

Olga Borodina has been described as a vocal monster with 'the kind of voice that could break glass'. She talks to Peter Culshaw

'I try not to act like a spoilt diva'

Nikolai Kornev, director of the St Petersburg Chamber Choir, is telling me about his recording of Rachmaninov's *Vespers*, which won a Grammy a few years ago and featured the Russian mezzo-soprano Olga Borodina. "The original singer had to be replaced, and luckily we found Olga. The musicians and singers had to sing and play much, much louder, because of the sheer power of Olga's voice. She has the kind of voice that could break glass or blow out candles. But somehow she combines this raw power with amazing purity and sensitivity."

Valery Gergiev, the charismatic and workaholic director of the Kirov Opera, called her a "vocal monster". When I meet Borodina in an elegantly dilapidated room backstage at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, I ask whether she liked this description.

"I think he meant it as a compliment," she says. "Perhaps it is because he is afraid of me."

I tell her I suspect she may be the only person that the notoriously ruthless Gergiev is afraid of. She smiles and replies: "Perhaps you are right."

The 37-year-old singer does acknowledge a huge debt to Gergiev, however, as he plucked her from the Leningrad Conservatory to take major roles at the Kirov in the late Eighties, just before the collapse of the Soviet system.

The Conservatory had rejected her twice because "they didn't hear anything special, but Gergiev did. I was very lazy then but he really pushed me and forced me to work." Victor Borovsky, a historian of Russian theatre, told me: "Gergiev can be talked of in the same breath as Diaghilev. He saved the Kirov when it was in trouble, but perhaps his greatest invention is Olga Borodina."

The two remain close – Gergiev picked Borodina as the only Russian soloist for this year's recording of Verdi's *Requiem*, and when the Kirov's season in London this summer was in trouble and picking up some rare bad reviews (Gergiev admitted that he had been over-ambitious), Borodina appeared as Eboli in Verdi's *Don Carlos* in spite of a bad cold. "She didn't have to do it," says Borovsky, who watched from the wings. "It was a heroic performance that showed real character. She risked her voice for Gergiev."

Although she has a contract for singing three times a year at the



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Mariinsky and returns to St Petersburg as much as she can, Borodina is now a global star. Her triumphs this year include Zeffirelli's *Carmen* at the New York Met and the lead in Saint-Saëns's *Samson and Delilah* in San Francisco, a role that she has made her own.

She will only take on characters

she can empathise with. "Carmen was a normal woman, not a prostitute," she says. "She happened to fall in love with a weak man. And a weak man can only disorientate, distract and finally disgust a strong woman."

This is said with some feeling, and I ask whether she is speaking

from experience. "I have two ex-husbands. We are still..." she pauses. "good friends." She speaks melodious English with a luscious Russian accent. The effect is like being slowly drowned in honey.

Borodina was born in a drab suburb of St Petersburg, the only child of two enthusiastic amateur

musicians who worked at the Red October (now Bekker) piano factory. Her son Alexei, 15, attends music school in St Petersburg, while she takes her other son, Maxim, three, on tour with a nanny – "The hardest thing for me is being a mother and a singer."

But, she says, it keeps her down

to earth – "I try not to act like a spoilt diva" – and she turns down many opportunities to exploit her fame. "I have enough. You will not be seeing me posing in *Playboy* magazine as some other singers have."

I hadn't visited St Petersburg since the mid-Eighties, and the

changes are obvious – from the foreign cars and Pizza Huts to *non-veaux riches* nightclubs. But is the music scene healthier than under the Soviet regime? "I believe St Petersburg is still the best city for music in the world," she says.

Huge state subsidies have been cut, but there's more freedom. As Borovsky says, referring to the Soviet era, "a prison, even with beautiful music, is still a prison".

The main problem is financial. "It has been difficult to keep the opera house going," Borodina says. "Although compared to the West tickets are cheap (about 300 roubles, or £7), that's a lot for the average Russian. Many people save up for a month or do without food to come to the Mariinsky."

What ambitions are unfulfilled? With Gergiev planning a *Ring*

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cycle, can she see herself singing Wagner? "I think my voice is more lyrical than dramatic, so if I sing German I prefer Mahler."

Indeed, she will be singing some Mahler this week at the Barbican, as well as de Falla's Spanish songs and some Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky, Russian composers naturally close to her heart.

After the interview, I run into Gergiev in one of the warren-like corridors of the Mariinsky. I ask what he meant by calling Borodina a "vocal monster".

"It was a compliment actually, and I'm only a little afraid of her," he laughs. "What I really meant was that there are many good, even great singers. But there are very few with her dedication, who can understand a score as quickly as her. To be a great singer you need to be physically, mentally, spiritually very strong – perhaps even to be a monster."

Olga Borodina sings at the Barbican on Wednesday (020 7382 7211). She is also featured on the new CDs of *Aida* (Teidec), conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt, and Verdi's *Requiem* (Philips), conducted by Gergiev