

Anna Netrebko: A rare jewel from the East

Her appetite for bling has upset classical music purists, but British audiences can't get enough of her. Jessica Duchén meets Anna Netrebko, opera's latest hot property

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It's the morning after the night before and the diamonds are still trapped around Anna Netrebko's throat. The clasp won't budge on the exquisite necklace, provided by her sponsorship deal with Chopard, which she'd worn for her knockout concert at the Barbican 16 hours earlier.

Netrebko's own sparkle, though, could illuminate the room unaided by bling. She's currently the hottest young soprano on the planet. She has everything: a glorious voice - high-set, lyrical, extremely expressive; terrific acting - the more dramatic, the better; and the sweet yet sultry looks of Audrey Tautou and Hepburn, glamorous and vulnerable at the same time.

Aged 35, and with a girlish, giggly sense of fun that makes her seem even younger, Netrebko is hurtling towards intergalactic stardom at a pace seldom seen in the classical music world. At the Barbican concert, shared with her frequent duet partner, the equally starry Mexican tenor Rolando Villazón, the audience went bananas. "I love the Barbican," Netrebko says, grinning, "and I love the audience. One aria, and 'hurraahh!'" She lets out a gale of delighted laughter. Backstage afterwards, she and Villazón had gleefully defaced each other's photos while they autographed CDs for a crowd of astonished fans.

It all began in the Russian town of Krasnodar, when the small Anna decided that she simply had to become a performer. "It didn't matter what, but I had to be on the stage. First I wanted to be an actress, but somehow, later, I fell in love with opera. I started to go to performances and it captured me." Her family weren't professional musicians, but there was always music at home. "We used to go to concerts and the theatre, and I was constantly doing house concerts with my friends. Whenever my parents had a party, we'd announce, 'And now, a concert,' and they'd all go, 'Oh, not again!'"

She studied at the conservatory in St Petersburg, mopping floors at the Mariinsky Theatre to make ends meet and to be able to watch the rehearsals. "I'm so sick

of this story," she cries. But it's hardly surprising that it's been told and retold: it's the stuff of fairy tales. When Netrebko auditioned for the Mariinsky's artistic and general director, Valery Gergiev, he recognised her as the cleaner and exclaimed: "You can sing?"

Talent will out: Gergiev spotted Netrebko's, and after she'd scored an early success as Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro* he gave her the title role in Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* when the Mariinsky toured to San Francisco. "It was my first year in the Mariinsky," Netrebko says, "it was a big, big role and it was a big success. So that was where my international career started."

Gergiev, whom she describes as "my godfather in music", is still a central figure in her performing life. "He has been so supportive and he always believes in me," she says. Has the working relationship changed now that she's found fame? "Yes, it has become much stronger. We're very good friends and we have some exciting plans. We're going to record Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta* on DVD, a wonderful new production, because this opera is not well known but is extremely beautiful, and Rolando will sing the tenor lead, Vaudémont."

Their audience can't get enough of Netrebko and Villazón, opera's newest and goldenest on-stage couple. "It started with *La Traviata* in Munich - one rehearsal, one performance," Netrebko recounts. "It was immediately obvious that we're very good together. We're having lots of fun performing on the stage and I think we help each other to perform better. He's a very, very strong partner and I have to work hard to be on the same level with him. I'm learning so much from him; he opens many things in me. It's great. We're working a lot together next year - recording *La Bohème*, performing Massenet's *Manon* in Berlin and there's a duet CD being released in March and it's wonderful. I only hope people won't get tired of us."

Netrebko's latest album, though, is a solo CD: Russian arias with the orchestra of the Mariinsky Theatre conducted by Gergiev, setting celebrated moments such as Tatiana's Letter Scene from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* alongside little-known gems by Rimsky-Korsakov, Glinka and Rachmaninov.

One favourite is Natasha's aria from Prokofiev's *War and Peace*. "I've performed this often on stage and I think it comes through that I already have that experience, which is not the case with Tatiana," Netrebko comments. Wouldn't she be an ideal Tatiana? "I'd like to sing the role, but not yet. It sits rather low for my voice, and the orchestration is quite heavy, so I don't feel ready for it."

Her favourite roles are the most dramatic. "The roles that don't have a strong character are not usually my best," she admits. "I really need to find something powerful inside the character. I'm trying to choose roles in which I can show everything that I can do." Next year she'll be at Covent Garden, singing Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. "Last June, in Japan, I came back to this role,"

she enthuses, "and I understood again how much I love it and how easy it is for me." Easy? One of Mozart's most complex women? "Easy success," Netrebko twinkles. "She has two arias, the most gorgeous music. Everybody else is working all evening, but Donna Anna just comes in and sings 'Non mi dir' and the audience goes 'Hurraaaahh!'" And has she a dream role? "All my dreams have come true," she says. "Now I have to find some new ones."

Earlier this year, though, Netrebko decided to cancel her Carnegie Hall recital debut. "I almost never cancel," she insists. "In five years I have cancelled maybe five performances. And Carnegie Hall was one of them. Because we plan things two or three years in advance, and nobody knows what will happen with you in two years. Suddenly I understood that I'm very busy with my operatic career, and actually I don't want right now to perform with piano. I prefer to sing in the opera. I felt I was not prepared enough to give a recital at Carnegie Hall. So I cancelled." A courageous decision? "Yes, but simple and honest." The concert, she adds, is only postponed: "I'll be back."

What about the trappings of fame, the photo sessions, the sponsorship deal with Chopard, and for concert gowns with

Escada, which recently emblazoned her image across Harrods' window alongside the likes of Catherine Zeta-Jones and Christina Aguilera? Do people make too much of this? "It can never be too much," says Netrebko, beaming. "I think it's great. These fantastic gowns and the jewellery really help me to 'spark' on stage. I think we have to look good, to give pleasure for the ears and sometimes maybe for the eyes, too. And why not? I will try to continue to look good, because I think that a woman should always look like a woman, no matter what it is she is doing."

So, for Netrebko, diamonds are forever. Yet there are still cynical elements in the classical scene who feel that all this emphasis on appearance is a distraction from music. Netrebko just smiles. "Let them be quiet," she declares. "Because I will sing better and better, and they will have to digest this." And this time, she's not joking.

Anna Netrebko will sing Donna Anna in Mozart's 'Don Giovanni' at the Royal Opera House, London WC1 (020-7304 4000) from 11 June 2007. 'The Russian Album' is out now on Deutsche Grammophon