a dark horse item when I do one of these surveys; this is it and I unhesitatingly recommend it as offering an unbeatable combination of best sound, singing and playing, wholly the product of a great Russian tradition.

**James Levine - 1987** (studio; digital) DG  
Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle  
Chorus - Leipziger Rundfunk

Eugene Onegin - Thomas Allen  
Lensky - Neil Shicoff  
Tatyana - Mirella Freni  
Olga - Anne Sofie von Otter  
Larina - Rosemary Lang  
Filippyevna - Ruthild Engert  
Gremin - Paata Burchuladze  
Triquet - Michel Sénéchal  
Zaretzky - Gunther Emmerlich  
Captain - Jürgen Hartfiel

For years I thought I had good reasons for neglecting this set. True, I was always very happy with the old international Solti recording on Decca that introduced me to this most engaging of operas and I

then acquired two other sets which I found equally satisfying: the classic 1955 Bolshoi version with Vishnevskaya (see my review) and the later (1979) Bolshoi recording with Mazurok, a favourite singer - but neither of these, although wholly authentic in a way that it would be unreasonable to expect Levine and co to achieve, is great sonically, and there is always a case for hearing an opera in best sound - which this DG set most certainly is. That is just as well, as the Staatskapelle's playing is sensational. Levine makes Solti, of all conductors, sound almost tame by comparison; key moments such as the duel and the last scene of desperate farewell crackle with intensity and every singer is profoundly immersed in his character. It is the dramatic intensity of this recording which most attracts me; I started to listen, felt myself ineluctably drawn into the narrative and then listened straight through.

Levine's cast really appreciates the psychological complexities of the tale and give it pathos and verisimilitude. I had imagined that Freni would be too old for Tatyana, yet there is scarcely a trace of a beat in her voice despite her being 52 at the time of this recording; she is extraordinarily steady, expressive and vibrant, top notes never flap and that homogeneity and beauty of tone are as striking as ever. She was always good at portraying quiet desperation and is even finer here than she is in the even later (1991) *Pique Dame* with Hvorostovsky, where there are some incipient signs of wear in her voice - but not here. I have not always enjoyed Neil Schicoff's tight tenor, but I have never heard him sing with more freedom and passion than he does here as Lensky; he is not as elegant as Stuart Burrows but certainly more involved. Likewise, Thomas Allen has never sounded better; his baritone is steadier and more beautiful than Weikl (who always had something of a bleat) and very much the equal of Hvorostovsky - perhaps with a tad more elegance and disdain, too - but I wonder why he omits the climactic top F on "mechti" at the end of his Act One aria "Kogda bi zhizn domashnim krugom"? Disappointing! I have in the past found Anne Sofie von Otter bland; not so here as Olga, although I have nonetheless heard more characterful assumptions of the role. The supporting cast is strong - amusing to hear Michel Sénéchal reprising Monsieur Triquet with just the same wit and elegance - and voice! - that he did for Solti so many years earlier. The chorus is wholly committed and Paata Burchuladze is in his element singing Russian in a role perfectly suited to his grave, sonorous tones.

Russian speakers might object to the internationally accented Russian here. I can't hear it; the singers enunciate very clearly and some, particularly Allen, sound exceptionally Slavonic to me - but what do I know? Freni was married to Russian-speaking Bulgarian Nicolai Ghiurov so must have had some intensive help and modern opera singers generally have to be at least competent linguists. The same objection can be levelled at the Solti set, but most of us don't care or know any better.

**Emil Tchakarov – 1988** (stereo; digital) Sony

Orchestra - Sofia Festival Orchestra

Chorus - Sofia National Opera

Eugene Onegin - Yuri Mazurok

Lensky - Nicolai Gedda

Tatyana - Anna Tomowa-Sintow

Olga - Rossitsa Troeva-Mircheva

Larina - Stefka Popangelova

Filippyevna - Margarita Lilowa

Gremin - Nicola Ghiuselev

Triquet - Michel Lecocq

Zaretzky - Dimiter Stanchev

Captain - Stoil Georgiev

The sadly short-lived Emil Tchakarov made half a dozen recordings of Russian opera for Sony and all have merit. Unfortunately, the wisdom of casting a 62-year-old Nicolai Gedda as Lensky and 56-year-old Yuri Mazurok was questionable. Gedda is certainly considerably past his prime; he never had the

freest, most pharyngeal vocal production but here he bleats unsteadily and sounds positively elderly - it is no accident that he was relegated to Monsieur Triquet a mere four years later in the English recording. and although However, the eponymous lead singer Mazurok is least touched by *anno domini* and still in good voice if considerably harder of tone than of yore. In truth, all the singers here sound too mature for their roles; both Anna Tomowa-Sintow and Rossitsa Troeva-Mircheva sound too matronly to be teenage sisters and a squawky, veteran Larina spoils the opening ensemble. To be fair, Tomowa-Sintow rises to a well-sung, if not especially moving or individual, account of the Letter Scene; I do not speak Russian, but hers sounds rather potato-mouthed to me. Ironically, Nicolai Ghiuselev as the aging Prince Gremin is the youngest of the three principal male singers and sounds it, singing well, but I wouldn't say that his account of his famous aria matches the sonority of the best by such as Reizen, Ghiaurov and Nesterenko.

The sound, engineered by Karajan's Michael Glotz, is first-class and the conducting both sensitive and indulgent, catching the pathos and the constant lyricism of this wonderful music. The presentation in the original issue is the usual lavish big box with a fat, quadrilingual libretto, but all that is to no avail when the participants sound superannuated. Sadly, this, along with the Rostropovich, is the least recommendable of all the recordings reviewed here.

**Semyon Bychkov – 1990** (studio; digital) Philips; Decca

Orchestra - Orchestre de Paris

Chorus - Saint Petersburg Chamber Choir

Eugene Onegin - Dmitri Hvorostovsky

Lensky - Neil Shicoff

Tatyana - Nuccia Focile

Olga - Olga Borodina

Larina - Sarah Walker

Filippyevna - Irina Arhipova

Gremin - Alexander Anisimov

Triquet - Francis Egerton

This recording was very positively reviewed by two MWI colleagues on its re-issue ([review](#) ~ [review](#)) and was endorsed by 'Gramophone', along with the Solti, as a prime recommendation.

As much as I greatly admired the late Dmitri Hvorostovsky, having heard him sing live I must observe that his voice was not as large as some baritones and an increasing element of forcing vitiated its tone as he aged, even before the onset of his terminal illness; here, however, he has the advantage of youth and not having to fill a large opera house. Furthermore, this recording has a Soviet-born conductor and a preponderance of Russian singers, so authenticity is enhanced.

To some extent, I agree with the previous reviewers, but with mild reservations which prevent me from recommending this above my absolute favourite versions. I concur that Bychkov captures the elegiac mood of Tchaikovsky's idiom without exaggeration and that the orchestra and chorus here are exceptionally fine, although Bychkov does not make the music as passionate and stirring as Melik-Pasheyev, Levine or Fedoseyev and for quite long stretches the singing sounds a little "safe" to my ears until the final scene where things heat up. Sarah Walker sings what to my untutored ears sounds like idiomatic Russian but both she and the great veteran Arhipova have something of a wobble and they don't blend especially well Nuccia Focile's soprano is aptly light and girlish but it is sometimes edgy and somewhat lacking in the substance I hear in fuller-voiced, more Russian Tatanyas, so her interpretation lacks the dimension of dark intensity which a developed lower register brings to it. Olga Borodina is yet another wholly satisfying Olga, a role which is rarely poorly cast; hers really is a voice of substance. Neil Shicoff had already sung Lensky very successfully for Levine in the 1987 studio recording; his tenor is a little constricted and he doesn't sound youthful but he is inside the role and

frequently prepared to sing softly as well as rise to the big moments. Hvorostovsky's beautiful baritone has bite, fine line and sensuous tone, but even here, this early on in his career, I note that rather distracting habit of gasping for breath between phrases and a tendency to force for volume. There is assuredly no lack of passion in his singing, an accusation which can be levelled at several otherwise vocally superlative Onegins – but why no concluding top F on “mechti”? In the cameo roles, Francis Egerton is a charming and very Gallic Triquet and Alexander Anisimov brings his sonorous bass to depicting a restrained but moving account of Gremin's aria, his fast vibrato preferable to the slow beat which mars the line of clumsier singers.

In sum, I acknowledge this to be a very fine account but I do not quite hear the paradigm of a recording that it is hailed as by the reviews above. You may find differently and I would understand why.

**Samuel Friedmann – 1996** (studio; digital) Arte Nova

Orchestra - Novosibirsk State Opera Orchestra

Chorus - Novosibirsk State Opera Choir

Eugene Onegin - Alexander Lebedev

Lensky - Farit Hussainov

Tatyana - Elena Zelyenskaya

Olga - Olga Obuchova

Larina - Ludmilla Ladinskaya

Filippyevna - Galina Babicheva

Gremin - Alexei Levitski

Triquet - Vladimir Vassilev

This is the most recent studio recording made to date and will probably be the last. Novosibirsk is hardly provincial, being Russia's third city and an important cultural as well as industrial centre, but it is fair to say that it hardly features on the radar of Western listeners, being relatively remotely located in Siberia. It has the largest theatre in Russia which is technically very well equipped and a state conservatory, so I will not patronise this recording by labelling it “surprisingly good” but you know what I mean.

Samuel Friedmann has made a dozen or so recordings for Arte Nova, mostly of Russian music, and knows what he is about. The most salient feature of this recording is its speed; it is at least ten minutes faster than the swiftest of the rest, which is not necessarily a bad thing but there are times when I wish the conductor would let us stop and smell the flowers, especially in Lensky's and Gremin's arias. The standard of singing and playing is generally good: the strings are thin but the voices are authentic-sounding and very Russian, with quite an obtrusive vibrato on the part of the ladies and but also firm and vibrant tone. Not one of the singers is previously known to me but none is less than competent – although I do find the tenor constricted and strident in the typical Russian manner. His thin, bottled tone makes him the weakest link here; the four other principals are all better. Nonetheless, he attempts to soften his sound to embrace the pity and pathos of his big aria - and succeeds to some extent. The bass who sings Gremin has resonance and gravitas, without the noble poise of the very best but his sound is authentic.

The Onegin has a mostly pleasing, refined baritone of no special individuality but sometimes with a rather odd, nasal quality in the middle of his voice. Elena Zelyenskaya has a big, warm, imposing soprano which opens up thrillingly on top notes. Her 'Letter Scene' is splendidly delivered, with passion and energy.

Bear in mind that this is available at super-bargain price in good, digital sound and makes a good introduction to a great work, even if ultimately, I would always recommend a starrier, more sophisticated version.

### **Recommendations**

My experience of doing these surveys has persuaded me that for real devotees of any great opera, a modern, studio or live-composite recording is the best bet, with a vintage, mono version as a supplement; the general listener will want only the former. This opera really has been very well represented by the studio recordings in the catalogue, with only a couple of duds among the thirteen reviewed above, so I am reluctant to pronounce any recording as "best". Consequently, I usually offer a choice of two or even several in each category and leave the rest to the reader's personal taste.

On acquainting myself with the Levine recording, I found my longstanding loyalty to Solti challenged but then I subsequently and much more recently encountered the terrific Fedoseyev studio recording, which for me edges out both by virtue of its passion and authenticity.

Studio mono: Khaikin 1955; Orlov 1948

Studio stereo/digital: Fedoseyev 1986\*; Levine 1987; Solti 1974

\*personal first choice, despite the poor Gremin.

***Ralph Moore***