

## Valery Gergiev: Light the red touchpaper, stand back

Ticket sales boom when Valery Gergiev is in town - and the fiery Russian now heads the LSO. Jessica Duchen salutes a conductor who can galvanise the concert business - if he chooses to

Published: 19 January 2007

He's been called the greatest conductor on earth, with a cult following like nobody else. He's been called demonic, a control freak, a creative dictator.

When Valery Gergiev, 53, takes over as the new principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra next week, it will mark the start of a musical partnership between the Russian maestro and the British capital that could be the most significant in years. For the LSO, he looks a great catch.

Gergiev, the long-standing director of the Mariinsky Theatre (formerly the Kirov) in St Petersburg, is a man of superhuman energy. His feverish, magnetic, high-octane character, which produces such thrills for his audiences, has its downside: he drives not only the music but himself, and those around him, with maximum intensity. Nor is he exactly renowned for accurate timekeeping. Some cynical orchestral players in London have been wondering aloud whether he will actually show up. Earlier this month, he didn't, pulling out of the BBC Symphony Orchestra's Composer Weekend (devoted to Sofia Gubaidulina) owing to a viral infection.

Were the musical world a Monopoly board, you might think that Gergiev is careering round it collecting the best complete sets, throwing double sixes every time and no doubt pocketing a lot more than £200 on passing Go. In London - aka Moscow-on-Thames - he's already drawing inevitable comparisons with Roman Abramovich and "Chelski" FC.

He's as renowned for his packed schedule as for his music-making. Besides running the Mariinsky, he's principal guest conductor at the Metropolitan Opera, New York; he'll leave his post as chief (since 1995) of the Rotterdam Philharmonic only next year; and he regularly appears with the Vienna

Philharmonic. He's cut back his guest conducting to concentrate on long-term associations, but the workload is still unbelievable.

The thing is, he gets results. On the platform, Gergiev is the maestro sans frontières. He's a performer of extreme intensity who visibly gives everything to his music: he appears to feel every note throughout his body and conveys this to the orchestra in a way that some players compare to a sculptor, shaping the work with a mingling of energetic, large-scale gestures and precise, artistic motions of the hands. The music, too, can seem extreme - some of the tempi are wild (he's fitted the complete Tchaikovsky Nutcracker on a single CD) - but his interpretations often make a near-mystical experience out of a concert.

To hear him conduct Russian music - Shostakovich's devastating symphonic testimonies, Stravinsky's terrifying Rite of Spring, Tchaikovsky at his most tragic, or Prokofiev in visionary mode in his opera The Fiery Angel - is to experience the kind of breathtaking, seat-of-the-pants excitement that's talked about for weeks afterwards.

Part of the adrenalin rush, it must be said, can at times arise from under-rehearsal, but there's still that intangible element of genius. Reviewing the climax of his roof-raising Shostakovich cycle at the Barbican last year, the Symphony No 11, Edward Seckerson wrote: "Gergiev's stonking performance seemed more than ever to project its message into the future. When the brutal fusillades of percussion had been silenced and the marches ground to a halt and all that remained was the lone voice of the cor anglais, beaten but unbowed, then you realised what this and all the other symphonies were really about - the quest for human dignity." Gergiev can come out of this looking quite a fiery angel himself.

Will he change the LSO? When his appointment was announced, various articles quoted him as saying that he had no plans to change the orchestra's sound. But orchestral sound changes, to some degree, of its own accord; conducting is about chemistry as much as technique, and an orchestra usually plays differently in response to different conductors' particular energies. The LSO's previous chief conductor was the patrician Sir Colin Davis; its principal guest conductor is the youthful, rather delicate Daniel Harding. It is difficult to imagine any maestro more different from either than Gergiev. He can certainly inject the band with a passion that could turn it from a fine orchestra into a world-beater - assuming he spends enough time with it.

The box office is bound to benefit when Gergiev's in town, however. The British music business offers endless gimmicks to boost audiences, but in the end only one thing can ensure its survival: inspiring performances. Boring concerts entice nobody back, however funky the marketing. But bring in a Gergiev, and tickets fly out.

I interviewed him at his London hotel when he celebrated his 50th birthday and his 25th anniversary with the Kirov. I was unusually lucky; stories abound of journalists trying to catch him for a word between naps on rickety Russian private jets or at 4am after gala-concert dinners, or following him round the globe only to find that the interview never materialised.

He's a tall, striking man with dark, green-brown, blazing eyes. His aura is charged with energy and testosterone; the sweaty, no-time-for-a-shower patina only adds to the magnetism. Heading for his concert after our interview, I bumped into some female musicians from the orchestra, who all melted at the mention of him. In 1999, Gergiev startled a music world that considered him wedded to his theatre by marrying a 19-year-old musician named Natalya Debisova. They now have two children. Gergiev has a grown-up daughter from his previous relationship with a language teacher, Lena Ostovich, about whom he's very secretive.

His charisma works wonders with sponsors and politicians, too. Not least, he has the ear of Russia's premier Vladimir Putin. At the Mariinsky, his political clout has helped him to carry the organisation to new levels, steering it through the upheavals after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

And it's the Mariinsky that is his first love. "There was never in my mind any other destination to settle than St Petersburg," he told me. "I didn't start \* \* all this just to say, 'Goodbye, I have invitation from a big American orchestra, I am now leaving.' That was never, ever in my mind, even theoretically - one would not speculate on these things. I'm interested in conducting the greatest orchestras, but I'm not interested in moving or settling myself and my mind."

Gergiev was born in Moscow to Ossetian parents, two months after the death of Stalin. He grew up in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia, where his father, a military officer in the Red Army, was posted. His uncle was reputedly Stalin's favourite designer of tanks.

The family loved music, and one of Valery's sisters, Larissa Gergieva, is a celebrated pianist and the director of the Mariinsky singers' academy. Gergiev's Ossetian background remains vital to him; after the school massacre by terrorists in Beslan in 2004, he flew to Russia to appeal on TV for people not to allow retaliation. Later, he conducted a series of benefit concerts around the world to raise funds for the victims' families.

Gergiev's father died suddenly when he was 14. This shattering revelation of life's brevity might to some extent explain Gergiev's possessed, driven nature; certainly, it was then that he resolved to become a musician. He went on to study at the Leningrad Conservatory with Ilya Musin, the most celebrated professor of conducting in Russia. He wasn't quite 25 when he became assistant conductor at

the Kirov Opera under Yuri Temirkanov, making his debut conducting Prokofiev's opera *War and Peace*.

The players elected him Temirkanov's successor in 1988, giving him a landslide victory against two strong candidates, including the distinguished conductor Mariss Jansons. "In fact, it was nothing to do with the authorities in the Soviet Union," Gergiev told me. "It was a big shock for them, even a bigger shock for them than for me. But that was the choice of the orchestra, chorus and singers, and even the ballet. From that point, I had to switch my own understanding, my emotional love for music, opera and dance, from loving it to being responsible for it."

It was an era of breakneck change. "Russia has its own drama," Gergiev said. "In a way, as well as developing or progressing, many, many things in Russian culture which we loved were becoming lost. It's something to do with the change of system, with the arrival of so-called money-driven realities. I'm not speaking about classical music, I'm speaking in a very broad sense."

He emphasised that his achievements at the Mariinsky depend on long-term "building". "You call it sound or style or orchestral or musical, a spirit or way of doing things, behaviour, interpretations, I don't even know which word is applied to this," he said. "But I am responsible not only for the way the orchestra plays, but in some ways also the life of this institution. Because I make certain decisions - some of them are wrong, some are right - but there's always a sense of responsibility for what would happen to these musicians, especially in the difficult 1990s. It was hard work for us, but many things stay in the memory and many of those are positive things we can look at with pride. One has to build something."

In 2003, the Mariinsky's set workshops were destroyed by a fire; all sets and costumes stored there were lost. Gergiev initiated construction on the site of a new 1,100-seat concert hall, which opened its doors for the first time, in the presence of Vladimir Putin, in November last year.

Equally galvanising has been his effect as director of the Stars of the White Nights Festival in St Petersburg, which now ranks as an annual highlight alongside the biggest festivals, such as Salzburg and Verona. On the Mariinsky stage, Gergiev has injected new life into the repertoire by unearthing Russian operas that were all but forgotten: lesser-known but often enchanting works by Rimsky-Korsakov, Glinka, Prokofiev and even Tchaikovsky.

Gergiev began to tour his company to the world's opera houses in the early 1990s. At first, they met some odd responses. "At the beginning of the first tour to the Met in 1992," Gergiev said, "our presenters didn't know particularly well how to tell American audiences who we are. People sort of knew the Kirov Ballet but they did not know, and in a way did not want to know, Kirov Opera. My first press conference before the tour started was rather funny and rather sad. I was asked

many questions, but every other question sounded like, 'Why did you come to the Met?' Which was not put in such a respectful way; it sounded like, 'Who needs Kirov Opera in New York?' So we had to give an answer. And we did. We brought 10 major voices with us, and they were constantly singing in the major American houses." Among the singers Gergiev helped to establish are the sopranos Anna Netrebko and Elena Prokina and the tenor Vladimir Galuzin.

The company's London seasons are always a talking point and usually a triumph - although the Mariinsky Ballet's all-Shostakovich run at the London Coliseum last summer included some dubious productions. Still, Gergiev is probably the only international conductor who takes ballet as seriously as opera. Describing the Mariinsky ballerina Uliana Lopatkina in Swan Lake, he said: "I was not only impressed and proud, but I felt: thank God we keep classical tradition, thank God we do not pretend to be only modernisers, because I just can't imagine how one could say goodbye to all these classical productions, and the style most of all, the elegance, precision and beauty."

Elegance, precision and beauty didn't seem uppermost in the Mariinsky's account of Wagner's Ring cycle, given on four consecutive nights at the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff last year. The event sold out in four hours, and the audience was bowled over; but The Independent's reviewer commented: "A lot of the musical performance might have fallen off the back of a pantechicon."

The trouble was that Gergiev appeared to have been sailing even closer to the wind in terms of that famous schedule. After that Ring (30 November to 3 December), he and the Mariinsky made straight for the Barbican to finish off the Shostakovich cycle with the last six symphonies on three consecutive nights (5 to 7 December). Gergiev may seem superhuman, but making such demands of the players could seem inhuman. They pulled it off - but how they did so is anybody's guess.

So, just how good an appointment is Gergiev for the LSO? On the most obvious level, it's marvellous. Classical music desperately needs leaders like Gergiev to act as ambassadors for their art among an alienated populace; and in a paradoxically overcrowded field, there aren't many. The grand maestros Herbert von Karajan, Georg Solti and Leonard Bernstein are dead; the senior roster, such as Wolfgang Sawallisch, Bernard Haitink and Kurt Masur, are growing long in the tooth; a succession of youngsters have brought exciting headlines but - with a couple of exceptions - they lack crucial experience. And the middle-aged ground in Britain is full of self-made conductors, Oxbridge graduates with woolly beats, bumbling good intentions and hit-or-miss results. Perhaps the closest to Gergiev are Sir Simon Rattle (in charisma terms) and the powerhouse that is Daniel Barenboim.

If there's a downside to Gergiev's appointment, it's that a question remains over whether his heart will really be in the job. His priority is bound to be his beloved

Mariinsky. And in London, where orchestras have scant rehearsal time compared to their counterparts in continental Europe, it's no joke to risk losing what there is because the conductor's been rehearsing in another country hours beforehand and his plane is late. Even the LSO needs a maestro who will bring dedication, substance and presence, not just a big name on the letterhead.

Of course, there's no point in a conductor being on time if he doesn't excite the players, pull in punters and give fantastic concerts. And there's competition from the South Bank Centre across the river. The Philharmonia has named the dynamic Finn Esa-Pekka Salonen, 48, as its new principal conductor-to-be, while the London Philharmonic welcomes Vladimir Jurowski, 34 - dubbed "the next Gergiev" - as chief conductor later this year when the refurbished Royal Festival Hall reopens. Salonen and Jurowski have plenty of charisma and are noted for open-minded programming. Jurowski is expected to give about 20 London concerts per season with the LPO, against Gergiev's 12 with the LSO.

If he is truly committed to the orchestra; if he's willing to act as a spokesman for it and for musical life in Britain; if he could use his power to coax funds out of politicians and sponsors as he has in Russia; then Gergiev could be the best thing that's ever happened to the LSO. But the "ifs" are numerous and the ride isn't likely to be smooth. Whatever happens, it won't be dull.

Valery Gergiev and the LSO present Russian masterworks at the Barbican, London EC2 next Tuesday (020-7638 8891; [www.barbican.org.uk](http://www.barbican.org.uk))