

Marina Poplavskaya: At full throttle

Covent Garden calls her 'turbocharged' – and the Russian soprano Marina Poplavskaya certainly lives life in the fast lane, discovers Jessica Duchon

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If it's the ability to go the extra mile that marks out a star, then no wonder Marina Poplavskaya is already shining bright. When the Russian soprano appears as Tatyana in Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin at the Royal Opera House in March, it will be the latest landmark in a career that has seen her making that additional effort time after time since childhood – sometimes by motorbike. It's no coincidence that, in the ROH brochure, her photograph has the tag-line "Va Va Voom".

"They call me 'turbocharged'," Poplavskaya says, giggling over the booklet; it declares that she does 0-60 in one second – decibels, that is. "Some people think it's embarrassing, others say, 'Oh, she doesn't deserve it', but I don't care. I think everybody deserves a little piece of sun."

Poplavskaya, 30, who has risen through the ranks of Covent Garden's Jette Parker Young Artists Programme, has already won more than a bit of limelight. Last year she starred as Elisabetta in Verdi's Don Carlo when Angela Gheorghiu declined the role, and a few months later she replaced Anna Netrebko at short notice as Donna Anna in Mozart's Don Giovanni at the ROH. "This was Poplavskaya's big break and she dazzled," reported the Evening Standard.

She's girlish, unpretentious, and a fantastic raconteuse – but when it comes to singing, the engine revs at an astonishing rate. She has sung for as long as she can remember. Her parents were scientists, "but there was always music in our little apartment," she says. "Russian songs are so charming..." She recalls walking on a beach aged two, singing a folk song and drawing approbation from passers-by, who gave her fruit and chocolate. "My mum was so embarrassed!"

Her mother was in for more surprises. When the small Marina announced she wanted to be a singer, her parents advised her to pursue a better-paid profession and sing as an amateur. They took her to swimming classes instead. "Then, one day," Poplavskaya recounts, "I missed my swimming

class because I'd heard on the radio that auditions were being held for the Bolshoi Theatre children's chorus."

Aged eight, she left a note for her mother – "Gone to audition at Bolshoi" – and crossed Moscow alone by train and bus, only to find some 300 candidates ahead of her. "Everybody was standing in line, and all were eating something. I was hungry, but of course I hadn't brought any money." Finally, it was her turn. "The conductor asked what I wanted to sing and I said, 'Well, I have quite a large repertoire!' – can you imagine? There was trouble when I got home..."

The next day, though, the Bolshoi called. "I saw how proud my mum was that I had achieved something," Poplavskaya remembers. "She taught me not to be jealous of others, just work hard myself to achieve what I want."

And work she has. After leaving the Bolshoi, she auditioned for the chorus at the Novaya Opera Theatre of Moscow, founded in 1991 by the conductor Evgeny Kolobov. He made her a soloist instead. "Kolobov was my first 'tutor' in the opera world, he introduced me to beautiful roles such as Tatyana and Rosina, and an amazing opera based on Turgenev's novel *First Love* by Andrei Golovin." She sang Tatyana for the first time aged only 18. Later she joined the Stanislavsky Opera Company, and learnt much about stagecraft, gesture and movement.

The fact that she is now at Covent Garden is thanks to the aforementioned motorbike. Half an hour after her Covent Garden audition, she had to catch a plane to Moscow for a rehearsal that evening and a recording the next morning. It sounded impossible, but she was determined to do both. So she booked a motorbike courier. "I was in my long concert dress and the guy put a windproof jacket and a helmet on me, and said, 'If it's too fast, tell me to slow down'. But eventually I was screaming, 'Faster, faster!'" She made the plane, the rehearsal, the recording, and the Young Artists Programme, too.

Today, she says, home is "where my luggage is". In 2006, she married the American bass-baritone Robert Hale – they met when they sang in Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer* together; but now the marriage is over, though they remain best friends. Her first year in England was stressful, she says, but "I'm grateful because I learnt so much. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I'd be proud to call this house [the ROH] my home".

The feeling seems to be entirely mutual. With her charismatic voice and all that va va voom, it looks as if Marina Poplavskaya will be calling Covent Garden home for years to come.

'Eugene Onegin', Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020-7304 4000), 8 March to 7 April