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Nina Kotova

from catwalk to catgut a star is born

extra
travel special

making music for Mandela

in search of hidden America

Valery Gergiev

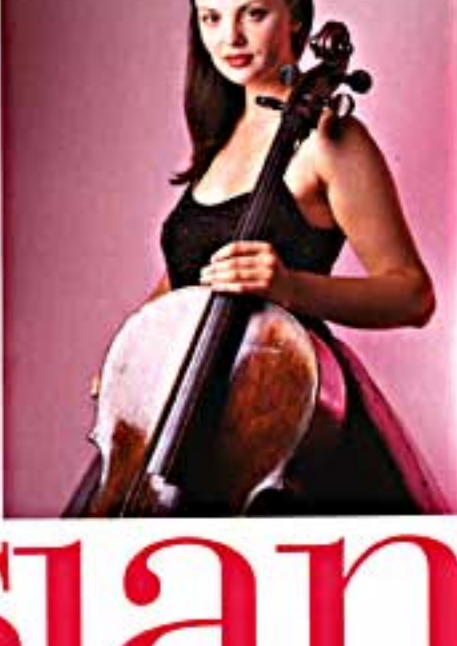
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out to lunch with the million dollar child



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nina kotova



Russian resolute

Nina Kotova dreamt of fame and fortune while growing up in communist Russia. Her determination to succeed has paid off – not only did she reach the top of her profession as a catwalk model, but after triumphant debuts in London and New York, now, she's being fêted for her virtuosity on the cello. Paul Richardson reports

Photographs by Ben Wright

Memo to Jackie Collins: if you are ever short of a plot for a high-gloss airport blockbuster, this one is for you. It has all the ingredients – glamour, talent and ambition winning out in the face of adversity. A beautiful young girl from a modest background in communist Russia dreams of being a famous cellist. Fleeing to the West after the death of her father, she is reduced to destitution. In New York City, she walks off the street into a casting session and becomes a hugely successful model overnight, but she hankers after musical stardom. After a cancellation at the Wigmore Hall she steps in, to rave reviews. Two years later she is riding high, with a recording deal and celebrity admirers wherever she goes. (Possible title, Jackie, *Heart Strings: A Parable of Passion, Perseverance and Prokofiev*.)

Nina Kotova, 27, has been snapped up by Philips as their Next Big Thing, and one can only imagine the other record companies cursing their luck. Nina is not only lovely to look at in a wide-eyed, willowy sort of way, she also plays like an angel – a quality not always guaranteed in Next Big Things.

You want proof? Look no further than her debut disc for the record label, simply entitled *Nina Kotova*. As a showcase for Nina's exceptional talents, it can hardly be bettered. Well planned, nicely recorded and superbly played, the programme mainly consists of short, expressive pieces by the Romantic Russian masters Rachmaninov, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov et al. It also features a number of Nina's own compositions, written in an approachable but highly original style – such as the entertaining *Sketches from the Catwalk*, inspired by her experience as a top

model. Her glorious deep, honeyed cello tone is firmly to the fore, given added sheen by the acoustics of the famous Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. This is a disc to be heard on a dark winter's afternoon in front of a roaring fire, with the samovar simmering and 500 pages of *Anna Karenina* still to go.

As she gazes out of the window of her town house in Dallas, where she now lives with her boyfriend, a Texan businessman, Nina Kotova could be forgiven for thinking her life story seems a trifle unreal. "It's unbelievable," she says with her light Russian accent.

She takes me back to her early days in Moscow, where as a little girl she was giving cello recitals and composing her first pieces, waking at six every morning to practise before school. At the age of seven, the cello faculty of the conservatory admitted her to its adult classes – a tremendous honour. Nina was an only child and a musical prodigy, but home life was never as claustrophobic as that makes it sound. Her mother, a former child-prodigy pianist herself, was, says Nina, "a very artistic personality. She taught me about painting – the shapes and forms of it. When I was five years old I wanted to be a painter; one of my first books was about Picasso. But then I started playing the cello and wanted to be a musician, and it was my mother who made sure I sat down and really worked."

Nina's father, the virtuoso double bass player Ivan Kotova, was an even more crucial influence on the child Nina: "He was the only one who never doubted my talent," she says. All the more traumatic for her as a 15-year-old, then, when he fell ill and died at the cruelly early age of 35. The Soviet authorities had been suspicious of his ideological commitment to communism, and progressively denied him both work and medical treatment, hastening his death.

Nina soon realised she would be tarred with the same brush if she remained in Russia, so she applied for a travel visa and, at 18, set off for the West, eventually pitching up at Yale University where she embarked on a music scholarship.

Looking back, she can barely understand how she found the courage to leave her home and motherland. "It seemed exotic but I would never repeat it now," she says. "I was always looked after by my mother. I had never learned what life is like. I grew up with my instrument, as most musicians do – I guess it was the same for Maxim Vengerov and Evgeny Kissin, who were at the conservatory, too."

Nina's first years in America were a cruel lesson in capitalist economics. Her scholarship from Yale was not enough to live on, and when she ran out of money she had no alternative but to drop out of college and leave for New York to seek her fortune. She had no



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"To influence a younger audience is just fantastic"



Nina Kotova sprang from obscurity to fill a last-minute cancellation at Wigmore Hall. Her swift rise to stardom led to a sensational Carnegie Hall debut last October



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cello, having had to return the instrument she was borrowing from the Soviet government. She had no green card, and nowhere to live. Increasingly desperate, she decided to try her hand at modelling. One day she chanced upon an 'open call' at the prestigious Ford agency. "I walked in and the excitement started. It seemed to me they really appreciated my personality and my individuality." Work began the very next day with a shoot for the French magazine *Glamour*. Almost overnight she was swept up into the world of international fashion. As 'Ninka', she became a catwalk model for Chanel, Yamamoto, Gucci, Versace, Armani. She was a star.

But Nina's heart was still set on a musical career. While her fashion friends partied at night, she practised in secret on borrowed instruments. While they caroused, she composed. During her years on the catwalk she told almost no-one about her double life. "It would only be confusing."

Then came her big break. On 22 July 1996 there was a last-minute cancellation at the Wigmore Hall, London's premiere recital stage, and they were looking for a replacement. Nina leapt at the chance. She played – on another borrowed cello – the Rachmaninov Op. 19 Sonata, the Prokofiev Op. 119 Sonata, and the UK premieres of her own *Scenes from the Catwalk* and the *Suite for Unaccompanied Cello* by her compatriot Boris Tchaikovsky (no relation to Pyotr) – a daring programme for her international debut. Those few critics who made it to the Wigmore that night were rapturous in their praise of Nina's performance: "unforgettable eloquence"; "extraordinary and talented"; they enthused.

She made the transition from rag to Rach with astonishing ease, and the good times rolled on. In October 1996, she was back in London to play the Elgar Cello Concerto at the Barbican – a work she feels close to: "Because of Jacqueline du Pré," she says with a big sigh. "She's like an icon to me. When she played the Elgar Concerto, you would not see a dry face. People like that aren't born very often."

Thereafter, Nina toured the world with the magnificent 1696 Guarneri 'Bear' cello bought for her use by a charitable foundation, culminating in her triumphant Carnegie Hall debut in October last

year. "I played the Tchaikovsky *Rococo Variations*. It was great. The audience called me back again and again. I had to play the last variation once more."

Among her many admirers are some impressive names, and none more so than legendary cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. "Slava" has said he holds Ms Kotova "in the highest regard," and she is happy to return the compliment. "He is very sweet. When he plays there is such appreciation for the music, it's like the first and last time the music has been played. Whenever he plays in the same city, I'll be there."

If Nina is anxious about being presented as yet another bimbo string player she's not showing it. "It's wonderful if someone is attractive. I know how to act in front of the camera. But the important thing is the whole package. Everything comes together: the magnetism on stage, the emotion, and the quality of playing. In any case, I'm certainly not afraid of being a woman and being feminine. Why should I be?"

Now a full-time cellist and composer, she has no doubts whatever about her decision to leave the world of fashion. "I learnt what I like, the styles I like to wear. I developed my taste, so it did some good." These days she tries not to think about modelling, preferring to get on with the job in hand. "I would never think consciously of what I should do on stage, whether I should turn my face this way, whether I should shake my hair. I never, never do this. It's disgusting," she laughs merrily. "It would be distracting. The music must always come first."

Her home is now in Dallas, and she's happy there. "We have the Meyerson concert hall, one of the best in America," she explains. "The pianist Van Cliburn lives here, a great friend of mine, and so does the cellist Ralph Kirshbaum." The folks at Nina's record company are "great people". She is delightfully positive about everything. Even her concert audience earns her enthusiastic praise. "They are great. I have noticed there are more children at my concerts. To influence a wider, younger audience is just fantastic."

Nina Kotova seems to have no regrets. But how much time would you have for regrets if the dream you had cherished all your life finally came true? ■
• Nina Kotova's debut album, including three of her own compositions, is released in March (Philips 462 612-2).

