

VOICE OF RUSSIA

His 'Battle of the Baritones' with Bryn Terfel in 1989 may have propelled Dmitri Hvorostovsky onto the worldwide stage but, he tells **Hugh Canning**, he has not forgotten his cultural roots, as his new disc of Pushkin-inspired songs will reveal...

PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES CHEADLE

It hardly seems possible that more than 20 years have passed since Dmitri Hvorostovsky, a handsome, astonishingly mature 26-year-old from Krasnoyarsk in Siberia, clinched the title of Cardiff (now BBC Cardiff) Singer of the World. In doing so, he beat the favourite, Welsh bass-baritone Bryn Terfel, in what has since become known as the 'Battle of the Baritones'. Both have gone on to enjoy two of the most illustrious international careers in music today and reach out to audiences way beyond the confines of opera houses, symphonic and recital halls.





SITTING COMFORTABLY: Dmitri Hvorostovsky in the familiar surroundings of the Royal Opera House, where (below left) he won acclaim as Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin in 2006

NOW 47, HVOROSTOVSKY is in his vocal pomp, acclaimed as the definitive Eugene Onegin, Tchaikovsky's Byronic world-weary anti-hero, of his generation, yet also regarded as the world's leading interpreter of the lyric Verdi roles. In April he sang Giorgio Germont in Covent Garden's *La traviata*, and next season he returns in the title role of David McVicar's staging of *Rigoletto*.



This month sees him celebrate the 20th anniversary of his Wigmore Hall debut, reprising his 1990 programme of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov songs and, to coincide, Delos will release a successor to his

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acclaimed set of Tchaikovsky songs, a recital of romances by Russian composers from Glinka (1804-1857) to Sviridov (1915-1998) setting the words of the great Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin. And it's Pushkin that begins our conversation when we meet in London. 'For Russians, Pushkin is like Shakespeare to the English-speaking people, Heine or Goethe to Germans,' he explains. 'At school every child is obliged to read Pushkin – his novels, his tragedies. His prose-writing is considered as important as his poetry.'

Outside Russia, Pushkin is probably best known as the author of the novellas, tales, dramas and poems that inspired some of the greatest Russian operas: Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and *Queen of Spades* remain the cornerstones of the Russian 'international' repertoire, but his work is also the basis of Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmilla*, Darghomizhky's *The Stone Guest* and *Rusalka*, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mozart and Salieri*, *The Legend of Tsar Saltan* and *The Golden Cockerel*, Rachmaninov's *Aleko* and

The Miserly Knight and Stravinsky's *Mavra*.

Most of these composers also set his poems as songs and Hvorostovsky has selected an eclectic programme for the new disc.

'It's a fantastic idea to record Pushkin songs,' he enthuses, 'because I don't think any of my compatriots have done it before – if one did, it might have been Irina Arhipova. Pushkin is one of the most celebrated poets in Russia so I guess that every major Russian composer from Glinka onwards has set his poems: Tchaikovsky, Rimsky, Anton Rubinstein, Borodin, Darghomizhky. It's the difference of styles from Glinka, who established the bel canto style and singing technique in Russia, that interests me and this is a little jewel box, full of unknown treasures.'

The mention of the bel canto in a Russian context takes us on to the subject of the singers who made a strong impression on him

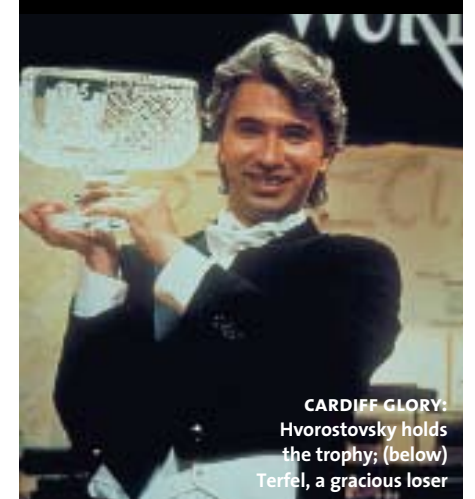
when he was growing up in a music-loving family in Krasnoyarsk in the 1960s. A brief history of Russian opera singing follows. 'Chaliapin, Nezhdanova and Sobinov – the great sacred monsters of Russian singing at the turn of the 20th century – all studied in Italy,' he says. 'The "school" was purely Italian. After the Revolution, the curtain came down for 60 years and the style changed to a kind of melodramatic declamation. Those great voices were shouting on stage – (Pavel) Lisitsian and Arkhipova are the exceptions. The greatness of Arkhipova is her Italianate singing voice – legato, cantilena.'

'Then in the 1960s, with Kruschev's great thaw in relations with the West, a collaboration started between La Scala, Milan and the Bolshoi Opera in Moscow. La Scala sent its ballet dancers to the Bolshoi and the Bolshoi sent its singers, (Yuri) Mazurok, (Evgenia) Obratzova, (Vladimir) Atlantov, to La Scala. Another advantage of the thaw was that the curtain opened slightly and a small stream of information came through from the West. I spent the little pocket money I had buying opera recordings with Western singers – everything published in the 1950s, '60s and '70s was issued in the Soviet Union by Melodiya as part of a reciprocal deal with Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, EMI. I've got a huge collection of Western records, now all on CD, of course. Back then it gave me a chance to study the Western repertoire.'

It comes as something of a surprise, then, to discover that Hvorostovsky, with his immaculately schooled, Italianate *baritono nobile*, is largely self-taught. 'I don't believe in singing teachers!' he exclaims. 'I believe in people who can study well. If you compare the Soviet to the American approach to voice training, it's like day and night. An American student has to find the money to pay a teacher for a one-hour lesson. Within two years, if they are lucky, they can get auditions. In the Russian system it takes five years of study in the conservatory. Everything is given to you by the state and you study piano, *solfege*, musicology, theory. I've studied music since I was seven, piano, conducting, choral singing as well as voice. I even studied the accordion as a second instrument.'

He was, he points out, one of the first of a generation that could both benefit from the advantages of the Soviet education system and then be able to export their talents abroad – only an approved Soviet elite, mainly from the Bolshoi Opera, had big international careers prior to the late 1980s but changes were already afoot when the then Kirov Opera made its sensational visit to Covent Garden under the direction of Yuri ▶

DMITRI VS BRYN BATTLE OF THE BARITONES



CARDIFF GLORY: Hvorostovsky holds the trophy; (below) Terfel, a gracious loser

The 1989 final of the BBC Cardiff Singer of World is still the most talked about in the prestigious competition's history. Dubbed 'The Battle of the Baritones' it pitched a 26-year-old Dmitri Hvorostovsky against the local hero, 23-year-old Bryn Terfel... and the Russian's Verdi famously triumphed over the Welshman's Wagner.

Though Terfel was awarded the Lieder Prize for his performance of Schumann songs earlier in the competition, he later graciously admitted that he saw it as 'a second prize to a wonderful Russian baritone' and that, when he first heard Hvorostovsky sing, 'I would have been the first to sign on to his fan club. Incredible.'

'I WAS STUPID ENOUGH TO TURN ON THE RADIO AND LISTEN TO HIS PERFORMANCE'

Hvorostovsky himself admitted that hearing Terfel in the final didn't help his own cause. 'I was stupid enough to turn on the radio and listen to his performance,' he recalled in 2003. 'It didn't do me any good, as it made me extra nervous.'

Not that nervous, clearly, given the performance that followed. As Brian McMaster, the former managing director of Welsh National Opera and a Cardiff Singer jury member, remembers: 'Those of us who were lucky enough to be in the hall that night will never forget it. It was an amazing night.' So amazing, in fact, that the baritones' fellow finalists, including mezzo Monica Groop and soprano Hillevi Martinpelto – both world class – rarely appear as anything more than a footnote in Cardiff Singer history.



Temirkanov and introduced an ensemble of wonderful singers of whom only baritone Sergei Leiferkus was at all familiar to British audiences. By the time Hvorostovsky reached his twenties, he was prepared to fly.

'I was well-treated by the state when I won several competitions in a row. Cardiff Singer of the World was, of course, the most prestigious and important. After my career began outside Russia, I was gradually moved to Moscow from Krasnoyarsk. I was given an apartment in Moscow as my reward for winning Cardiff. That was typical of the way the Soviet system treated its celebrities at the time. Boris Yeltsin, our new president, gave me an apartment in the centre of Moscow.'

Hvorostovsky and Terfel have been two of the great operatic survivors of our time

with uninterrupted careers now stretching back 25 years in the Russian's case, 20 in the Welshman's. Have their paths crossed much since the Battle of the Baritones? 'Well, how could they have?' he quizzes. 'We sang one production of *Le nozze di Figaro* in Salzburg with Bryn as Figaro and me as the Count, but we don't have much repertoire in common. We never sang Don Giovanni and Leporello for instance. I don't do *Don Giovanni* any more.' Those looking for rivalry here will be disappointed. In short, their repertoires have moved apart – Hvorostovsky's in the direction of Verdi, Terfel's toward the Wagnerian *Heldenbaritons*, Wotan-Wanderer and Hans Sachs.

I wonder aloud how Hvorostovsky has managed to acquire and maintain a bel



DMITRI HORROR STORY: looking scary in *Toi et Moi*

canto technique without relying on singing teachers. What is the secret of his vocal health and longevity? 'Well, the voice is the basic material, and to use this material, to become a musician, singer and actor takes a lifetime. Of course it's very much to do with your training and what you learn in the right place at the right time. It's like a seed in the soil when it grows in the right climate, supply of water and minerals, it can become a wonderful flower. If anything goes wrong, it dies. It's very much the same when you try to become a singer. It's not enough to have a beautiful voice, you have to learn to express yourself and enable an audience to share the emotions you are expressing on stage. That needs another gift.'

A surprising development in his career – well, a surprise to me – is his recent metamorphosis into a popular, big-arena singer, especially back in Russia, but increasingly in Europe and the US. While I've come primarily to talk about his Wigmore anniversary and Pushkin disc, he seems keen to talk about this new (and undoubtedly lucrative) branch of his musical activity.

'Haven't you seen the video of *Toi et Moi*?' he asks me, and I have to confess I haven't. When I get back to my computer I follow his search-engine instructions of the YouTube site to discover at least 30,000 people have been there before me. I rather wish I hadn't. The video is a bizarre Gothick, sado-masochistic soft-porn sequence in which a lightly, but leather-clad Hvorostovsky, sporting a buffed torso with a cross-shaped scar over one nipple, struts his stuff among scantily clad women – one of whom he whips until she bleeds – and a gaggle of creepy ghouls. Hmmm. It looks like *Don Giovanni* in hell, but the music is thin, moody retro-1950s stuff by Russian composer Igor Krutoy, who has written an album's worth of songs in Russian, French and Italian. Needless to say, the baritone doesn't wear the SM-gear in concerts.

'I performed the songs from the album in November last year in Moscow, St Petersburg

ALEXANDER PUSHKIN WHO WAS HE?

Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) is of all poets Russia's most beloved, widely quoted and extensively set to music. Hot tempered and apparently conceited in person, in his writing he displayed a deft if often sardonic wit, keen and often compassionate observation and a worldliness which recalled the English poet he most admired, Lord Byron.

What makes his achievement extraordinary, though, is that he managed to express all this in Russian, a language that had been previously despised by all educated Russians as belonging to peasants and much inferior to French. While Pushkin shared their admiration of French literature, he

was able to match its qualities – and more – while writing in his native tongue. Besides poetry, Pushkin pioneered almost every significant genre in Russian literature including historic drama (*Boris Godunov*), historical romance (*Poltava*: the basis of Tchaikovsky's opera *Mazeppa*), the novel (*Eugene Onegin*), and the supernatural tale (*Queen of Spades*).

Perhaps ironically, Pushkin was never a connoisseur of music. He regularly tripped over people's feet as he arrived late for the ballet, which he attended entirely to ogle the ladies. Yet he was fascinated by Mozart: the opera *Don Giovanni* inspired his own drama *The Stone Guest* (itself turned into an opera by Dargomyzhsky), and



PUSHKIN'S WRITING DISPLAYED A DEFT WIT AND KEEN OBSERVATION



RUSSIAN ICONS: Alexander Pushkin himself (left); a portrait of bass Feodor Chaliapin as Boris Godunov (above)

he wrote a dramatic scene concerning the relationship between Mozart and Salieri (which Rimsky-Korsakov made into an opera). He was also acquainted with Glinka, who hoped the poet would adapt his folklore-style epic *Ruslan and Ludmila* into a libretto for operatic setting: alas, only months after the historic premiere of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*, Pushkin was shot in a duel which he himself had called to defend his wife's honour.



LOOKING AHEAD: 'I am still excited, but God only knows how long you are going to sing well'

'I'VE HAD A LOT OF ARENA CONCERTS, BUT I'M PLANNING TO MAKE IT UP TO MY RECITAL AUDIENCES'

and Kiev, six concerts almost consecutively to audiences of six, seven and ten thousand. It's a mixture of pop, electronic and quasi-operatic. There's a lot of singing – high notes, low notes, very uncomfortable to sing by the way, but using the microphone makes it easier. Maybe it's my future,' he suggests with a twinkle in his eye and a slightly questioning tone that suggests he is not entirely serious. 'I've been using microphones already for a long time, so I have gradually come to terms with microphone technique. If you use your

full operatic technique with a microphone it sounds too harsh and uneven. I've learnt that a little, but it's a long journey and nobody knows what's going to happen in a few years time. Maybe a little musical, maybe a Soviet pop-opera, who knows?'

Anyone who fears that Hvorostovsky's days as a star of opera-house and concert platform may be numbered can relax. He is booked by his favourite opera houses – Covent Garden, New York's Met, Vienna State Opera, Munich, Berlin and the Opéra-Bastille – up

to five years ahead. Next season he returns to the Royal Opera – 'which I consider my home house as I live in London' – as Rigoletto and the following season as Valentin in Gounod's *Faust*. He recently took Verdi's Simon Boccanegra into his repertoire – 'most of the Verdi I sing belongs to the epoch of bel canto and that's how I like to sing it. Boccanegra is partly bel canto, partly late Verdi style,' he says – and he plans to learn Iago, but probably not before his 50th birthday. Another Verdi role that interest him is Don Carlo in *La Forza del destino*: 'I recently sang the duet in one of my *Hvorostovsky and Friends* concerts in Moscow with Jonas Kaufmann and I would love to sing the opera with him if he ever does it!'. But he's happy to leave Amonasro in *Aida* – 'too short and I'm too busy' – to others.

His schedule is so hectic that he rarely has time to spend with his four children – two each with his ex and present wives – in London. Straight classical recitals such as his Wigmore date, which take long hours of preparation, have been rare of late. 'Apart from the opera I sing, I've had a lot of "gala" and arena concerts, but I'm planning to make it up to my recital audiences in the coming seasons. I regularly sing at the Barbican and Carnegie Hall. New York and London are very much more advanced than the rest of the world in terms of the programmes I offer. I don't have time to study between engagements!' he complains. 'The new programme is Liszt (*Petrarch Sonnets*), Fauré, Taneyev and the last opus of Tchaikovsky. As a chorus conductor, I had to study a lot of Taneyev's music and I hated it, but recently I discovered a huge pile of great music among his songs. I chose five or six out of a two big volumes. I had to fly my pianist to Florida, where I was on holiday with my family, to do some preparation. It's not memorised but it's nearly ready.'

With his tentative moves towards crossover, I ask him if he is still finds fulfilment and excitement in his classical work. I get a surprisingly diffident reply. 'Sort of,' he mutters. 'I'm 47 now and life is full of struggles, with lots of responsibilities. I am still excited but only God knows how long you are going to sing well and enjoy it. I probably anticipate more than anyone else because I am too critical of my performance, so I think when the time comes to go I will know.'

One can only hope that it won't come too soon for the outstanding 'noble baritone' of the day. ■

Dmitri Hvorostovsky's Wigmore Hall recital is on 11 June; his new disc of Pushkin songs (Delos) will be reviewed next month.