

# OPERA NEWS

IN REVIEW > INTERNATIONAL,

Vol. 85, No. 4, October 2020

## *Eugene Onegin*

MUNICH

Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz

10/10/20



Matija Meić (Onegin) and Mária Celeng (Tatiana) during the final scene of Ben Baur's production of *Eugene Onegin* at the Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz

Photo by Christian POGO Zach

**T**HE FIRST NEW PRODUCTION of the season at Munich's Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz was Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, seen at its second evening, on October 10. The Gärtnerplatz has the luxury of alternating two almost completely different casts and this performance featured the so-called B-cast. (The superb singing and total commitment on this evening made me wonder what the A-cast must have been like.) Because of the pandemic, the audience was limited to only 200 spectators and—due to space restrictions in the orchestra pit—the theater commissioned a reduced score, skillfully accomplished by Pyotr Alexandrovich Klimov. The smaller forces also added a welcome intimacy to a work usually performed as larger-than-life. The smaller Gärtnerplatz orchestra was more than up to its challenge, rewarding with virtuoso playing. Both chorus and ballet were limited in number and even the staging for soloists had to take social distancing into account where possible. On a very positive note, the use of German overtitles made it possible to perform the opera in the original Russian. Stage director (and set designer) Ben Baur relied on the music to give him his dramatic impetus: Tchaikovsky's music tells us nearly all we need to know about the characters in the work, at times with an entirely different shading than the great poet Pushkin's original.

Baur presented us with a unit set with a curtain, which can be pulled closed to precipitate changes of scene or atmosphere, dividing the front third of the stage from the rest. The costumes of Uta Meenen are historically accurate, not extravagant and sometimes not even pretty.

If one listens to the musical line, Onegin is not as much of a cad as he is sometimes presented and Baur has taken pains to show us not only Onegin's egotism but also his weaknesses, his insecurities, his pain. The soaring final confrontation between the two protagonists was full of sincere love, particularly from Tatiana, and this interpretation does not even attempt to negate that which is musically so indisputable. The production has many wonderful small touches; the individual characters all related to each other, actually listened to each other and reacted accordingly.



Matija Meić (Onegin), Emma Sventelius (Olga) and Alexandros Tsilogiannis (Lensky) in *Onegin's* Ball scene

Photo by Christian POGO Zach

Alto Anna Agathonos was so perfect in every respect that it would be remiss not to begin with her performance as the nursemaid Filippyevna. Agathonos was reminiscent of altos from a past age: her voice was full and evenly produced from top to bottom and her sensitive acting and staging raised her to a level nearly equal to the major roles.

Soprano Mária Celeng brought Tatiana's letter scene to life so compellingly that one was caught on the edge of one's seat. Celeng sang with consummate vocal shading and—with the exception of one or two wiry top notes—was nothing short of magnificent. Her Tatiana seemed to open the door to the ensuing tragedy, spurning Onegin so openly in the ball scene that the latter was almost forced into flirting with Olga.

Baritone Matija Meić was perfectly suited to Onegin vocally and temperamentally. Tenor Alexandros Tsilogiannis was a superb Lensky, secure in all registers, beguiling in vocal tone, extremely moving in his lament before the duel. Emma Sventelius was an enticing Olga whose acting and singing were both a joy. Bass Levente Páll sang Gremin with fluid line and tone did not try to belt out the prince's aria. Tenor Maximilian Mayer, one of the best singers I have heard in recent years, represented sheer luxury casting as Triquet; veteran Ann-Katrin Naidu rounded out the principals as a sympathetic Larina.

Conductor Anthony Bramall gave his singers the vocal support they needed to pour out Tchaikovsky's glorious music but maintained the intense forward thrust of the opera's narrative. This was an evening to be remembered, rewarded by the 200 in attendance with long rounds of applause. —*Jeffrey A. Leipsic*

