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FIRST NIGHTS

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DMITRI

HVOROSTOVSKY

OPERA'S MISTER COOL

WIN

HVOROSTOVSKY'S
MUSICAL ODYSSEY
ON DVD



R

BEYOND

boundaries

He once turned down an offer to record with Madonna, but having established his credentials as one of the great classical singers of our time, Dmitri Hvorostovsky is venturing into new musical territory. By Mark Glanville

An audition panel, it is said, can decide whether they want to hire a singer from the moment he or she walks on stage. The Siberian baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky radiated star quality the second he appeared in the 1989 Cardiff Singer of the World competition which effectively launched his spectacular career at the age of 27. That he beat Bryn Terfel into second place says it all, and he's not shy about telling me so: 'I know for sure that I have one of the greatest instruments in the world. By 23, I'd already been able to perform on the opera stage and I could see there were things I could do that my older colleagues couldn't do.'

The voice, like its owner, is sleek and handsome, its rich, dark colour set off by the brilliance of its upper partials which make it both exciting and moving in equal measure, especially in the Russian repertoire to which, as one might expect, it is ideally suited.

Having achieved most of his goals on the classical stage, Hvorostovsky is now opening himself up to new directions and opportunities, crucially those that will fulfil him as an artist and at the same time sit comfortably with the family life that has become so important to him. Perhaps his most striking departure has been in the direction of crossover music, specifically that of Igor Krutoy, a wealthy Russian with a strong gift for conducting and composition, whom he first met while on holiday in Miami.

No fan of crossover myself, I admit to being won over by these recordings. Hvorostovsky sees them as an extension of his previous

work in the field of Soviet war songs (these were one of the musical highlights of a 2006 concert tour). Krutoy's songs are melodically unsophisticated, but they are tuneful, memorable and inflated by the presence of a symphony orchestra and chorus they can pack a real punch. What makes them particularly interesting, however, is the fact that they have been written to exploit Hvorostovsky's own remarkable vocal gift, so that they become exercises in showing off its wide range and colours.

When I contrasted this endeavour with Renée Fleming's crossover album *Dark Hope* (far less successful, in my view), Hvorostovsky became very defensive of his friend and colleague, telling me he found her album 'very brave and challenging stylistically'. He had one interesting caveat: 'My only criticism is that instead of singing well-known songs she should have had something specially written for her. It's essential.'

None of Hvorostovsky's career choices is made without very careful consideration and planning. The result is that what may appear to be disparate musical elements – folk music, light music, popular music, art song and opera – come together in one man who, it might be argued, has failed to compromise the way certain other singers have done. A chance to perform with Madonna in the mid-90s, with all that implies, was turned down flat. 'I felt that if I ever did it I would compromise myself. It wasn't difficult to turn down. Maybe I was a fool for not doing it but I didn't even consider

Photo by Pavel Antonov



it for one minute and Philips Classics, who approached me to do it, must have put the cross on me ever since.’

When I first met Dmitri Hvorostovsky several years ago he explained how the pain of not being able to see enough of the children from his first marriage offered him insights into Rigoletto’s grief over his daughter Gilda. At our second meeting, in his elegant west London home, I encountered a very happily married man with a delightful Swiss wife, Florence, who served us tea from a samovar, two lovely children (Maxim and Nina aged eight and four) and a cat. Broach the subject of Florence, and Hvorostovsky, a singer famous for his Tchaikovsky roles, is suddenly transformed from the impetuous Eugene Onegin into his rival in love, the dignified and doting Prince Gremin.

‘With Florence I have everything. She understands what I’m doing and she appreciates it very much. She’s the greatest fan, and because she’s a classical singer and musician herself, she understands it better than anyone. Her personality is like sunshine, she’s well-balanced, she makes me happy. She’s a naturally happy person, so she really balances my dark, moody Slavic soul. Since we’ve been together people don’t recognise me – they’d never seen me smile before! Even now when I’m touring somewhere alone and she comes and joins me, my entire personality changes. She has a beautiful voice herself, but we wanted a family, so she gave up what could have been a successful career – perhaps that’s my fault. My ego.’

Hvorostovsky sees a precedent for his own career in that of his fellow

going. One crossover tour keeps me financially happy for the rest of the year. I can be more in control and more selective. Some have said I’ve betrayed classical music and won’t come to see me singing these Krutoy songs, but I’ve gained a new audience by doing so.’

Not that Hvorostovsky has abandoned the classical repertoire. When we met, he was in the middle of recording sessions for his latest classical album, released last month and paid for with his own money: ‘I rented the Moscow Conservatory Hall, an acoustically fantastic venue, and a recording crew, and I’ve recorded stuff that’s probably the best I’ve ever done – songs by Rachmaninov, Taneyev, arias from the last operas of Tchaikovsky and Musorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death*.

‘I’m sick and tired of waiting for money, sponsorship. I work hard so I can save some money and pay for recordings. I’m not doing it for money. The recordings are something you can leave for centuries after you’re gone. But you have to do it while you’re still full of ideas and the voice is sounding great. I have plans to do more of this in the years ahead.’

The Rachmaninov tracks that I had the chance to preview from the new recording are the work of an artist in his prime, interpreting the music he loves. It wouldn’t surprise me to see these new recordings becoming seminal in our assessment of Hvorostovsky’s legacy. Rachmaninov was also the high point of Hvorostovsky’s recent Barbican recital, though it began disappointingly: his Fauré songs lacked the wistful irony of the best interpreters and the

‘ If I have an idea in my head I’m unstoppable, I’m desperate to complete it. That’s the only good and positive side about me. ’

countryman, the great Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin. ‘He was one of the first crossover artists, with songs such as *‘Ochi Chernye’* (Dark Eyes). It wasn’t folk. It’s café music that was sung by gypsies – pop singers of their day. He was singing those songs along with folksongs that were also seen as compromising the style and image of the opera singer. But because he was born into a certain labouring class, one of the lowest in Russian society at that time, he carried it throughout his life.’

When I ask Hvorostovsky which area of his work he finds most fulfilling, he has no hesitation in referring me to the DVD of *Toi et Moi*, which accompanies the two CDs of *Déjà Vu*, the handsome boxed set of Krutoy’s songs written specially for him. It might seem a strange choice: Harry Potter meets Akhnaten with more than a dash of sado-masochism thrown in. The great baritone appears with his torso bared, thrashing a naked woman with an elaborate snakeskin whip one moment, rescuing her from a giant rolling globe the next. But it was the making of this bizarre fantasy that appealed to him most.

‘I had such fun with Krutoy. For five minutes of video we worked two days and nights. The crew never stopped working. He wanted to film a baby, but in the end it was taking too long. It was filmed in Kiev where it was freezing and most of us were almost naked, topless and we had these little heaters. It was crazy!’

The financial cushion offered, in part, by his collaboration with Krutoy is facilitating other projects close to Hvorostovsky’s heart. ‘You can’t make money out of classical music, so the crossover stuff means I don’t have to do a lot of routine work. I only do what I really want to do: I don’t have to go to Berlin State Opera or Hamburg or Düsseldorf or whatever just in order to keep myself

linguistic accuracy that might have lent them authenticity. The smile to the audience at the end of each song only emphasised the lack of one while they were being sung. But in the Italian repertoire, especially Verdi, Hvorostovsky was back in his element, having absorbed the language and idiom of music he has been listening to since boyhood. ‘The Russian singing technique was built on the Italian. All the great singers used to go and study in Italy for many years and a lot of them sang in Italian opera theatres.’

Hvorostovsky’s 2012 calendar is devoted to the operas of Verdi – Ernani, Renato in *Un ballo in maschera*, and Simon Boccanegra. This is heavy repertoire, and he has had to work hard to match it to his essentially lyric instrument. ‘In order to feel in shape, you have to do a physical workout every day. Since I began working out, I’ve had a huge increase in my technique and vocal resources, particularly in terms of the volume. It’s not that I’ve become heavier. I’m about the same weight as I was 20 years ago, but it’s all muscle. You need the support for bigger sounds. It’s as simple as that. So you do need to be really fit.’

A successful operation on a damaged septum which has caused him constant problems throughout his career will also help to improve his already superlative instrument. When I asked him about the origin of the injury he told me that his nose had been broken many times.

‘It was when I was a teenager, those wild years.’

How did it happen?

‘Street-fighting!’ he exclaims, apparently astonished at the naivety of my question.

But it is in the music of his own country, so much of which is a reflection of the gloomy, Slavic soul he admits to possessing, that

As Il Conte di Luna in
the Met's *Trovatore*.
Photo by Ken Howard



At home in Moscow



Making his role debut as Verdi's
Ermani at the Met, New York.
Photo by Marty Sohl

Hvorostovsky comes most to life. 'If I have an idea in my head I'm unstoppable, I'm desperate to complete it,' he says. 'That's the only good and positive side about me. Everything else is just crap. I'm a typical Russian, very moody, self-critical and doubtful more than anyone. I've never been happy with anything I was doing except perhaps a couple of things. I always have a certain vision of who I have to become, who grow up into. There's a certain model in my vision. What do I have to do, where to go, which direction. Somehow, I have it in my instinct.'

COMPETITION

Opera Now is giving away five copies of the Decca DVD Renée Fleming & Dmitri Hvorostovsky: *A Musical Odyssey in St Petersburg!*

To enter, simply drop us an email with the subject ODYSSEY to competitions@rhinegold.co.uk, or send a postcard to Rhinegold Competitions, 20 Rugby Street, London WC1N 3QZ.

Please include your full name, address and a contact telephone number. (Deadline for entries: 30 March 2012.)



DMITRI HVOROSTOVSKY'S DIARY

March 5, 8, 11, 13

✦ Vienna, Austria
Simon Boccanegra/ Title role
Vienna State Opera

April 6, 10, 14, 18, 21, 25, 28/ May 2

✦ New York, USA
La traviata/ Germont père
Metropolitan Opera

May 21

✦ Paris, France
Recital
Châtelet Theatre

June 2

✦ Mexico City, Mexico
Recital
Venue to be announced

November 8 to December 15

✦ New York, USA
Un ballo in maschera/ Renato
Metropolitan Opera

NEW RELEASES

Dmitri Hvorostovsky

A MUSICAL ODYSSEY IN ST PETERSBURG

There's clearly good chemistry between Dmitri Hvorostovsky and Renée Fleming. As performers, their ease in each other's company is one of the things that makes this DVD such a pleasure to watch. Filmed on location in St Petersburg by the hugely experienced Brian Large, each of the three parts of this concert/travelogue has an opulent setting as its backdrop: the court theatres of the Winter Palace, the Yusopov Palace and the stupendous Peterhof. The musical journey kicks off with the duet from Act IV of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* and, after an interlude in which Fleming takes us on a tour of the Winter Palace, we get more Verdi in an extended scene from *Simon Boccanegra*. From then on, we're firmly in Russian territory, with songs and arias by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and Medtner, sometimes with piano accompaniment, sometimes with the State Hermitage Orchestra conducted by Constantine Orbelian. At the end of each musical section, Fleming continues her 'odyssey' through St Petersburg, relating the history and wondering at the grandeur of Peter the Great's imperial capital. She's a natural in front of the camera, as anyone



who has watched her present one of the live relays of opera from the Met will know. Hvorostovsky, meanwhile, provides some authentic Russian soul to the music-making, especially in the songs, where his grasp of the poetic nuances of the Russian texts really comes to the fore. The DVD also includes 23 minutes of extra performance footage, a highlight of which is Renée Fleming singing 'Casta Diva' from Bellini's *Norma*.

Decca 0440 074 3383 6, 1 DVD

HVOROSTOVSKY IN MOSCOW

In June 2008, Dmitri Hvorostovsky invited the American soprano Sondra Radvanovsky to be his guest in the prestigious Moscow concert series 'Hvorostovsky and Friends', with conductor Constantine Orbelian and the Philharmonia of Russia. The event marked these artists' first-ever musical collaboration and was broadcast on national TV in Russia, proving a tremendous hit with audiences. Delos originally released a recording of the concert on a CD entitled *Verdi Opera Scenes* (DE 3403) and then, having obtained the original film footage, collaborated with Californian film



editor Steve Scoville who has expertly synched the film with Delos's concert audio. Here we have two charismatic artists who are among the leading Verdi performers of our day. Their formidable technique is projected through beautifully shaded, subtle singing that captures the drama and intensity of Verdi's music.

Delos DV 7006, 1 DVD

SERGEI RACHMANINOV: ROMANCES

For this first CD release under his new recording contract with the Finnish label, Ondine, baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky has chosen a selection of 26 Romances by Sergei Rachmaninov. These are songs that have formed the bedrock of the singer's acclaimed recital career internationally, performed with his longstanding duo partner, Estonian pianist Ivari Ilja. All the hallmarks of vintage Hvorostovsky are here: the Russian propensity to dwell on longing and loss; an expressive yearning that cuts through the vocal bravura; and a virile charm that leavens the heavy, head-on intensity of these superb songs. This is a fine debut to Hvorostovsky's new partnership with Ondine.



Ondine ODE 1207-2, 1 CD