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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

CULTURAL CONVERSATION | SEPTEMBER 2, 2009, 9:35 P.M. ET

'I Have to Fly in Order to Sing'

By [DAVID MERMELSTEIN](#)

San Francisco

Dmitri Hvorostovsky, the silver-haired Siberian baritone whose sex appeal is overshadowed only by his ruby-colored singing, always seems to have someplace else to be. Late last month, as he sat for an interview at the stately War Memorial Opera House during a break in rehearsals for Verdi's "Il Trovatore," someplace else meant spending time with his wife and two youngest children.

But the fidgety quality that characterizes Mr. Hvorostovsky when he is not working gets banished when he performs. Whether in solo recitals or in fully staged operas, the singer exudes a smoldering charisma that commands attention and holds it. There are other handsome baritones these days—Nathan Gunn, Rod Gilfry and Thomas Hampson to name but three American singers—but none possesses Mr. Hvorostovsky's exotic allure. And then there's that velvet voice.

At the moment, he is immersed in a role that has occupied much of his time this year: Count di Luna, the villain in "Trovatore" and one of opera's most black-hearted characters. In David McVicar's production, scheduled to open here on Sept. 11, Mr. Hvorostovsky favors cool calculation over moustache twirling, a choice that has won him wide praise.

The baritone, who turns 47 next month, first appeared in this production in February at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and he sang Luna again in April in a different production at London's Covent Garden. But he maintains that the role does not yet bore him. Working with Nicola Luisotti, the San Francisco Opera's new music director, is partly why.

"This is making a huge effect on my conceptual understanding of the role," Mr. Hvorostovsky said, rocking in a swivel chair in a cramped conference room prior to meeting his family. "Right from the beginning of rehearsals this was true. Nicola has his own approach and attitude to Verdi's music, so let's see what's going to be cooked. I'm expecting to make a big step forward in this production."

But no matter who is conducting, the singer varies his routine as a matter of course. "Every performance at the Met, I added and took away—I improved," he said. "I always do, whether it's encouraged or not—especially if it's not. Doing 10 performances exactly the same way is very difficult, at least for me."

Lately, he has been dabbling in pop music of the Andrea Bocelli variety, which is to say amplified, synthesizer-backed sentimental ballads. Such material might enlarge his fan base, but it could also sully a reputation he has spent decades cultivating.

The project, titled "Déjà Vu," starts in earnest in November, when he gives six concerts in Russia and Ukraine, singing material in Italian, French and Russian written especially for him by Igor Krutoy. He is scheduled to perform a similar program at New York's Radio City Music Hall in March. "It will be me with a huge symphony orchestra and choir," Mr. Hvorostovsky said. "There will also be computerized special effects, like *Cirque du Soleil*."

Yet the baritone's long-time fans needn't fling themselves from the parapets just yet. "I'm not saying that I'm getting tired of opera," he maintained. "Opera is nice. But I want to do new things. I need to stay excited. I need more challenging projects. Of course, I would never drop opera, because I grew up on the opera stage. What I do in the opera house is what makes my deeds valuable."

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Mr. Hvorostovsky's victory in the Cardiff Singer of the World Competition. (He bested the Welsh bass-baritone Bryn Terfel, another of today's most prominent singers.) - "Everything changed after that," he said. "I went from Siberia to traveling around the world and having the luxury of so much choice." He settled in London in 1994 and is now a citizen of both Britain and Russia.

Mr. Hvorostovsky distanced himself from Russian repertory early—the title role in Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin" notwithstanding. His name rarely appears in the landmark series of Russian opera recordings that Valery Gergiev conducted in the 1990s, even though the two prize each other as colleagues. "The Russian tradition is a big part of me, of course, and it may be what I do best," the singer said, "but I'm more cosmopolitan. People say I have an Italian quality to my voice."

Certainly many Italian roles have served him well. In addition to "Trovatore," he is associated with major parts in Verdi's "La Traviata," "Rigoletto," "Un Ballo in Maschera" and "Simon Boccanegra," and he is planning to sing characters of similar stature in the composer's "Ernani," "Macbeth" and "Otello" eventually. But there have been disappointments, too, and the baritone is quick to acknowledge them.

"I did 'Don Giovanni' at the Met seven years ago, but it's not part of my repertory," he said, referring to Mozart's opera. "I also did Donizetti's 'L'Elisir d'Amore' there, which I didn't think was a success for me. So I never did it again."

He especially regrets a break in his relationship with the conductor Riccardo Muti, soon to assume the music directorship of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. "He seemed to like me, and then something happened and I found myself not in favor any more," recalled Mr. Hvorostovsky. "My career could have turned into something very different if I would have worked with him more."

The singer prefers not to parse his gifts. "It's all part of the same package, and it's always been like that for me since I began," he said. "The balance is important above all, and you rarely see someone who is as balanced as I am. I'm not being egotistical, but it's true. It makes what I do and who I am distinctive."

Mr. Hvorostovsky is right. He stands among the era's great singers thanks to his combination of rich tone, sonic power, thoughtful characterization and physical appeal. And he insists that he cannot sing without integrating all these elements. "I've been taught never to give a single note without putting performance in it," he said. "I cannot just give one note. It has to be connected. I have to fly in order to sing."

—Mr. Mermelstein writes for the Journal on classical music and film.

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