

## In Unison

### Sparks fly when opera stars Ildar Abdrazakov and Olga Borodina share the stage.

By Galina Stolyarova

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Mezzo-soprano Olga Borodina and bass Ildar Abdrazakov have plenty in common. Both started out at St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theater, rapidly rose to worldwide fame and star at Milan's La Scala and New York's Metropolitan Opera. On their off time, the singers are also a married couple, juggling family life with singularly hectic schedules.

Earlier this month, Borodina and Abdrazakov gave their first joint interview in Russia in their St. Petersburg apartment, which overlooks the opera house that launched their careers. Borodina's cozy study is dotted with opera posters, diplomas and photographs. Pointing out several large suitcases in the corner, the couple joked that they are hardly ever empty. These days, Borodina performs in St. Petersburg no more than three times a year, while Abdrazakov has not appeared in a Mariinsky production since 2001. So rare are their visits to their alma mater that many old Mariinsky acquaintances were surprised to see the singers this time around.

Abdrazakov recalled how a colleague once greeted him with condolences, assuming that his long absence meant that he had returned to his homeland of Bashkortostan and was suffering from a drinking problem.

In fact, the singer had been opening the La Scala opera season as Moise in Gioachino Rossini's biblical opera "Moise et Pharaon" under the baton of Riccardo Muti. Next year, he will sing in Charles Gounod's "Faust" at the Metropolitan Opera, and, in the 2006-07 season, he will star in Jacques Offenbach's "The Tales of Hoffmann" at the Madrid Opera.

While Borodina knitted her brows at the story, commenting that she wished that other people would stop gossiping for once, Abdrazakov dismissed the misunderstanding with an apologetic smile, blaming himself for not performing often enough at home.

Hailing from Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan, Abdrazakov had his first music lessons there and studied at the local Institute of the Arts. His Mariinsky debut came in 1998 in the title role of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro." The following year, he won a host of major prizes at Russian competitions. Critics dripped with praise for his velvet timbre and impressive range. But his international reputation was sealed when he was awarded the Grand Prix at the Fifth Maria Callas International Singing Competition "Nuove Voci per Verdi" in Italy in 2000.

The victory brought him multiple lucrative contracts and the opportunity to sing in works rarely performed in Russia, including Vincenzo Bellini's classic "Norma" and Rossini's "Moise et Pharaon," "Semiramide," "Il Turco in Italia" and "L'Italiana in Algeri." Now, at the age of 28, he reckons that he has sung more often at La Scala than at the Mariinsky, where he is seldom invited to perform these days.

"It is partly because here [in Russia] they plan short-term, and would normally announce a new production only a month in advance, while in Europe they plan several seasons ahead," Abdrazakov explained in reference to his rare appearances.

I used to just sign on to everything because I loved everything that I was offered, and then it turned out I would get so busy that I wouldn't come home for nine months," he added. "I have learned from that, and am now always looking for a balance."

In order to see more of each other, the singers try to work together as much as possible. "It isn't easy, since Ildar sings a lot of Mozart and Rossini, while I am doing a lot of Verdi," Borodina explained. "But we have already gotten to the level where the managers of the world's most



Metropolitan Opera



AP  
Abdrazakov recently performed with Hei-Kyung Hong in the Metropolitan Opera's production of "Don Giovanni."

...and we have already gotten to the level where the managers of the most acclaimed venues ask us what we would like to perform, on what date, and with which conductor, so that we can put forward suggestions."

Borodina joined the Mariinsky company in 1987, and made her international debut in Camille Saint-Saens' "Samson et Dalila" at the Royal Opera Covent Garden in 1992. The production, which also starred Placido Domingo, was the start of an impressive international career. Today, at 40, she is famed for her deep, creamy tone and for her ability to switch between dramatic and lyrical roles.

In demand in multiple countries at once, the pair -- who have an 18-month-old son named Vladimir-Amir -- dream of being cast in the same production. Neither could remember when they had last shared the stage, finally coming to the conclusion that it had not been for several months. This fall, however, Abdrazakov is scheduled to play Escamillo opposite Borodina in Georges Bizet's "Carmen" at both the Metropolitan Opera and the Seville Opera Festival in Spain.

"We are trying to arrange things so that we sing in the same production, or at least in the same companies ... so that our family is able to stay together for longer," Abdrazakov said. Due, perhaps, to their real-life relationship, the couple is known for creating sparks onstage.

Recently at the Metropolitan Opera, Borodina played Isabella in "L'Italiana in Algeri" opposite Italian bass Ferruccio Furlanetto. But on the last night, Abdrazakov stepped in to play Furlanetto's role. In the wake of their inspired appearance, several other companies invited the singers to reprise the roles.

The couple also share a similar musical taste, refraining from taking part in experimental, modernist productions. "The audiences, as well as the performers, shouldn't be forced to spend their time at the theater trying to figure out what the director wanted to say," Borodina said. "It just gives you a major headache."

Abdrazakov concurred, recalling his performance in a radical Italian production of "Semiramide" earlier this year. "I personally find conceptually charged shows emotionally tiring," he said. "When everything is cubic or round, and there are barely two colors involved, it is difficult to maintain a convincing stage presence. Special effects shouldn't be a substitute for drama or the tension between the singers onstage."

Keen to put her views into practice, Borodina said that she was considering trying her hand at directing. "Having seen so much, and having performed so much, I immediately see what is going to work and what is not," she said. "And when I point these details out to directors, they agree, and the shows benefit from it. I feel prepared to direct an opera, and I hope to be able to make it happen."

However, despite her directorial ambitions, Borodina has no plans to move away from Russia. The singer spoke in emotional, rather than practical terms about the family's decision not to emigrate.

"We all have too much of a Russian personality," she said. "This country is a very spiritual place, and we get nostalgic when we are away for too long. It is the only place for the heart to recover."

Although Borodina's younger sons Vladimir-Amir and 6-year-old Maxim always travel with the couple, her eldest, 17-year-old Alexei, is preparing to study singing and choir directing at the St. Petersburg Conservatory this year. Alexei insists that his two younger brothers spend more time in Russia, Borodina said.

"He says that it's important for a Russian person to spend a lot of time in Russia to absorb its culture and recharge their energy, and we all completely share his view," she said. "Ildar and I travel a lot, but neither of us sees ourselves living abroad permanently. We would always be alien there."



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One of the Metropolitan Opera's most sought-after mezzo-sopranos, Borodina starred opposite Earle Patriarco in Rossini's "L'Italiana in Algeri" earlier this year