

Classic Opera Replaces Pomp with Atmosphere

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It's fall in Russia. Gold, burgundy and garnet leaves are scattered along the gray ground. Birch trees, the roses of Russian culture, tower over the scene in impasto stalks, powerfully sculptural yet soft, yearning to be touched. As the music of the orchestra slowly rises, two old women enter, followed by two girls in simple, light dresses. Then the old women open their lips and reality melts away as their voices blend with a harmony and nostalgia that can only be Tchaikovsky.

This is the opening scene of the UM University Opera Theatre's "Eugene Onegin," playing at the Power Center tonight through Sunday. The opera, composed by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and based off of the poetic novel by Aleksander Pushkin of the same title, has become a classic in Russia for its breathtaking melodies and Romantic sentiment. And now the School of Music will be bringing the show to Ann Arbor.

Like any great Russian play of the late 19th century, "Eugene Onegin" is a tale of unrequited and all-consuming passions, where a symptom of love-sickness can actually be death. Onegin is a well-educated misanthrope constantly brooding. Tatiana is a simple girl of the countryside that daydreams in the garden and constantly reads books, while all the other girls partake in song. She falls deeply and instantly in love with Onegin, and Onegin rejects her outright, seducing Olga, Tatiana's sister and his best friend Lensky's fiancé, instead.

Hearts are broken, friendships are severed and dignity is lost, as the characters dance, dine and duel in the name of stolen love. Also – and most importantly to Russian drama – they also indulgently and incessantly sing about how miserable they are.

As if duels, samovars, birches, and misery weren't Russian enough, the performers are also singing the entire production in the original language, which none of them had previously studied.

"(Singing in Russian) is a daunting project and it's actually been very inspiring, their ability to embrace it: to not only learn it, but be expressive with it," said director Joshua Major, Clinical Assistant Professor of Opera in the School of Music.

Yet the cultural and historical aspects of “Onegin” can’t solely account for why it has become a timeless masterpiece and arguably Tchaikovsky’s best opera. “Onegin” is unique, especially in its subtlety and poetry. For the anyone who hates the superfluous tendency of opera — the unnecessarily extravagant sets, over-the-top acting and pointless spectacles of crowds, horses and whatever else can fit onstage — this is the perfect anti-thesis. The set has a clean, open feel, with stunning trees and warm lighting. Set changes are achieved through lighting and an additional piece of furniture. And, best of all, the actors don’t indulge in grand gestures and mello-drama. Brünnehilde in her Viking hat, boisterously domineering the stage, has been replaced with an ensemble of empathetic youths who actually engage with each other.

“It’s really just a bunch of conversations, and there’s only a few operas like that in the repertoire,” said Major. “The excitement is in the dialogue, the transfer of ideas, the passions.”

Still, certain traditional features of opera are certainly present. Massive choruses enters out of the blue, dances intermittently break up the arias and maidens clump together to swoon and giggle. But a deeper core sustains throughout.

If these conceptual aspects don’t spark interest, no worries. The show is enjoyable without the plot as well. One could sit and listen to the music without ever reading a subtitle and fall sway to its power. And since the piece was written for the Moscow Conservatory, the vocal parts were arranged for young singers, allowing the UM cast to comfortably and elegantly work with the music.

For those in need of a break from the onset of winter or craving the catharsis of Russian despair, Tchaikovsky’s opera will be a portal into the Russian countryside. As the chorus of “Onegin” sings, “Come out yourself or else send out/ Sasha or Masha/ or dear little Parasha,” and enjoy watching lovers drown in their own swamps of emotion.