



Dmitri Hvorostovsky

The Ardent Ambassador of Opera

BY AYSEGUL SERT PHOTOGRAPHY SIMON FARRANT

*"Motherland hears, Motherland knows,
Where in the clouds her son is flying,
Full of friendly caresses and tender love,
With her eyes of red Moscow Kremlin
stars,
Kremlin towers' stars,
She watches you."*

— "Motherland Hears"
lyrics: Yevgeny Dolmatovsky,
music: Dmitri Shostakovich

For internationally acclaimed Russian baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky, opera tells those stories that "desperately" long to be heard. Hvorostovsky was born in the icy mountains of Siberia, in Krasnoyarsk, a city of a million people. It was a time when Russia was called the Soviet Union, a time when his town was closed to foreigners, a time when he discovered that even if he never could, his voice might be able to travel beyond his country's borders. Indeed, his refined and powerful voice did reach the lands behind the snow-covered landscape. And it left some deep prints. Today, he is regarded as one of the three leading baritones of his generation, along with Welshman Bryn Terfel and American Thomas Hampson.

Like a story you cannot recall when you first heard it, Hvorostovsky cannot remember how he began singing, but he recalls "yelling and screaming and shouting," an attempt to make his voice stretch and be heard "over there." The only child of a father who always wanted to be a musician but instead became an engineer, and of a mother who was a doctor but "sang like an angel," Hvorostovsky was encouraged at an early age to speak the language of music.

In 1988, two years after graduating from the Krasnoyarsk Conservatory, the baritone traveled to France accompanied by two female K.G.B. agents ["That was the Soviet way of traveling," he explains, chuckling] to take part in one of Europe's most prestigious musical competitions, the Concours International de Chant. He won and entered the Cardiff Singer of the World the following year, and at the age of 27, yes, once again escorted by the K.G.B. agents, he won the distinguished competition that introduced his lyrical baritone voice to the world.

It is difficult to summarize Hvorostovsky's most notable roles, and understandably so, because the list is quite extensive; the title role in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Germont pere in Verdi's *La Traviata*, Olegin in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, and Valentin in Gounod's *Faust*. The tall (6'1") baritone has performed in opera houses around the

world—from the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, to the Royal Opera House in London (the city he currently calls "home"), to the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Venice had a chance to speak with this incredible maestro about his childhood in Siberia, his affection for Verdi, and the "painfully dissatisfied" artist that lives within him.

Venice: What was it about opera that sparked your interest in the first place?

Dmitri Hvorostovsky: Oh, my God, I cannot even remember! We are talking about a very, very, very young age.

Your father wanted to be a musician but never got the approval from his parents. He must have seen the gift in you, since he took on the task of overseeing your musical education.

It was him and only him who saw the musician in me at first! It was his decision; he gave me the chance to study music. One day, he was playing the piano and I was standing close to him, admiring the sounds he made on the keys. He saw me looking over and said, "You don't touch this piano unless you do it professionally, unless you are serious about it." After that, I started playing the piano for hours every day.

How did you realize the power of your voice in all this?

As a kid, I was singing in the chorus but I wasn't any better than the rest of the kids. I studied everything we were given: harmony, musicology, and music history. I was singing in the chorus, but it never crossed my mind to do it professionally. Soon before my voice broke, my father, as if he felt it, went to my music school, and told the schoolmaster to release me. He didn't ask him, he told him. I was about 13 years old and my voice had started to show certain fatigue.

Was he disappointed that you didn't want to play the piano and that you were losing your voice? After all, he saw you as the one who would fulfill his musical dream.

My father had obviously understood that I would have no future as a pianist, but the only hope he had was that maybe I could at least become a singer. So he did everything in his power to protect my voice from getting hurt. I was always very shy. At sixteen, I was teaching kids to sing and I suddenly realized how powerful my own voice had become. It was as if I was rediscovering my own voice. It sounded brand new and it was all mine! I was so excited, I wanted to extend my voice

in all possible ways. My father was horrified. He was very much against my misusing my gift. But I rebelled, like all teenagers do. I started performing in front of crowds and realized that my voice was growing. It is a beautiful feeling to realize that your voice has the power to go so far, to be heard by so many people, to realize that you've got something unusual. Today, my voice is still growing.

You refuse almost half of the roles you are offered for fear those parts might damage your voice. That's an extreme caution, isn't it?

Your entire life depends on those vocal chords. Your kingdom, so to speak, can be ruined if you are not careful as to how you use your gift. I know that there are certain limitations that my voice cannot reach, at least for now. There are some repertoires that I truly want to do but I have to be patient. One day, maybe I can try to do them, who knows? I have to grow, and my voice has to mature. I am being very cautious about it, yes. You see, in order to survive in this art which can be quite cruel, I have to make sure my voice survives.

Some critics argue that you are not projecting enough volume.

I think it's bullshit! They don't know what they are talking about!

You grew up in the Soviet Union of the 1970s and '80s, with the country's heart beating politics day and night. How did it all influence and nurture the artist within you?

Krasnoyarsk, my hometown, was closed to foreigners, and there were many military checkpoints around. I remember taking one of my close friends, who wasn't Russian and didn't speak the language, to visit in 1991. She was literally one of the first foreigners that stepped in my hometown after the fall of the Soviet Union. She was treated like a Prime Minister! [laughs] She looked like a little miracle to my fellow countrymen.

Socialism surely had its weaknesses, but I think it would be fair to say that it always somehow encouraged a very high level of education, whether in Cuba, China, or the Soviet Union.

Definitely! The cultural background in any part of the country where I come from is very rich and profound. I didn't have to travel to Moscow or St. Petersburg to study music; it was right here in my little town. The only way you can become a true artist is by finding around you whatever is necessary for your

growth. You are right, I think, that one of the greatest achievements of socialism was education; it was at the highest level. In the Soviet Union, the most intellectual, the ones with the most knowledge weren't necessarily the wealthiest ones. To the contrary, the people who appreciated and created art were often the poor. In the Soviet Union, money didn't mean intellect. There are some things you cannot acquire with bank accounts.

Art is a great medium to transport one from reality to another realm.

My compatriots had to learn to escape reality through art. They had to struggle for material things. You never ask a Russian about happiness. They learned how to find happiness in unhappiness. I am sorry, I don't quite know how to explain it.

Russians are quite moody! Even when everything in their life is normal, they try to find something terribly wrong! [laughs] It may sound odd, but I am telling you, it actually is a very productive way for artists, because they cannot lead a normal human life, they put themselves into this extreme state of being and come up with great creativity.

In the world of opera reside powerful characters with tormented emotions. How do you delve into the depth of those emotions?

Any piece of art—literature, painting, music—is always expressive of extreme human feelings, whether it is grief or joy. When it comes to art, nothing can be simply ordinary. Russians are quite moody! Even when everything in their life is normal, they try to find something terribly wrong! [laughs] It may sound odd, but I am telling you, it actually is a very productive way for artists, because they cannot lead a normal human life, they put themselves into this extreme state of being and come up with great creativity.

Listening to you, I get the image of the artist as a creator for whom sadness is almost a norm.

I am talking about emotional discomfort... You have to find those emotions within you, wherever they are hiding, and bring them to the surface, to your voice. Only when you are at such a high degree of performance, you can touch people's heart. That's the only way you can communicate with the audience, and at that moment, art becomes classical.

In 1988, for your first trip outside the Soviet Union, you were escorted by two K.G.B. agents to France to take part in one of Europe's most prestigious musical competitions. Two female K.G.B. agents, that's quite some company!

Yes, yes, where did you hear that? For that trip, and a few others that followed, I was accompanied by K.G.B. agents, that was the Soviet way of traveling. [laughs] One of them

was an interpreter, spoke fluent French, and she even helped me with my repertoire. The second one, who was more attractive looking, wasn't particularly nice, and she was "the boss." When I was receiving my winning prize, an envelope with money, suddenly I heard "the boss" yelling offstage: "Hvorostovsky, cut the talk, just get here and give me the fucking money!" I think she took half of that money; that was also the Soviet way!

For the past decade, Great Britain has become your "home," but you retain strong musical contacts with Russia.

You know, I am one of the first "ambassadors" coming from the Soviet Union, with a certain Russian repertoire. I have been performing Russian music and I have been trying to make people all around the world

understand and appreciate the music that I love and grew up hearing.

I know you have a profound admiration for Ettore Bastianini, the great Italian baritone of the 1950s and '60s, and both of you, as the leading baritones of your generations, share a love for Verdi.

Verdi is not just dear to my heart, [he] is to everybody's. He was a genius! He was very classical yet at the same time very contemporary. Verdi is such a theatrical composer. He made the world of opera much more progressive and much better. We owe him a great deal.

While we are speaking about composers, why do you seem to shy away from Puccini? Do you think your voice is not ready yet for it or is it that his music doesn't touch you as much?

Puccini touches me too much! It is so hard to resist his music, but I have to because I am afraid it is going to ruin my voice. I love Puccini; I would love to do it but I don't think that my voice is quite there yet. Opera is an incredible meeting point of many genres including drama-theater. Hopefully soon, I will include Puccini in my repertoire. I just have to make sure I'll preserve my voice.

How is opera doing in the world of today? I mean, is it in danger or is it doing just fine?

Let me ask you one question: Are museums in danger? Let's say the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or the Louvre, or the Tate, do you think they are in danger? No, they aren't. Museums are meant to preserve and exhibit art. It is the same for opera. There will always

be people appreciating or wanting to learn more about opera. I believe in that. There will always be some people, somewhere, willing to go beyond that percentage of the chewing-gum population and go hear opera.

In some past interviews, when queried about the Russian audience, you said: "They are the one that I dread. They're too demanding. Each time, it is like delivering a report to them on the state of my soul." And referring to the American audience, your response was: "They give you a reaction right away. They don't keep it inside." Do you still feel that distinction in the way the two respond to your music?

Honestly, I am not sure. I am always on stage rather than on the other side, so I cannot quite tell. I can tell you what I feel, how-

ever. I feel that it is not necessarily the truth. We all live in our reality. We create our own reality. After my performance, even if only one person walks away with some idea of classical music, that's enough me. What happens in opera is really unique. Although, there are times when I feel painfully dissatisfied with myself.

"Painfully dissatisfied with yourself"? That is quite harsh, especially taking into consideration the incredible baritone that you have become! I would have assumed the contrary—that you are finally happy...

I guess it is painful because I care about what I am doing; I care about the best result. My father never complimented me on my work when I was a child. He does it now, but it isn't the same... I constantly feel I am that child again and that makes me dissatisfied with my work. I am never sure I am doing the right thing. I feel like I have to have people around me to reassure me that I am doing a good job. Don't get me wrong, I am happy the way things are, but I am still looking for my dream performance. I guess I am too much of an idealist about it. I know I am on the right [track] but I can never be sure. I study constantly. The moment I would feel satisfied with my work 100 percent, I think that would be the beginning of the end for me; that would be my death as an artist. ▼

On January 15, Dmitri Hvorostovsky performs with conductor Constantine Orbelian and the Philharmonia of Russia in a concert of Russian arias and songs from Russia's "war years" at 2pm, at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave, L.A. For tickets, log on to www.laopera.com