

A Russian at Home Away From Home

By CORI ELLISON

NEW YORK is not a bad second home for a young woman from St. Petersburg. These days, there is a teeming Russian émigré community here to make her feel at home and to supply friends, fans, nannies and interpreters. And there are bona fide Russian restaurants and grocery stores, so that when a visitor comes to breakfast, the hostess can set out a hunk of chewy black bread, some thick raspberry jam, a bowl of decent berries and a steaming pot of genuine, astringent Russian tea.

On a gray morning recently, the mezzo-soprano Olga Borodina poured tea in a sublet a stone's throw from the Metropolitan Opera, where she had sung a blazing *Carmen* the night before despite a nasty cold and fever. "I take all my vitamins, but still I caught something from Maksim," she said, pointing to her 3-year-old son, who circled the room clutching an oversize Pikachu doll. (Her older son, the 15-year-old Aleksei, remained in St. Petersburg, attending music school.) "Maksim was sick for three days," she added, "and I'm sick for three weeks."

Perhaps Ms. Borodina should think about giving up the sublets and investing in Manhattan real estate. This season alone, she sang eight Met performances of "*Carmen*," four of "*Aida*" and two of "*Samson et Dalila*." Next Sunday, she will join James Levine and the Met Orchestra and Chorus in the Verdi Requiem at Carnegie Hall. And on May 4, she and Mr. Levine will return to Carnegie Hall for a recital of songs by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Mahler and Falla.

Ms. Borodina, 37, first trod the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House in 1992, when, as a little-known performer with the visiting Kirov Opera, she delivered memorable performances of Marina in "*Boris Godunov*" and smaller roles in "*The Queen of Spades*" and "*The Fiery Angel*." By the time of her official Met debut in 1997, also as Marina, she had become an international luminary. On that occasion, Bernard Holland, in *The New York Times*, called her "a majestic presence, with an unforced beauty of

From modest beginnings, Olga Borodina has built a brilliant career that is still expanding.

sound and great command."

Since Ms. Borodina's return to the Met in "*Samson et Dalila*" on the opening night of the 1998-99 season, she has been a mainstay of the company's mezzo wing and a bankable star. She will sing in "*Samson*" and the Verdi Requiem on the Met's tour of Japan this spring and will return to New York next season as Eboli in "*Don Carlo*." The Met will also be the scene of her first Didon in "*Les Troyens*," in 2003.

Not bad for someone who was twice refused admission to the Leningrad Conservatory. "I never had any big expectations," she said, her classic Slavic face looking simultaneously plain and beautiful. "When I was in high school, I thought if I were ever accepted in the chorus of the Maryinsky Theater, I would be ecstatic. But my desire gradually became stronger. And the will of God played a big role."

Born and bred in a drab proletarian pocket of Leningrad (now, as before, St. Petersburg), Ms. Borodina was the only child of two enthusiastic amateur musicians who were, by trade, engineers at the former Red October (now Bekker) piano factory. After singing in a children's chorus for several years, she was determined to study at the Leningrad Conservatory.

She gained acceptance only on her third try, but by 1987, her third year there, she had been recruited by the Kirov Opera. She made her debut as Siebel in "*Faust*" and filled other supporting roles during Yuri Temirkanov's final season as artistic director. In 1988, Mr. Temirkanov passed the reins to his longtime assistant, Valery Gergiev, and neither the company nor Ms. Borodina's life would ever be the same.



Nick Briggs

The mezzo-soprano Olga Borodina has become a regular visitor and bankable star at the Met.

Even in a nation where formidable mezzos spring up like wild mushrooms, Mr. Gergiev recognized Ms. Borodina's exceptional gifts. But he proved a stern taskmaster as well as an energetic booster. He insisted that Ms. Borodina take on longer, heftier roles than she felt ready to do, like Marfa in "*Khovanshchina*" and Marina in "*Boris Godunov*," both bulwarks of the Russian mezzo repertory.

"He forced me to work," she said. "He told me in a strong way that it's not too early for me to sing certain things. 'Let me make the decision whether or not you can sing this,' he would say. And when I would finally sing the parts he wanted me to sing, he would say, 'I told you so.' And now he calls me a vocal monster."

To a great extent, the trajectory of Ms. Borodina's early career paralleled the Kirov's booming fortunes, and Mr. Gergiev's. Disseminating the rich Russian operatic heritage in exchange for hard Western currency, the workaholic maestro initiated extensive touring, telecasts and a landmark series of Philips recordings of Russian operas. But all of these,

along with Ms. Borodina's victories in the Barcelona and Rosa Ponselle vocal competitions, soon gained her a strong foothold in the West, and she did not need to cling to the Kirov's coattails for long. In 1992, she made her debut at the Bastille Opera in Paris in "*Boris Godunov*" and bowed at Covent Garden in London in "*Samson et Dalila*." Her partner on that occasion and in many subsequent performances was Plácido Domingo.

"I was immediately amazed by the beauty of her voice, and by the total singer and musician she is," said Mr. Domingo, who both sang opposite her in "*Samson*" and conducted her in "*Aida*" this season at the Met. "I'm full of admiration for the color of her voice, her effortless technique, her expression and her dedication. And she is the most beautiful human being you can imagine."

The Russian operas on which Ms. Borodina cut her teeth, like "*The Queen of Spades*," "*The Czar's Bride*," "*Yevgeny Onegin*," "*War and Peace*" and "*The Stone Guest*," demand both full-hearted, ele-

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