1985 recording of this Symphony by the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra under Michael Halász (Marco Polo 8.220358) sounds like an under-rehearsed ensemble relying on slow tempos just to get through the notes, which in any case are often obscured in a muddy recording. The difference between these two releases suggests immediately why we need first-rate ensembles to explore the unknown corners of the repertoire, rather than cede that turf to lesser groups working on the cheap. The result, as with Strauss's symphony, may not always be a diamond in the rough, but even semi-precious stones benefit from good settings.

The two remaining items on this disc are relatively unknown works from the same era as the symphony, Strauss's Romanze for Cello (TrV 118), and the later orchestrated set of *Six Songs on Poems by Clemens Brentano* op. 68 (TrV 235). The Romanze is typical of the salon style that Strauss practised in his youth, and the piece is well played here by Raphael Wallfisch. The songs, although properly beyond the bounds of this journal, were originally composed in 1918 for voice and piano, using the distinctive chromatic language of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* op. 65 (TrV 234), and Strauss orchestrated them two decades later. Soprano Eileen Hulse sings them marvellously in an effortless fashion that belies the difficulty of the vocal lines.

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Tchaikovsky

Eugen Onegin

Opera in Three Acts

Gertrude Jahn (Larina), Mirella Freni (Tatyana), Rohangiz Yachmi (Olga), Margaritha Lilowa (Filipjevna), Wolfgang Brendel (Eugen Onegin), Peter Dvorsky (Vladimir Lensky), Nicolai Ghiaurov (Fürst Gremin), Choir and Orchestra of the Vienna State Opera, Seiji Ozawa *cond*

Live recording, 20 May 1988
Orfeo C 637 0421 (2 CDs 145 minutes: ADD: digitally remastered)
Notes and translations included.

There are four main points of interest here. First and foremost, this issue documents the first time that *Onegin* was heard in Russian at the Vienna State Opera. Second, it is distinguished by Seiji Ozawa's altogether exceptional handling of the score. Third, it features the luscious tones and heartfelt characterization of Mirella Freni's Tatyana. And fourth, the orchestral playing has moments of extraordinary distinction. There are significant downsides too, and even the primary strengths come with elements of fallibility. But no recording of this inexhaustible masterpiece captures anything like its full range of subtlety, and this one is certainly among the finest.

This May 1988 production of *Onegin* saw Ozawa's debut at the Vienna State Opera, although he was already well known for his concert appearances with the

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Vienna Philharmonic. The triumph he scored with it was a factor in his appointment as Music Director in September 1992. Back in 1974 he had made his Covent Garden debut with the same opera, and he clearly felt a special affinity with it, as he did with Tchaikovsky in general (his 1991 *Queen of Spades* for RCA, also co-starring Freni, is one of the finest on CD; curiously, his Tchaikovsky symphony recordings have never been quite so successful).

It takes no more than a few seconds of the orchestral introduction to register that extraordinary things are happening. Immediately the emotional tone is full but restrained, the phrasing affectionate but not over-perfumed. Tchaikovsky is spinning a web of motifs that seems to know the course of drama to come, thanks mainly to the anacrusis figures that bend and shape to every emotional nuance; and Ozawa knows exactly how to draw every thread.

With the quartet of the two Larina sisters, their mother and their nurse, the spirits sink somewhat. Here we have to endure the over-projected, more-vibrato-than-note wobbliness that is so often the price to be paid for live recording from the opera-house. This is followed by a pointless truncation of the first 30 seconds or so of the leader/chorus scene (the one Shostakovich so tellingly inverted in the final act of *Lady Macbeth* – by no means the only thinly veiled parody of *Onegin* in that work). A verse of the chorus itself is also cut. Rohangiz Yachmi then delivers Olga's aria – so vital in establishing the contrast of temperaments with Tatyana and for preparing us for Lensky's eventual fate – in unpleasantly plummy tones and with some mangled Russian consonants. Gertrude Jahn's Larina is better but seems to need constant help from the prompter. There are further small excisions in the following conversational exchanges.

At which point I would probably have given up, had I not been on the job; or if not here, then certainly soon after the arrival of Wolfgang Brendel's uncomfortably dry-throated Onegin. But that would have meant missing out on some superb qualities, once the performance warms up and persuades one to filter out its weaknesses. The obtrusive presence of the prompter remains, but the cuts are less damaging than might be feared – they affect mainly the chorus (did someone despair of their ability to learn all those Russian words, since they do sound pretty ill-focused throughout?) and some of the repetitions in the two Ball scenes. Mixed though the singing is in the quartet of Lensky, Onegin, Tatyana and Olga, Ozawa's pacing here is wonderfully perceptive, and whoever had the idea of making Lensky pick up so seamlessly on Onegin's thought-processes – as though he in some way represented the latter's pre-cynical self – deserves a salutation. Peter Dvorsky sings his declaration of love to Olga most beautifully, and he rightly receives a rapturous burst of applause. As early as the Nurse's prescience before the Letter Scene, it is clear that Ozawa understands Tchaikovsky's structural use of string tremolo. Credit the conductor too, as well as the composer, for the fact that our heartstrings are pulled tight even before Tatyana beings to tug seriously on them.

Then it is Mirella Freni who has to make or break the evening. Her first outburst – uncomprehending of her own emotional pain – is already riveting, and pretty much everything in the early stages of the Letter Scene rings true, as she searches her heart and mind to put words to what she feels. At the moment of quiet revelation when she voices the crucial questions that are so much more eloquent than her statements (no one who knows the opera will fail to identify the spot) the Vienna oboe and horn catch the mood beautifully (insofar as a Viennese oboe can ever sound beautiful). But Freni herself cannot entirely shake off a conventional mode of delivery here, and she tries too hard for inwardness at 'obman neopïtnoy

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dushi' (the deception of an inexperienced heart). But then she delivers the passionate intensity Tchaikovsky asks for at 'Voobrazi, ja zdes' odna!' (Behold, I am here alone!) with fabulous roundness and fullness of tone. This may not be one of the all-time greatest accounts of the Letter Scene, but it has enough stirring moments to keep the drama on course.

This is not just a matter of maintaining the plausibility of narrative and emotions. It concerns faithfulness to the core of the work, in particular its matchless sensitivity to shades of self-delusion, to which all the main characters in *Onegin* are prone to varying degrees, and out of which they grow, or to which they become reconciled, as events unfold. And this in turn stands for something bigger, since it represents one of Russian opera's less loudly trumpeted routes to dramatic truth, one that has stood the test of time better than most. In order to represent self-delusion, *Onegin* thematicizes (rather than merely exemplifying) the untruth of operatic conventions – the wishful thinking of folksy peasant choruses and harmonious family ensembles, the backward-looking self-indulgence of male lyrical posturing, the voyeuristic emptiness of high society, and so on. It therefore feels far more modern than a host of other nineteenth-century operas, Russian or otherwise. Reality and unreality constantly flip over, as Tatyana finds herself as if acting in one of the novels she has been reading, and Lensky acts and suffers as if in one of his own poems; yet ironically their lives have become all the more real for that. The unreal (or rather, meaninglessly superficial) 'surprise' hailed by the dancers at the Act 2 Ball turns to the all-too-real one of Lensky's challenge, yet at the same time this is based on the unreal offence he has taken. Pushkin's avoidance of the Mills & Boon, or even Brontë-esque, ending becomes all the more telling for Tchaikovsky's multi-dimensional articulation of social artificiality in the early stages. Therefore *Onegin* is at one and the same time a critique of opera as a genre and a promise of one direction for its potential renewal.

Of course this balance of the artificial and the genuine has to be handled with extreme tact by singers, designers, directors and conductors, and here Ozawa and his team score highly, without always hitting the bull's-eye. Lensky has to be a bit of a poseur, for instance, but if that is allowed to overwhelm his capacity for genuine feeling, then the all-important tension of the drama is destroyed. Dvorsky's Lensky keeps the balance in exemplary fashion. But while in principle it might be possible to excuse Brendel's less than bel canto delivery of Onegin's rejection as the outer manifestation of an inner emotional coldness, in fact the more obvious verdict is hard to avoid – that his technique buckles under pressure. He is simply not up to the task of conveying Onegin's metamorphosis into a love-stricken boy (inverting Tatyana's metamorphosis into a duty-reconciled, though still heart-broken woman, so movingly conveyed by Freni). Nicolai Ghiaurov as Gremin slightly over-plays his set-piece aria, drawing attention to the voice at the expense of character and situation; this is not the place to convey artificiality, and I doubt that this was the intent.

In sum, this is a performance from which much can be learned, but to which one cannot surrender for very long stretches. Perhaps *Onegin* still awaits the recording of the Tchaikovsky-lover's dreams. But no serious engagement with the work can afford to be without the two classic Russian accounts – the first ever commercial recording, from 1937 (on Naxos 8.110216-17), and the 1955 Melodiya with the young Vishnevskaya (briefly available on CD, 74321 170902, now deleted, but so much finer than the later Vishnevskaya/Rostropovich collaboration).

The Orfeo discs come without libretto, though with a moderately informative booklet essay. The sound quality is more than satisfactory, with few signs of the

problems that so often afflict live opera house recordings as they attempt to track voices as they move across the stage.

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