

A Model Musician

Moscow-born cellist Nina Kotova went from the concert hall to the catwalk—and back

BY ANNA KUCHMENT

FOUR YEARS AGO NINA KOTOVA WAS an up-and-coming model, sashaying down runways in Fendi furs and posing for the pages of French *Glamour* and *Cosmo*. But when a British management company offered her the chance to play a debut solo recital in London's Wigmore Hall, she promptly abandoned the catwalk. She hasn't looked back since. Last summer the Moscow-born cellist joined the prestigious roster of Columbia Artists Management. She recently signed an exclusive recording deal with Philips Classics for a CD due out next fall. And in October, she's scheduled to make her Carnegie Hall debut.

Kotova hasn't always been so lucky. Her father, virtuoso double-bassist Ivan Kotov, died unexpectedly when she was 15. Four years later she left behind the prestigious Moscow Conservatory, and her mother, to study abroad. She traveled first to Cologne and then to the United States, where she won a scholarship to Yale University. Short of money and hoping to earn enough for a new cello (she'd had to return her old one to the Soviet government), she stopped by an open call at New York City's Ford Modeling Agency. They signed her on the spot, and within two days she was on her first editorial assignment.

Modeling may have been a smarter career move than Kotova realized. As classical music's core audience ages and shrinks, record companies are looking for ways to broaden their appeal. Promoting the style and sex appeal of classical stars has become a sure way to sell records to a younger, hipper audience. Among Kotova's current competitors: the cleavage-baring Anne-Sophie Mutter, Britain's Vanessa-Mae, who once performed Bach in a wet T-shirt, and Finnish violinist Linda Lamminen, who posed nude in *Playboy* last year.

But for Kotova modeling wasn't a publicity stunt. It was a way of breaking out of her music-bound lifestyle. "I grew up between four walls," she says, "practicing and going to school, going to conservatory and playing concerts. I didn't go out or see the real life that most of us live." She still has the earthy presence of a classical musician—unstyled hair, no makeup—rather



No strings attached: Kotova before and after



than the glamorous persona of a model. But she's been able to effectively mesh the two experiences. She recently wrote a short, humorous piece for cello and orchestra, "Scenes from the Catwalk," which she premiered at her Wigmore Hall recital.

Costa Pilavachi, president of Philips Classics, says he was impressed with "the whole package" when he signed Kotova—her talent, training, beauty and compelling life story. She first came to the company's attention when a senior executive from PolyGram, Philips's parent company, heard her play at a function for bankers and financial execs in London three years ago. "He came back to his office and called us and said, 'This is a fantastic cellist—and she's beautiful,'" recalls Pilavachi. "All the bankers had stopped what they were doing and couldn't take their eyes off of her and couldn't stop talking about her afterwards. If a classical artist can do this to a bunch of serious financial people, then imagine the success she could have on our label."

Impressions of her musicianship vary. Some say she's no more talented than other young, aspiring soloists. Others rave. Her Yale cello professor, the renowned Aldo Parisot, says, "She's a fantastically gifted cellist. Very expressive, very imaginative, and she has a wonderful stage presence." The conductors she's played with compliment similar aspects of her musicianship: a warm tone, a facile technique and a strong rapport with the audience. "I think people really listen when she plays," says Hans Vonk, the Dutch-born music director and conductor of the St. Louis Symphony. "She has a special atmosphere about her, something extra which impresses them very much."

Kotova does have another important asset: her boyfriend, a young well-connected businessman and arts patron with whom she lives in Texas. He has bought and loaned valuable instruments to several prominent musicians, and recently purchased a rare Guarneri cello for Kotova's use. The couple met three years ago when he heard her play in London. "He was taken with her, and then he took her," says a close acquaintance.

Kotova's long-term goal is to continue living "the musician's life," though she won't rule out occasional modeling gigs. "I love performance," she says. "I love creation and just sharing that beauty." Whether it's on the catwalk or in the concert hall. ■