

Eugen Onegin

ONE of the outstanding events of next week's music broadcasts will be the studio performance on Thursday, August 29, of Tchaikovsky's best-known and most popular opera, *Eugen Onegin*, by the National Orchestra, the Phoenix Choir and soloists.

Tchaikovsky did not call *Onegin* an opera, but referred to it as "lyric scenes," which, as Mrs Rosa Newmarch in her work on Tchaikovsky wrote, "... describes more accurately a work of art which in many ways defies criticism as completely as it eludes classification. It answers to no particular dramatic truth; its weaknesses are many, and its absurdities not a few. Yet to all emotional natures it makes an irresistible appeal, for the music is as much a part of the touching, old world story as the perfume is the part of the flower which exhales it."

Eugen Onegin was the hero of a novel-in-verse by Pushkin, the poet who has been called the Russian Shakespeare. Hero is perhaps an inexact word, as Onegin is the type of bored, Byronic individual recurrent in 19th century Russian literature who is as much a source of exasperation as a

subject for sympathy. Tchaikovsky himself revealed that while writing this opera he was "terribly indignant with Onegin, who seemed to me a cold, heartless coxcomb."

On an inherited country estate lives this melancholy man of the world, whiling away his self-imposed rural exile with the company of his friend and neighbour Lenski, and the two daughters of another neighbour with one of whom, Olga, Lenski is in love. The other sister, Tatiana, soon falls in love with Onegin and declares her love to him in a letter. The sophisticated Onegin, perhaps realising that the duties of marriage are hardly compatible with his nature—but certainly unappreciative of this country girl's direct sincerity—thanks her for her letter, offers her brotherly affection instead, and some cynical advice to the effect that she should be more reserved in future. Later, at the unhappy Tatiana's birthday ball, the bored Onegin flirts with Olga. When Lenski loses patience and demands an explanation, Onegin in return is coldly insolent; a duel follows and Lenski is killed.

Twenty-six years pass and the ageing Onegin returns from his wanderings to St Petersburg. There at a ball he meets the country girl he had once rejected, now the brilliant and worldly wife of the nobleman Prince Gremin. Onegin is dazzled, his cold egoism thaws, this time he falls passionately in love—to little avail. For although Tatiana's love for him is reawakened, she decides after a struggle to renounce him and remain faithful to her prince. The opera ends with Onegin left alone to his bafflement and despair.

Eugen Onegin won fame for Tchaikovsky for, it has been said, "it was one of the greatest realistic operas since Beethoven's *Fidelio*," and a great change from the Italian operas then in vogue. Tchaikovsky felt that on the stage *Onegin* wouldn't be interesting, "For it won't satisfy the first requirement of opera—scenic movement." But he hoped that it would please "those who are capable of appreciating in opera the simple, everyday feelings common to all mankind."

Brian Salkeld, of the NZBS, who will "realise" *Eugen Onegin* for radio, says: "It is a singer's



opera, an intimate opera; dealing more with emotions and thoughts than with dramatic action, violence and bloodshed. Consequently, there is little lost in the intimate speech of a radio production."

As in last year's productions of *La Traviata*, *Il Tabarro*, and *Hansel and Gretel*, narration will only be used to set scenes, Mr Salkeld explained, and will not interfere in any way with the music.

Singers taking part in this three-act opera are Sybil Phillipps (soprano) as Tatiana, Ninian Walden (baritone) as Eugen Onegin, Andrew Gold (tenor) as Lenski, Mona Ross (mezzo-soprano) as Filipievna, Joan Vause (mezzo-soprano) as Larina, Corinne Bridge (contralto) as Olga, Lazlo Rogatzy (baritone) as Prince Gremin, Antony Vercoe (baritone) as the Captain, Martin Wilson (bass) as Saretsky, and Newton Goodson (tenor) as Triquet—with the Phoenix Choir (chorus master Harry Brusey), and the National Orchestra conducted by James Robertson. (All YCs, August 29.)

HARBOUR WINDOWS

*WIND from the blackened harbour
How cold, how cold—
The woman at the rain-streaked window
Fingering bulbs in mould
Feels her china heart crack once
And knows that she is old.*

*Gusts from the plunging harbour
Rattle pane and sash—
The young man on the floor below
Rinses dregs and ash;
"I must get out of here," he thinks,
"Or else go on the bash."*

*Iron waves across the harbour
In squadrons go—
The child with bleached hair watches
From another window,
Sings to herself as the wind changes
Bringing snow, bringing snow.*

—James K. Baxter

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NINIAN WALDEN (baritone), who will sing the part of *Eugen Onegin*



Spencer Digby photograph
BRIAN SALKELD, who will "realise" the opera for radio