

## ■ CONCERT

Midori's intelligent Bruch

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Prokofiev's First Symphony

# A mezzo with Russia in her soul

**OPERA:** The singer Olga Borodina may have carved out a truly international reputation, but her heart remains in St Petersburg, she tells **John Allison**

When we met, Olga Borodina was between two roles at New York's Metropolitan Opera. A long way from home in St Petersburg, she seemed completely at ease, and not simply because of the support she receives from New York's thriving émigré community during her regular sojourns in Manhattan. Of all the Russian singers of her thirtysomething generation, Borodina is one of the few who has remained true to her roots while becoming really international, in terms of both what she performs and how she does it.

Borodina's career has a cosmopolitan flavour still rare among female Russian singers today. Many others are heard mainly in Russian parts, but with Carmen and Saint-Saëns's *Dalila* among her signature roles, she has quickly established herself as one of the leading exponents of the French mezzo repertory.

The big Verdi roles such as Amneris and Eboli are also well suited to her rich, liquid tone, yet she is not content to stick with what she knows: tomorrow, when she gives a recital as part of the Barbican's *Great Performers* series, she will be mixing Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death* with arias by Purcell, Handel, Pergolesi and Vivaldi among others, music she has not performed much before.

This is the kind of music much smaller voices have appropriated with success these days, so why the risk of a new idiom? "Because I want to! I know that other singers may do *arie antiche* better than me, but I've got my own personal view of these songs," she says. "I've done so many recitals in London, I've sung just about everything else that suits my voice — it's time for something

new. I do like dramatic challenges, but occasionally it's nice to take a holiday from them."

Borodina's typically Slavonic features radiate inner calm. She prefers not to sing even the greatest mezzo roles if she does not identify with them personally. Take *Marina*, in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, one of her early Kirov Opera successes but a role that the conductor Valery Gergiev had to talk her into singing. "She's evil and arrogant I just can't connect with her — I'm a much softer personality. I felt

Even over the six or seven years since her major Western debuts, her voice has changed and with it the roles she sings. She says she is now "too old" for Olga in *Eugene Onegin*, but relishes Tchaikovsky's songs. "Tchaikovsky is one of the hardest composers to sing — it's got less to do with the voice than the soul, the heart. A fundamental, tragic loneliness runs through so much of his music."

Borodina was born in St Petersburg to parents who worked at the famous Red October piano factory, which since the collapse of the Soviet Union has reverted to its original name of Bekker, synonymous with top-quality instruments long before the Revolution. It is to St Petersburg she goes whenever she needs to recharge her batteries. "People who leave Russia also leave something of their soul behind. Once it's in you it is impossible to give it up, and I need to nurture that connection. When I'm not singing well it's because I'm not making that connection. Having a beautiful voice is important, but first there must be that sense of completeness."

Borodina's exciting plans include singing with Dmitry Hvorostovsky in *The Tsar's Bride* in San Francisco in 2001, the first major production of Rimsky-Korsakov's opera in decades. It is an opera she loves and is keen to introduce to the West, but otherwise she is reluctant to discuss her long-term plans. "I take it as it flows. I believe that the faster you reach the top the faster you fall. Of course I've got goals, but I don't want to be a big star. My two sons must come first — first I'm a mother, then a singer."

● Olga Borodina is in recital at the Barbican Hall (0171-638 8891) tomorrow

‘My sons come first. First I’m a mother, then a singer’

there was no way I could sing her, but with time I found how to do it. *Marfa* [in Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina*] is different, and I do believe that Russians sing her best — you have to have suffered a lot to understand *Marfa*."

**M**ezzos are seldom cast as the heroines, but that does not worry Borodina. "I like them to be nice, but if not, at least strong. *Dalila* is an interesting character — a very strong lady like me! My *Carmen* is different from the stereotype, and certainly not a prostitute. She's proud, she loves men of course, as all women do, but she's very special."



"Having a beautiful voice is important," says Olga Borodina, "but first there must be that sense of completeness". Barbican audiences can judge her tomorrow