

# The Day

## With 'Onegin,' Conn. Lyric Opera Proves Itself A Musical Force

*By Milton Moore, Day Arts Writer. Published on 11/24/2008*

New London – The Connecticut Lyric Opera appeared out of nowhere, or so it seemed, less than five years ago to stage its first production in the sanctuary of the First Congregational Church. Sunday evening's production of Tchaikovsky's "Evgeni Onegin" at the Garde Arts Center — uptown, or at least uphill, from that venue — marked a rite of passage.

The company made the leap to the big stage last season, but it was the very choice of "Onegin" — let alone Sunday's often thrilling performance — that demonstrated Lyric is now a musical force in this community, with artistic maturity and commitment to presenting the best in music.

The company is built around Polish-trained artistic director and conductor Adrian Sylveen Mackiewicz and Lithuanian soprano Jurate Svedaite, who sings most of the lead roles. They brought to Sunday's performance a fluency in both the Russian language and in Tchaikovsky's taxing score. One of the company's assets is that the orchestra is Mackiewicz's New Britain-based Connecticut Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra, not a pick-up contract ensemble.

"Onegin" is a far cry from Italian opera (though it bears some uncanny resemblance to Verdi's "La Traviata"). It does not stop for the standard operatic set pieces of arias, duets, and quartets; its emotional story rides a narrative of orchestral score, and the voices and musicians breathe the same air. Sunday's performance, though far from note-perfect, was driven by Mackiewicz's firm grasp of the score and by fine performances by two principals, soprano Svedaite and Russian baritone Maksim Ivanov as Onegin.

Based on Pushkin's poem, it is the story of the dreamy small town girl Tatiana who is smitten by the jaded sophisticate Onegin when he is introduced to her family by her sister Olga's fiancé, Lensky. Tatiana writes an impassioned love letter to Onegin, who dismisses her with a snobbish lecture about her naïveté. In a party that follows, Onegin relieves his boredom by flirting with Olga to irritate his friend. Lensky becomes enraged and challenges Onegin to a duel, and Lensky is killed in the duel.

Six years pass, and Onegin attends a soiree in St. Petersburg, where he is stunned to see Tatiana, now married to a nobleman. Overcome with the anguish of lost love to compound his dissolute life, Onegin meets with Tatiana and pledges his love to her.

Tatiana too breaks down, confesses her love for him never died, but she says it is all too late and leaves him shattered.

Tchaikovsky spends little time on character development, knowing that his audience was well-versed in the poem by Pushkin, the Shakespeare of the Russia (himself killed in a duel). Instead, the composer describes pure emotion with his subtle and powerful score.

Performed with black-box sets and fine costuming, Sunday's "Onegin" was carried by a well-paced reading by conductor Mackiewicz. Though there were rough spots in obbligatos and some exposed violin section playing, the 23-piece orchestra pulled off oversize moments, written for a far larger orchestra, in the drama of Tatiana's letter scene, the duel scene and the well-paced finale.

Svedaite was a fine Tatiana (if a bit too old to pull off the casting in the small theater). Her letter scene, one of the great soprano tours de force in all opera, was unhurried and sung with knowing, fluid dynamics. The effect was riveting as she travelled its emotional landscape, and she had the same vocal and emotional sensitivity in the final scene.

You couldn't have asked for a better Onegin than Ivanov. Though used primarily as Tatiana's dramatic foil, he had a powerful presence and hall-filling baritone. Though given few solo opportunities by Tchaikovsky, he made the most of his Act 3 "Uzhel ta samaja Tatiana."

The role of Lensky, given some of the opera's best music, was miscast with tenor Andrew Drost, who sang with a pinched, almost comic voice far too often. The ardent Act 1 love aria "Ya lyublyu vas" felt perfunctory, and his unlovely tone did not fit the lovely wind playing in his musings before the duel.

The chorus performance was the best yet by this company, and several of the supporting cast members were excellent, including mezzo Margaret Tyler, as Tatiana's nurse Filippievna, and bass Laurentiu Rotaru, a company regular, as the nobleman Gremin.

Lyric's was the first performance ever in Connecticut of this masterpiece in its original language. This young company has proven it has much to offer local music lovers.