



ARTS & CULTURE

Ingenues, Sirens, Matinee Idols and More

FRISKY BUSINESS



Dmitri Hvorostovsky at New York's Carnegie Hall.

To sing Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, a performer has to make you believe he has seduced several thousand women—for most, no easy feat. But when **Dmitri Hvorostovsky** first took the part, in Geneva in 1999, he effortlessly closed the credibility gap. All that the sultry, silver-haired Russian-born baritone had to do was stride onstage and look at the actress playing Donna Elvira's maid, and she began taking off her clothes. Many women in the audience would happily have followed suit.

Virtually every article written about Hvorostovsky since 1989, when he burst onto the scene by winning the Cardiff Singer of the World competition, trumpets his sexiness. He's been called a pin-up, an operatic hunk, even one of *People* magazine's "50 Most Beautiful People." Yet when asked about his appeal, he reacts with the equivalent of a squirm.

"To be talking about 'operatic hunk' is such alien language to me," he says, the resonance of his dark voice carrying across the phone lines from Paris, where he is performing, to New York. "Opera hunk—it's not the way I consider myself."

Well, everybody knows a man is sexier when he doesn't try to be. Especially when he's got a voice like that.

So let's talk about the voice. It's a creamy, thick baritone, produced in an even stream on what appear to be unlimited reserves of breath. It is warm as well as lyric—meaning it's higher than some male voices, indeed high enough that Hvorostovsky finds the part of Don Giovanni a little low and has stopped singing it altogether. "I identified myself with this role too much," he says. He no longer wants to play the seducer. The role that most excites him these days is Verdi's Simon Boccanegra, who matures from an ardent lover into a wise leader and father. "I don't have much of a problem playing an older man," the forty-five-year-old says. "Although to play a lover is even more fun, believe me or not." And yet he's not worried about aging: "A good baritone is like a good wine. The older it becomes, the better it becomes."

Nor does he want to play only heroes. His dream role is Iago in Verdi's *Otello*. "Everyone has got a darker side to their character," he says. "Obviously, I've got plenty of it. I have to let it out somehow."

You could argue that a man is sexiest when he's talking animatedly about something that really interests him. For Hvro-

stovsky, that is opera. He sang in a rock band when he was a teenager in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia; he's dabbled in film (*Don Giovanni Unmasked*, 2000) and is considering more movie roles; but his real passion is reserved for the high arts. "This is what is so good about theater, literature, art," he says. "They make you think. They stick with you in your mind; they tease and tickle your brain." Culture never sounded quite so alluring.

There's also something very appealing about a man who adores his family. Wherever Hvorostovsky travels these days from his home base in London, his wife and their two young children are with him. This picture of family bliss is the flip side of his *Don Giovanni* past—literally. One of the women in the 1999 Geneva production, Swiss soprano Florence Illa, evidently wasn't acting. Today she is Mrs. Hvorostovsky. It's a real-life happy ending that the Don never dreamed of.

"It was extremely successful," Hvorostovsky says of that fateful foray into the role. "I've been so happy ever since." *Hvorostovsky will perform as the lead in Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin at the Chicago Lyric Opera from March 1 through 14; he will appear as Renato in Verdi's Ballo in Maschera at New York's Metropolitan Opera from April 10 through 26.* ANNE MIDGETTE

DMITRI'S SEDUCTIVE SOUND

- ***Heroes and Villains*** (Delos; \$15). Hvorostovsky's recent solo album juxtaposes highlights from Russian opera, like Rubinstein's *Demon*, with better-known fare from the Western canon, like the "Toreador Song," from Bizet's *Carmen*.
- ***Dmitri Hvorostovsky: Portrait*** (Decca; \$18). A two-disc compilation of the baritone's greatest hits from opera and song.
- ***Where Are You, My Brothers?*** (Delos; \$16). Featuring popular Soviet songs of the World War II era, this recording, evocative of Russia, is among the frequent collaborations of Hvorostovsky, conductor Constantine Orbelian and the Moscow Chamber Orchestra. It has also spawned a DVD, *Russian Songs From the War Years* (Video Artists International; \$25).
- ***Verdi Arias*** (Delos; \$16). There are few true Verdi baritones around today; Hvorostovsky leads the pack. This release does not, alas, include *Simon Boccanegra*, but it does give him a chance to show off his interpretation of Iago in *Otello*. A.M.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE J. SHERMAN

