

# The Power of a Russian Birthright

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“The older I become, the closer I feel to Russia,” the Siberian baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky said recently over tea at a Manhattan hotel. And he seemed surprised to hear himself say it.



“If you had talked to me 10 or 15 years ago, I would have said I do not really care about this,” Mr. Hvorostovsky, 45, said. “To become more internationalized was one of my biggest tasks.”

What that meant in particular was making his mark in Mozart opera and the Italian repertory, especially Verdi. And his burnished voice, uncanny breath control and Italianate feeling for lyrical lines, as well as his charisma and dashing physique, make it easy to understand why he has been approached by companies worldwide to perform core Verdi baritone roles that are perpetually hard to cast.

A defining moment for Mr. Hvorostovsky at the Metropolitan Opera was his elegantly impassioned Germont in “La Traviata,” which opened the season in 2003, with Renée Fleming singing her first Violetta at the house. In December Mr. Hvorostovsky’s Renato in Verdi’s “Ballo in Maschera” was one of the few compelling portrayals in the Met’s tepid revival of this 1990 production. Mr. Hvorostovsky returns as Renato for three more performances, starting April 16.

But in the fall he celebrated his Russian heritage in an ambitious North American tour with the acclaimed Academy of Choral Art, Moscow, and the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Constantine Orbelian. The program included Russian liturgical music, opera arias and folk songs. After intermission he crooned Soviet-era pop songs into a microphone.

“It was an enormous task, involving about 100 people,” Mr. Hvorostovsky said.

How authentically Russian the pop songs were was, of course, is open to question. Reviewing a performance at Avery Fisher Hall in November, Bernard Holland wrote in *The New York Times* that some of the pop songs sounded stateless, “their flaccidity offering a sort of Europop for grandmothers.” Still, in the arias and liturgical works Mr. Hvorostovsky sang with “the improbable smoothness and cultured delivery that still make listeners roll their eyes in wonder,” Mr. Holland wrote.

No one will question the authenticity of the Russian repertory that Mr. Hvorostovsky is presenting on Thursday night at Carnegie Hall with the pianist Ivari Ilja: a program of songs by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff and Nikolai Medtner, a contemporary of Rachmaninoff’s.

Mr. Hvorostovsky recently recorded two albums of Russian songs for the Delos label: a Tchaikovsky program and a selection of settings of Pushkin texts by various Russian composers. (Release dates have not been announced.) “I’ve been going back to my childhood,” he said, reconnecting to traditions “I used to love.”

Yet for such a thoughtful artist Mr. Hvorostovsky was surprisingly inarticulate about what defines the Russian musical heritage and singing style. What makes a Russian singer sound Russian?

“Do I know?” Mr. Hvorostovsky said. “Hmm.”

Because his connection to the culture is innate, he suggested, he may lack the perspective to explain it. When singing in Russian, he can, of course, “play with the words and the phrases,” he said. Then there is a pervasive brooding quality to Russian music, a “stubbornness and wildness,” he added, that also comes naturally to him, something he proved during his rebellious adolescence. Growing up in the gritty industrial city of Krasnoyarsk, the young Dmitri started drinking vodka at 14 and ran around with gangs of working-class boys, getting into fights and breaking his nose several times.

To Western vocal music enthusiasts the Russian traits of Mr. Hvorostovsky’s singing may be easier to describe. The language is rich with earthy colorings, robust vowels and consonants that “seem to go on forever,” in Mr. Holland’s words. When Mr. Hvorostovsky sings in his native tongue, the language comes across as conversational and mellifluous.

The dark, rueful Russianness of his singing infused his portrayal of the title role in Tchaikovsky’s “Eugene Onegin” last season at the Met. In the early scenes, when Onegin arrives at the country estate of the Larin family and meets the winsome young Tatyana, poignantly portrayed in this production by Ms. Fleming, Mr. Hvorostovsky blithely conveyed the diffidence and smugness of this rakish and entitled young landowner. Yet even in Onegin’s haughty phrases, Mr. Hvorostovsky’s voice had a melancholy and an aching sensuality that exposed an emotional subtext. It was not surprising when, in the final scene, with Onegin now desperately in love with the married Tatyana, the character’s suppressed longing burst through his volatile courtship of Ms. Fleming’s shocked and regretful character.

Mr. Hvorostovsky, for his part, cringes when he watches himself on film. “If something goes wrong from your point of view, it’s so painful to see,” he said. He is intensely self-critical. “I don’t like myself really,” he added.

From the story of his early life in Siberia, it is hard to imagine how he coped with the cultural isolation of Krasnoyarsk and the deprivation of the Soviet era. An only child, he mostly lived with his maternal grandmother and his volatile, alcoholic step-grandfather, a war hero. Though

devoted to his parents — his father an engineer, his mother a gynecologist — he saw them mostly on weekends in their small cooperative apartment. He wanted to study music in Moscow, but his parents were determined to keep the family as together as possible. “They worried that I would live a dangerous life and lose my talent,” he said.

After victories in student competitions, he became a star at his hometown conservatory. “I was the most cherished and loved and admired boy,” he said. Even before graduating, he was awarded a position at the local opera theater, where he was nurtured by conductors and coaches. “I was given an apartment when I was still a student,” he said, laughing impishly.

The only component of his vocal training that was lacking, he said, was an exploration of the classic bel canto approach to singing, which cultivates evenness throughout the voice, pliant legato phrasing and nimble agility. The bel canto heritage profoundly influenced Russian opera in the mid-to-late 19th century. Just listen to the arching melodic lines and flourishes of filigree in Glinka’s operas. But during the Stalin era, cultural overseers viewed bel canto as some elitist European influence that was corrupting the earthy tradition of Russian vocal music.

Mr. Hvorostovsky learned bel canto on his own, listening to recordings of great Italian singers from the early 20th century. His combination of impassioned Russian expressivity and elegant Italianate phrasing won over the judges of the Singer of the World Competition in Cardiff, Wales, in 1989. Mr. Hvorostovsky, chaperoned by a pair of K.G.B. agents, edged out the Welsh bass-baritone Bryn Terfel for first prize. The next day, he said, he traveled to London and signed a recording contract, and his international career took off.

Mr. Hvorostovsky endured rough patches in his artistic work and his personal life during the late 1990s because of excessive drinking and a continuing penchant for rebellion. “I enjoyed the opportunity to be famous, because of my stupidity and stubbornness,” he said. “It spoils you.”

He has been sober since 2001, he said, and he now finds strength from a rich family life with his second wife, Florence, and their two young children. He also has 12-year-old twins from his first marriage.

Still, Mr. Hvorostovsky feels the pressure of expectations. “Who cares what I did last week?” he said. “Yes, your name helps out and gets people’s attention. But I have to prove myself every time.”

One of the most alluring actors in opera, Mr. Hvorostovsky responds to challenging directors and is open to daring production concepts. But his adventurousness may be tested when he sings Onegin in October at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich.

The production, by the Polish director Krzysztof Warlikowski, was introduced in the fall amid sensational controversy. Onegin and his earnest friend Lensky are depicted as lovers; the climactic duel scene opens with the impulsive friends in bed together. The well-known Polonaise at the ball is danced by a corps of bare-chested, implicitly gay cowboys. The show was called the “Brokeback Mountain Onegin” by bloggers and critics.

“I shall see for myself,” Mr. Hvorostovsky said. “These devoted friendships between Russian men at that time could be sexual.” Intimations of romantic feelings between Onegin and Lensky run through the source, Pushkin’s verse novel, he said: “It’s very tender, the way it’s written.”

On the Verdi front, he sang his latest role, the title part in “Simon Boccanegra,” to acclaim at the

Houston Grand Opera and the Paris National Opera. And he is studying Iago in "Otello." Audiences at Carnegie Hall last year had a hint of what a Hvorostovsky Iago might be like from his chilling and cagey performance of the "Credo" during a program he shared with the soprano Anna Netrebko and the Orchestra of St. Luke's.

He is also looking closely at that touchstone Verdi role, Macbeth. "I want to do it," he said, adding: "It's just so dark and depressing. Even a Russian is afraid."