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Eugene Onegin

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Royal Opera House London

Thought, dream, reality: where does one end and the other begin? It's a question the Royal Opera's new production of *Eugene Onegin* constantly poses as it follows Tatyana from the naïve open steppes of the Larina estate to the fur-coated sophistication of St Petersburg. Past, present and future are strung together on the thread of the wish running through them - the wish of romantic fulfilment. Reminiscence and anticipation haunt Pushkin's tale as they do Tchaikovsky's music, both poised between a past they recapitulate and a future they foretell.

This is the imaginative hinterland Steven Pimlott seeks to explore in his staging, aided by the copious alienating devices of Antony McDonald's décor and the subtle contrasts of Philippe Jordan's conducting. It's a critical interpretation of a kind we hardly ever witness at Covent Garden, and for that reason it is extremely welcome. It serves notice that the Royal Opera does, after all, have an artistic conscience, because it takes risks with a beloved tale.

The risks stem from Pimlott's determination to see the opera as Tatyana's dream - an episode in Pushkin's verse-novel that Tchaikovsky removed from the story but compensated for in music overflowing with motivic cross-references. As in dreams, the production catches us lurching wildly between realism and anti-realism, heightening the syncopations of narrative in word and music.

A lot of it is disconcerting - especially in the big empty spaces of the first act, where the cast appear to be only one small component of a highly coloured, over-lit design concept. But just as much is thought-provoking, and the thoughts continue to flood the mind long after the final curtain. The last thing Pimlott and McDonald want is a passive reaction to an over-familiar tale. Even if you don't "get it" - and some of the allusions are just a little too oblique - you come away buoyed by the sheer wealth of subtext they find beneath the familiar surface.

What finally tilts the balance in Pimlott's favour is that this is far more than a "concept" production.

His greatest achievement is to draw performances of such conviction and detail from his cast. There can be few more practised Onegin than Dmitri Hvorostovsky, but here he remakes the character afresh. Partly it's the appearance: smiling in a brown wig for his early scenes with Tatyana, the Siberian baritone is almost unrecognisable, but he is all too real as the "superfluous man" who smiles politely before behaving badly. His performance shows just how far he has developed as an actor, while radiating the polished beauty of Tchaikovsky's vocal lines. Rolando Villazón, in his debut as Lensky, makes the perfect counterpart, finding a thrilling ardour and open-hearted temperament in the role.

The Royal Opera has been remarkably faithful to Amanda Roocroft. She rewards us with a Tatyana who may be a shade mature for the country girl of the first two acts, and not exactly touching in the letter scene - the production leaves her stranded in too much space - but she comes into her own in the finale. Roocroft looks as pretty as ever, and she has done wonders to brighten her tone. Nino Surguladze is the scene-stealing Olga, almost child-like in her *joie de vivre*, while Eric Halfvarson contributes a Gremin of enormous substance and style - and there are fine cameos from Susan Gorton, Yvonne Howard and Ryland Davies.

Jordan conducts an exceptionally nuanced reading of the score, full of *rallentando* and *accelerando*, shimmer and sigh, musical thoughtfulness and pride of execution.

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