Edinburgh festival: Valery Gergiev - a Tsar on the side of the masses

Ismene

By Helen Brown

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Conductor Valery Gergiev is on a mission to rediscover Russian opera. He tells Ismene Brown why

- **Edinburgh Festival 2008**

When Edinburgh International Festival director Jonathan Mills set this year's festival theme - that of shifting borders - he could not have imagined that a shifting border in the Caucasus mountains would become a bloody arena of 21st-century war as the festival opened, nor that two of his best attractions would be natives of that area.

As the Georgian Ballet leaves today, the charismatic conductor Valery Gergiev arrives, and his performances, always bonfires of excitement, may carry even more charge, given that he is a native North Ossetian.

Gergiev, 55, world traveller though he appears, is a deeply patriotic man, which drives his preoccupation with opening up what some Westerners categorise dismissively as "Soviet" music and showing it as simply Russian music. In Edinburgh, following a marathon Prokofiev retrospective of symphonies and string concertos this weekend, he will conduct four Slavic operas, all more or less obscure on the British stage but all likely to be given the kind of advocacy by his Mariinsky Opera that blows away ignorance or prejudice.

Or so Gergiev ardently hopes. I met him last month during the St Petersburg White Nights Festival, at 11.30pm, after he had conducted Verdi's Simon Boccanegra, with a night train to Moscow planned, then a flight to Britain to conduct Mahler at the Barbican with the LSO. In just a month he had done Wagner's Tristan und Isolde, three Rimsky-Korsakov operas, six Stravinsky and Shostakovich ballets, Bryn Terfel and Maria Guleghina galas, and rehearsals for all the operas we'll see here. It didn't seem quite human.

Though he was bone-tired, he talked fervently of his Edinburgh plans. Invited by Mills to perform the Polish masterpiece Król Roger (król means king) in full staging, he came up with a large Russian package of concert performances as well. "For me it was unthinkable to bring a very good Polish opera without bringing Russian ones, too," he says. "It was clear my work with the London Symphony Orchestra would limit my appearances with the Mariinsky in London, and my Mariinsky work, with unusual programmes, was quite liked in London, so I felt that going to Edinburgh would be a good thing."

The Slavic operas he has chosen all portray a man on an internal journey, whereas Italian and French 19th-century opera usually centres on romantic love. Szymanowski's magnificent 1926 Król Roger has a king unsettled morally, emotionally and sexually by a shepherd (Aug 25 and 27). In Rachmaninov's one-act 1893 Aleko, an upper-class lad runs off to join the gipsies, with tragic results; Gergiev pairs it (Aug 24) with the central act of Prokofiev's Semyon Kotko, a highly political 1940 story about a Bolshevik soldier's struggle to find domestic happiness. Rodion Shchedrin's 2002 opera The Enchanted Wanderer (Aug 26) shows another civilised man led astray by a gipsy, an excuse for rural instruments such as guslis and balalaikas in his score.

However, Gergiev was not governed by the stories' intriguing convergence. "It's true that the Russian operas are based on novels or romances by big writers - Pushkin, Leskov, Katayev - but for me it's the musical value of having young Rachmaninov or very mature Prokofiev or an opera from a new millennium. We wanted a group of operas that travels across time in music.

"I really don't know why Aleko isn't done more often - maybe you need a Tom Hampson or a Hvorostovsky to take it up and two big-name singers to be attracted to it. And Semyon Kotko is mature Prokofiev. It's very important to do it again, after we presented it in London in 2000. There will be 95 per cent of people who don't know how good this opera is, especially the third act, which is really phenomenal."

Król Roger's richly romantic style - with echoes of Richard Strauss and Scriabin - and its full staging makes it the most obvious public attraction, but Gergiev, though a longtime Szymanowski fan, is even more evangelical about the Shchedrin.

In the West, Shchedrin is broadly known for two things - for being married to the great Bolshoi ballerina Maya Plisetskaya and for the ballet Carmen Suite, a free reinvention of

Bizet (Matthew Bourne used it for his contemporary dance production, Car Man). In post-Soviet Russia, Shchedrin's reputation suffered by comparison with Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Alfred Schnittke, and his recent 75th birthday celebration in Moscow, helmed by Gergiev, was greeted as an impressive rediscovery by home audiences.

Gergiev gets angry about the politicising of Russian composers' reputations. "I'm sure Shchedrin's opera will stand very confidently around the world. He is a master. He never created nonsense or left anything unclear. His language goes from the very complicated to the simple - he knows what he's doing. I love his composition for many things, especially the choral theme and individual singing.

"This other stuff is a product of those propaganda wars, those boring people who don't hear the music and look and try to see who was relatively close to political process. It's a non-starter. Like calling Semyon Kotko Prokofiev's 'Soviet' opera. Yes, it is not the Prokofiev who was a young man in Paris or Chicago, it was written after he came back to the country in which he was born. That is the music."

Recently Gergiev has exercised his enormous power at the Mariinsky to enthusiastically uncork an area that had seemed deadened by the loss of the vast Soviet theatre subsidies: new Russian opera. Shchedrin's was commissioned by Lorin Maazel for New York, but back home Gergiev has ordered up no fewer than five new Russian operas for the Mariinsky - a feat of commissioning on a Tsarist scale.

"It's what I promised. We'll bring them all to London [the Barbican] in 2009. They're waiting, already composed, most of them." In his Mahler season at the Barbican this season, Gergiev smartly shoe-horned compositions by Tishchenko and Karetnikov alongside the Austrian epics: "Something unusual from Russia again. Basically I felt that just doing Mahler symphonies in London might be interesting for me and my orchestras, but for the public there is no extra message."

For a man who strides so forcefully and unimpeded across the musical world, he talks about us joes, the humble audience, a lot, I say. His answer is not that of a Tsar: "Well, it's who we're working for."

- Gergiev with the LSO, tomorrow-Sunday; with Mariinsky Opera, Aug 24-27. Tickets: 0131 473 2000; www.eif.co.uk

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