

## Valery Gergiev: The Ring master

It's the musical event of the summer. As the Mariinsky brings the Ring Cycle to London, Jessica Duchen meets the maestro in charge, the conductor Valery Gergiev

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Few would dispute that Valery Gergiev, 56, is today the most viscerally powerful conductor in the world. Or that the Ring Cycle by Richard Wagner is the most overwhelming experience available in classical music.

Now Gergiev's Ring Cycle from the Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg, is set to take the Royal Opera House by storm. The production, Russia's first Ring since 1914, has toured to the Far East, America, Italy and Germany during its five-year life to date, and when it was brought to Cardiff's Millennium Centre three years ago, tickets sold out in four hours flat.

It looks likely to be the event of the musical summer in London. With the four operas performed over four nights, it promises a total-immersion phenomenon, bringing the music's masterful construction and emotional ecstasy into breathtaking focus.

Nevertheless, the reviews have been mixed. They always are for the Ring, of course; it's rare to see that title without the word "controversial" beside it. And Gergiev, too – a whirlwind on legs who circumnavigates the globe at a rate that would make Phileas Fogg look like a tortoise – naturally carries some controversy of his own.

Possessing a legendary charisma that his musicians often say allows him to conduct more with his eyes than with his hands, Gergiev is a one-man musical power station. He's not only the director of the entire Mariinsky Theatre, but also chief conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra and a devoted guest-conductor of the New York Metropolitan Orchestra and the mighty Vienna Philharmonic. If you attend a Gergiev concert or opera, you're unlikely to forget it in a hurry – I, for one, am still reeling from the impact of his performance of Bartók's Duke Bluebeard's Castle with the LSO a good five months ago. But some have suggested that he spreads that famous energy too thin.

Gergiev is notorious for cutting his packed schedule so fine that he's sometimes still in the air when he should be rehearsing. And this, it seems, is a Ring on the wing – specifically, Gergiev's wing. We still don't know exactly what will be seen at Covent Garden, because the production is being revamped, dramatically so. Perhaps only Gergiev could have drafted in a brand-new, 24-year-old director, the Anglo-Russian Oxford graduate Alexander Zeldin, to "re-imagine" the staging at a few months' notice; apparently, they have added video installations as well as tautening up the drama. Clearly this Ring does not just go round and round in circles.

Nor, for that matter, does Gergiev, whose life has carried him on an upward trajectory that would make most space programmes blink. Born in Moscow in 1953, he grew up in Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia, where his father, an officer in the Red Army, was posted. Later he studied at the St Petersburg Conservatory under the famous conducting professor Ilya Musin.

Aged only 25, Gergiev became assistant conductor at the Kirov Opera (the Mariinsky's name during the Communist era) under Yuri Temirkanov. It was the members of the orchestra who elected him their chief conductor in 1988 – a shock choice, since other candidates included maestros such as Mariss Jansons – yet a prophetic one.

The decision changed the course of the company's history, for it seems that Gergiev's devotion to his Mariinsky will let him stop at nothing. He's employed his famous energy to mesmerise not only orchestras but also politicians: he is famously close to Putin and a number of Russian oligarchs, and his ability to secure political support and significant sponsorship is said to be second to none.

His attachment to his Ossetian background led him to fly to Beslan and conduct a concert in tribute to the victims of the school terrorist attack there in 2004; and he spoke out passionately during the Georgian conflict last year, accusing Georgia of massacring ethnic Ossetians.

Somehow, he has also found time to have a family: in 1999 he married a young pianist and fellow Ossetian, Natalya Debisova, who was then only 19. Now the couple have three children. He also has a grown-up daughter from a former relationship.

London has been the one place where Gergiev, taking up his post as chief conductor of the LSO, was not greeted with entirely open arms. Some critics were anxious that his fly-by-night schedule would prioritise other commitments ahead of London, compromising the LSO's standards through lack of rehearsal. Gergiev's whirlwind style has certainly set the LSO musicians reeling under the intensity. But his concerts are packed, most reviews are superb, and many of the

players are now devoted to him. He may not be here much – but he gets results when he is.

So perhaps it is not surprising that when the Mariinsky Ring Cycle, sung in Wagner's original German, was first seen in 2003 on the 300th anniversary of the founding of St Petersburg, the concept was credited entirely to Gergiev and his designer, George Tsypin; no director was mentioned and at first Gergiev retained complete control over the production. Even the singers do not get star billing, their names in advance publicity confined to a list headed: "Singers include..."

Yet this staging has never been just about Gergiev: the arrival of Zeldin is only the latest of its many evolutions. When the production was initially mooted, Gergiev intended to work with the German director Johannes Schaaf. "But at some point in this work on the Ring," Gergiev says, "I was struck by a simple understanding: what is there for the Mariinsky in working with a German director, designer, and lighting designer? I found it more important for all of us to make our own Russian cycle, maybe to bring together elements of Russian theatre, the Mariinsky's history and the new realities of the Mariinsky, including the power of our technical department.

"With the designs of George Tsypin we went far beyond what the German designer had offered us. Tsypin had already made one shockingly modern and hi-tech Ring in Amsterdam. So I thought: why not on the stage of the Mariinsky?"

Tsypin's designs are inspired by Russian, Caucasian, Scythian and, appropriately enough, Ossetian folk imagery, drawn from myths that parallel those that inspired Wagner.

Perhaps this Ring marks the culmination of everything Gergiev has wanted his Mariinsky to stand for. He has turned the company into a breathtaking international force, with a distinctive brand rooted in its own Russianness.

"I have tried to build a type of opera house where, without neglecting or disrespecting the tradition we inherited, one still wants to join the rest of the world in building modern productions," he says. "If we want our own "language" of production style, it need not be exactly like the brilliant theatricality of certain stagings in London or the so-called concept theatre that has dominated German productions for 40 years. There is strong theatre in Germany and one can respect it, but there is no need for a Russian theatre company to copy it. In the style of productions, the change in the Mariinsky has been maybe bigger than in any other major theatre of the world. When I first worked there, there was not one modern production, and not one opera performed in the original language."

All this has been transformed beyond recognition. "I'm not making it my own achievement," Gergiev insists. "It is our achievement, our work, our history. We had some difficulties but we are learning, we were learning and we will learn."

What exactly they have learned should be evident when the Covent Garden curtain rises on Das Rheingold. Perhaps it's constant motion that keeps artistry alive, and the very spontaneity of this Ring's ongoing development that makes the prospect of it so exciting. A few top-price tickets remain. Alternatively, beg, borrow or steal one.

Valery Gergiev conducts Wagner's Ring Cycle at the Royal Opera House, Wed to 1 Aug (0207 304 4000)