

Baton with tsar quality

INTERVIEW Valery Gergiev's passion for Russian opera is insatiable, finds **Nina Large**

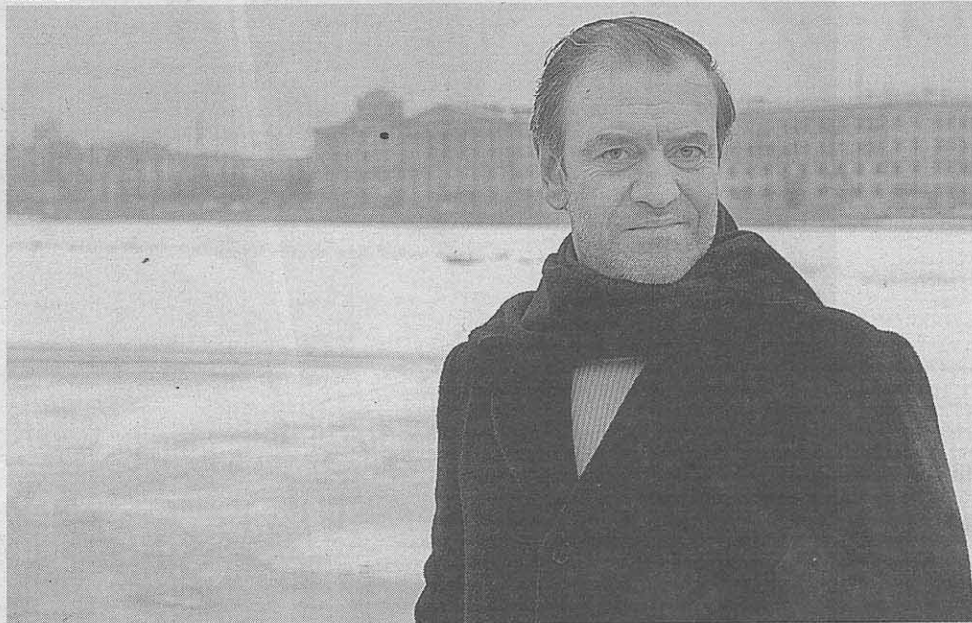
"THERE is never a dull atmosphere here. It sparks," Valery Gergiev says with a somewhat tired but friendly smile. It may be lam at the Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg but the day's work is still very much in progress — staff are buzzing all around and meetings are taking place as if it were a normal Tuesday afternoon.

Gergiev is now 51, but he was just 25 when he started conducting performances at the Maryinsky, or Kirov, as it was then known. He was appointed artistic and general director in 1996. Since then he has become something of a national hero, propelling the company back into the limelight — it performs several concerts at the Barbican in London next week — that had been occupied by the Bolshoi Opera in Moscow for years.

His decisions have not always been greeted with delight, but colleagues attest that however hard he pushes others, he pushes himself harder. It's undoubtedly his strongly focused vision that has steered the company to such success. He is quite simply the oxygen of the Maryinsky. A frenzy of activity is whipped up as he blazes around the house — never without a bevy of people at his heels, each one needing a moment with "Maestro". It's hard to imagine how he fits in the Rotterdam Philharmonic (where he's principal conductor) and the Metropolitan Opera in New York (principal guest conductor.)

When you sit in the Maryin-

NINA LARGE



Russian soul man: Valery Gergiev has breathed new life into the Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg

sky auditorium, resplendent in its deep-blue velvet and gold, it's overwhelming to think of all the musical battles won and lost on this stage. Verdi composed *La Forza del Destino* for the house in 1862 and the first Russian school of opera effectively began here with Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* in 1836. Then there were countless premieres from Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Stravinsky (who was born just across the street).

Gergiev has championed the work of many of these art-

ists, particularly his fellow Russians, with insatiable curiosity. In 1989, shortly after his appointment as artistic director, he staged a Mussorgsky festival featuring all the composer's operas. Similar events followed that reached into the furthest corners of Prokofiev and Rimsky-Korsakov's work. "Only a handful of Russian operas, maybe *Onegin*, *Queen of Spades*, more recently *War and Peace*, are really famous. But there are so many other great operas which people need to know about," he insists.

Thanks to the Maryinsky's worldwide tours, audiences from La Scala to the Edinburgh Festival have also had the chance to discover some of these rarities. Back in 1995 Gergiev took a semi-staged production of Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* to the Barbican. It was still the early years of Gergiev's reign, the Soviet regime wasn't long gone and the Russian economy was in crisis. "It was a huge deal for us," he recalls. "Big emotion, big importance, big effort and big logistical problems — but it worked somehow."

With financial support from organisations such as the London-based Maryinsky Theatre Trust the company's fortunes have certainly changed, but if you missed *Kitezh* back then you have the chance to see it again when the Barbican celebrates the tenth anniversary of that first visit with three concert performances including *Kitezh*, Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* and *Les Noces*, plus Shostakovich's *The Nose*.

"There is something about *Kitezh* which is even more Russian than other operas: the colour and sound of the chorus, the Russian text itself — there is a certain sadness, a mystical

power which I adore," he says. *The Nose*, Shostakovich's scarcely performed first opera, was condemned by one critic as "an anarchist's hand grenade" after its premiere at the Maryinsky in 1930, but Gergiev is confident that even the most experienced London listeners will be enlivened by these works. Just as English troupes have a certain way with Britten or Purcell, it is a thrilling experience to see Gergiev and his company performing their native repertoire.

"Everyone who sings these works really understands what

"Everyone who sings these works really understands what they mean"

they mean. It's not just about the tempo or the rhythm — some words are even difficult to translate and yet we feel a lot about them and so the right character comes out."

Young talent has become an increasing priority for Gergiev in recent years as his founding of the Maryinsky Academy of Young Singers, run by his sister Larissa, and the Youth Orchestra attest. "So many young people disappear before they even begin to fulfil their potential, so I really like to do it. It's a process full of joy but of course you can sometimes be very disappointed when someone doesn't develop into what you expected."

He is also investing in the Maryinsky's future with the building of two new spaces — another opera and ballet auditorium to be known as Maryin-

sky II and a new concert hall, Maryinsky III, due to open in 2008. The extension will be built just opposite the original theatre on the other side of the Kryukov canal. It will be a vast geometric casing of gold-coloured glass and steel, reflecting 21st-century progressive Russia, with a bridge linking it to the imperial past.

Gergiev's devotion to his country was highlighted recently by his work with the children of Beslan after last year's terrorist attack on a school, and a fund-raising concert at the Coliseum in London. Brought up in Ossetia himself, he clearly felt the atrocity acutely and is not keen to talk much about it. "I acted simply. Today too much is said about projects, roles and plans. When it comes to a tragedy of this size people shouldn't talk; they should just do. I would much rather be anonymous and help but it's very hard in the short term."

As he considers the past decade Gergiev's face draws into a frown of concentration, his remarkable energy boils and bubbles intensely just beneath the surface. "I love the balance of the theatre and its history, the city and its history and the country and its history — all those complexities. It just works," he says. "Perhaps that's why we can understand so many of these Russian operas better than others."

● The Maryinsky Theatre concerts at the Barbican (020-7638 8891) include Rimsky-Korsakov's *Kitezh* (Feb 23); Stravinsky's *Les Noces* and *Oedipus Rex* (Feb 25); Shostakovich's *The Nose* (Feb 26)

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