

The Gergiev effect

The great Russian conductor is leading St Petersburg's legendary Mariinsky Theatre into a new golden era. We visit him on site

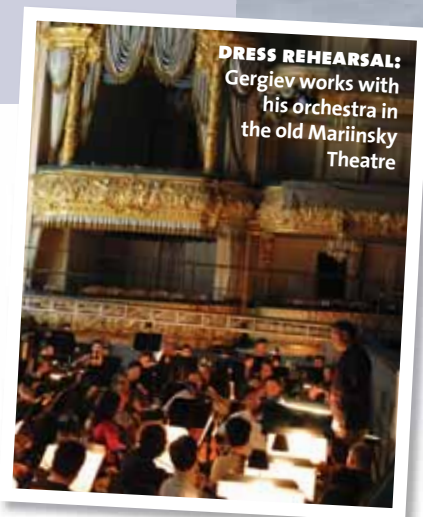
WORDS: DANIEL JAFFE PHOTOGRAPHY: NINA LARGE



Valery Gergiev exudes energy; even after a punishing two days of rehearsal and a gala performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tsar's Bride* at the Mariinsky Theatre, followed by dining and toasting until 4.30 this morning. Today he entrances his audience yet again, this time a highly attentive gathering of students and staff at St Petersburg University, with a performance of Act II of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Away from the trappings of beautifully crafted scenery and indeed the sumptuous auditorium of the Mariinsky Theatre, one is all the more aware of the quality of Gergiev's conducting. The maestro himself is lithe tension, cat-like grace one moment, ferocious activity the next. However it's not Gergiev's antics, but the resulting music which seizes attention. Even in this hall's confined acoustic, Gergiev is somehow managing the roiling textures of

Wagner's ocean of music, ensuring that it never overwhelms his soloists yet allowing it to speak as powerfully as it should.

At the end, Gergiev, his soloists and orchestra receive a standing ovation and several bouquets. But Gergiev has to leave quickly: he has a flight to catch to Moscow. At his invitation, I follow him out of the hall into a mild December day – this being St Petersburg there's melting snow and treacherous ice to cross before we clamber into the awaiting car. Beside the driver is a burly man – either Gergiev's assistant or his bodyguard, there is no time to find out; our car sets off in the wake of an escorting police car



which sounds its siren. 'So much noise,' says Gergiev. 'They don't need this, they just need to get to the airport.'

Possibly he is concerned the siren will disturb the interview – this is my only chance to speak with him face to face while in St Petersburg. His manner is friendly but, from the way he sinks in his seat, Gergiev is clearly quite exhausted. After so much inspired musical activity, one has to pinch oneself and remember that Gergiev is not only one of the world's leading conductors, but also the artistic and general director of the Mariinsky Theatre – therefore responsible for any triumphs and disasters at that institution. Under his



VALERY GERGIEV: has been artistic and general director of the Mariinsky Theatre for 17 years

FEATURE **VALERY GERGIEV**

GERGIEV: A LIFE IN BRIEF

BORN: 2 May, 1953 in Moscow.

Raised in Vladikavkaz, Ossetia

STUDIED: Leningrad Conservatory (1972-76) conducting with Ilya Musin
1977 first prize, Herbert von Karajan Conducting Competition, 1977

Assistant conductor to Temirkanov at Kirov Theatre, Leningrad

DEBUT: 1978 with Kirov conducting Prokofiev's *War and Peace*

1988 succeeds Temirkanov as chief conductor and artistic director at the Kirov, elected by Kirov musicians
1991 makes European and American opera debuts, respectively at Bayerische Staatsoper with Boris Godunov, and San Francisco Opera with *War and Peace*

1992 Kirov regains pre-Soviet name of Mariinsky Theatre; Gergiev launches Stars of the White Nights Festival, St Petersburg

PRINCIPAL: 1995 principal conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic

1996 appointed artistic and general director Mariinsky Theatre by the Russian government. He launches Peace for the Caucasus festival, and Red Sea Festival at Eilat

1997 Principal guest conductor, Metropolitan Opera, New York

MARIINSKY ACADEMY: 1998 founds Mariinsky Academy for Young Singers, sponsored by Alberto Vilar

2003 speaker for the BP Annual Lecture in the British Museum, taking as his theme 'Arts and Culture: Counterbalancing World Aggression'

leadership, the Mariinsky has over the past 17 years surpassed the once mighty Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow as Russia's leading centre of musical excellence, and seems likely to stay there for decades to come. It is extraordinary that on top of this achievement Gergiev holds the posts of principal conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic and of principal guest conductor of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Since 1997 he's had a highly cordial relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic, with which he has made live recordings of Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies due to be released by Philips.

BEHIND THE SCENES

There's nothing new in Gergiev leading a frantic schedule and having a lot on his mind. However, there is now a clearer sense of forethought and preparation in all he and indeed the Mariinsky company are doing.

Under Gergiev's leadership the Mariinsky Theatre has surpassed the once mighty Bolshoi as the centre for music excellence

'We regularly do concert performances at the University before we prepare an opera production,' he explains when I ask him about the *Tristan* I have just seen. Each act of the opera is performed on its own day with different soloists. 'It gives the singers some oxygen before we go into production, to perform to an audience and learn from that experience,' he says. It is also a useful trying ground for new singers who are trained by Gergiev's sister, Larissa, at the Mariinsky Academy of Young Singers, enabling Gergiev to assess them as possible members for the second cast or as understudies. He is careful to

point out that this does not mean his soloists are trained into a Gergiev-style performance through these pre-production try-outs: 'In these concert performances, the singers can't see me,' he explains, referring to the fact that his soloists have to sing with their back to him; 'so they have to listen to the music and work out how they become part of the performance with the orchestra.' Precisely by performing in these concerts, his soloists learn to stand on their own feet and not become over-reliant on Gergiev's direction.

Concert performances, in fact, are soon to become a more regular fixture for the ▶





'IN THE PAST TEN YEARS OUR BEST FRIEND HAS BEEN THE GREAT MUSIC WE HAVE BEEN PERFORMING'

Gergiev says that works such as Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tsar's Bride* bring him and his performers together.



POINT OF ACTION: Gergiev consults his stage director while rehearsing *Tsar's Bride*

**VALERY GERGIEV:
RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS**



RIMSKY-KORSAKOV
THE LEGEND OF THE INVISIBLE CITY OF KITEZH
Soloists; Kirov Opera & Orchestra/Valery Gergiev
Philips 462 2252 £39.99
The opera that saw Gergiev bring the Mariinsky to London for the first time.



STRAVINSKY
RITE OF SPRING
St Petersburg Kirov Orchestra/Valery Gergiev
Philips 468 0352 £12.99
One of the most hair-raising performances ever of this seminal masterpiece.



SHOSTAKOVICH
SYMPHONY NO. 4
Kirov Orchestra/Valery Gergiev
Philips 475 6190 £12.99
Who better to make sense of Shostakovich's most ferociously untamed symphonic masterpiece?



TCHAIKOVSKY
Symphonies Nos 4-6
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra/Valery Gergiev, Philips
No. 4: 475 6316; No. 5: 462 9052; No. 6: 475 6317 (separate discs)
Gergiev's live recording of Symphony No. 5 reissued plus new live recordings of Nos 4 & 6 due to be released 7 March

■ TO ORDER THESE DISCS SEE PAGE 94

Mariinsky company, thanks to the highly ambitious refurbishment and extension plans being executed over the next three years. The Mariinsky Theatre, magnificent as it is with its glorious auditorium decorated in stucco, blue and gold and its huge stage, has the smallest backstage facilities of any major opera house in the world. Part of the problem is that immediately behind the stage's back wall is one of the city's many canals. In the past, all the scenery has been prepared in a studio situated above the auditorium, then posted through a slot immediately above the stage in order to be set up; then, production over, the scenery would be rolled up and stored under the stage.

Now the design for a new theatre, to be built on the opposite side of the canal, has been approved – a strikingly modern concept of golden-hued latticework constructed of steel girders, cable and glass with aluminium cladding, due to open by the autumn of 2008. A bridge will link the old and new theatres, and some of the space within the old Mariinsky rearranged to enable it to receive scenery from the new theatre (or Mariinsky II, as the company prefer to call it). The old Mariinsky (Mariinsky I) is also to have total rewiring and replacement of its air conditioning and water supply; and, most importantly, it is to have the orchestra pit moved back under the stage where it had been before the renovations of the 1970s. It is hoped by doing so that the Mariinsky's

once admired acoustic will be restored with singers no longer having to bellow over the chasm between themselves and the audience.

LONDON CALLING

And that brings us to the concert hall. This, known as Mariinsky III, is being built on the site of the Mariinsky's former workshop (which disastrously burned down during 2003) and is to open by June 2006, well in time for the company to use it during the temporary closure of Mariinsky I from that autumn.

Semi-staged performances have, in fact, been done most successfully by the Mariinsky, as Londoners will remember from ten years ago when the company first came and gave highly characterful performances of such Rimsky-Korsakov operas as *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* and *Kashchey the Immortal* in the Barbican Hall. Indeed, the Mariinsky are due to return to the Barbican late in February to celebrate that decade with a repeat performance of *Kitezh*. There will also be an evening of two shorter Stravinsky works, *Oedipus Rex* and *Les noces*, the latter work being 'a very important part of our present-day tradition'. And then finally there's Shostakovich's rarely-heard mad-cap ('phantasmagorical', Gergiev insists) opera *The Nose*. Gergiev sees *The Nose*, one of Shostakovich's 'most populated' operas, as an excellent vehicle for several of the younger singers in the Mariinsky. 'It's fairly





September 3, when news broke of the massacre by terrorists of young children at School Number One in Beslan. Gergiev, who has a personal tie to the region, having grown up and studied music in Vladikavkaz just 20km away, is reluctant, or perhaps unable, to go into any detail about that recording: 'It was one of the worst days of my life. It was pure coincidence that I did the Tchaikovsky Six that day: it had been planned a year in advance, that I should record that symphony live on that

London's Coliseum in November, culminating in a fiery yet strikingly detailed performance of Tchaikovsky's Sixth; this ended, at Gergiev's request, with no applause, leaving the music's candidly bleak ending to resonate unimpeded.) 'But I don't want to patronise the people of Beslan. They have seen the very worst of human behaviour; it's one thing for terrorists to kill soldiers, but to attack children at their school, some of them as young as three, on that most special day – that is the worst thing, the

Tchaikovsky's Sixth was recorded when news broke of the Beslan massacre

day. But I didn't know what to do. I didn't know if I could go ahead and perform that work on that day: not to perform it would have given me terrible pain, and to perform it would also be painful.'

BESLAN SUPPORT

So, given his strongly ambivalent feelings, why did Gergiev go ahead? 'I think there is a

strength in the human spirit, which enables us to go on even when we are faced with such a tragedy. I think something like that made me go ahead and conduct that performance. I did not intend to make a political statement or to make any kind of statement by doing that performance. But it seemed, and many people agree about this, that Tchaikovsky's last symphony was an appropriate choice for this terrible event. I cannot tell you anything about that performance, because I don't remember

anything about it. I just did

the performance I could at that time.'

I assure Gergiev that I would like to move onto other things, but can he say something about how the Mariinsky Theatre's cultural programme for Beslan is progressing?

'I want to do what we can, but quietly,' he says. 'I don't want to do something like a big concert, or say something which will appear in all the papers as a major piece of news. But we had to do something immediately for Beslan because it was in the news and we had to do something about it at that moment.' (That 'something' was, of course, the concert held at

lowest that terrorism has ever reached. And the people in Beslan have had to face this. So I want to give them something, however small, and give it to them quietly, in a modest way. We have to enable Beslan to build something positive to put against the terrible evil they have had. Humankind is not all evil – they can also do some great and wonderful things: not just music, but sport and film – all these things are important. So we are offering what the Mariinsky can offer, and if any child or anyone in Beslan wants it they can have it.'

Alas, we are approaching the airport and there is scarcely time for Gergiev to update me about his forthcoming Barbican season. 'There is still a lot to do. There are maybe ten works which are known in Russian opera, even in this country – say *Boris Godunov*, *Eugene Onegin*, *Queen of Spades*... But then there are ten more works which audiences should know about. *The Tsar's Bride*, which I conducted yesterday – that is a fantastic opera. There were members of the audience who were crying when Marfa [played by Anna Netrebko] sang her final aria. People need to know that Rimsky-Korsakov is a great composer. I am bringing up young singers on these works. The past ten years has been largely about friendship, and the best friend is the great music we have been performing.' And with that, he shakes my hand warmly, and leaves the car to catch his plane. ■

UK APPEARANCES

SYMPHONY HALL, BIRMINGHAM
Tue 22 February, 7.30pm Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 5; plus works by Wagner
 Box office: +44 (0)121 780 3333
www.symphonymhall.co.uk

BARBICAN HALL, LONDON
Wed 23 February, 7.00pm Rimsky-Korsakov *The Invisible City of Kitezh*
Fri 25 February, 7.30pm Stravinsky *Les noces; Oedipus Rex*
Sat 26 February, 7.30pm Shostakovich *The Nose*
 Box office: 0845 120 7550 (UK only)
www.barbican.org.uk

close to a circus,' he says of the opera; 'Amazing difficulties for everyone in the orchestra, including the percussionist. And also for the singers and for the chorus. We had a very successful premiere of *Nose* last season, with a large group of young singers who went through this experience in an early stage in their career.

It was one of my goals that they should go through a production of *Nose* and so be equipped with a better understanding of the language of 20th-century opera. We're bringing some of those young singers to London, so London's public and critics can judge for themselves the future of Mariinsky.'

Much attention will also be excited by the release of Gergiev's live recordings of Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies, recorded with the Vienna Philharmonic. The Sixth Symphony in particular will inevitably bear the weight of the date it was recorded,

LITHE TENSION: Gergiev's conducting style is unorthodox, but undeniably effective

