

Her World on a String

Nina Kotova had it all—except the thing she loved most

By DEBRA GORDON

IT WAS HOT that day in June 1999—so hot that the musicians inside the Moscow Conservatory's Great Hall wrapped themselves in wet sheets during breaks to stay cool. But even before the last echoes of their music faded away, they knew they'd done justice to the Russian-born beauty who'd come home to record her debut album.

After the taping the orchestra

and crew quickly fled to their air-conditioned hotel rooms. Now the magnificent hall was quiet.

And Nina Kotova was alone.

The 29-year-old cellist walked through the empty seats, her back straight as a dancer's. She climbed onto the stage and stood beneath the great domed ceiling. Closing her eyes, she listened.

Through the silence she heard the music—Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky. Then, soaring above them,

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she heard the deep, sonorous tones of her father's virtuoso double bass.

Ivan Kotov had been dead 14 years now. But standing where he had studied and performed, Nina sensed that he was near. She could feel his energy, along with the energy of all the great masters who had played here. Then she knew, at last, that the strange, whirlwind course of her life had a purpose after all.

IVAN KOTOV WAS A BIG MAN, both physically and emotionally; it was said he handled the enormous double bass as though it were a violin.

When Nina was three, she delighted her father by dropping candy through the holes of his bass. A few years later she discovered the sweet sound of the cello, an instrument much like her father's but closer to her own size.

Invited to study cello at the Moscow Conservatory at age seven, Nina practiced endlessly, until her fingers bled and her head pounded. She pushed furniture against her bedroom door to keep her mother and other distractions out. In her mind, "the music was the only thing that existed," she recalls in softly accented English.

Yet even as Nina lost herself in the world of music, her father found

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more and more doors in that world closed to him. Proud and independent, Ivan fell out of favor with the Soviet authorities. Though he was widely regarded as a virtuoso, his reputation as a troublemaker interfered with his career and kept him from fulfilling the promise of his talent. Still, through it all, Nina idolized her father and deeply resented what she took to be signs of his rejection and increasing isolation.

In 1985, when 15-year-old Nina won the prestigious Prague International Competition, her joy was dampened by news of her father's

declining health. Hospitalized with a lung condition, Ivan died at the age of 35.

To Nina, the cause of death was clear: her father's spirit had been crushed under the weight of oppression. And in her mind, the persecution did not end there. She's convinced that after Ivan was gone, she was made to suffer for his freewheeling behavior.

Nina's triumph in Prague should have been her ticket to a glorious musical career. Instead, there were no accolades, no concerts scheduled. "Only a few of my co-students would even consider to greet me," she says. Her cello teacher arranged to meet her mother in the subway to avoid being overheard.

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"Get Nina out," he whispered. "She has no future here."

Two years would pass before Nina got her chance. When her instructor heard she had been invited to visit friends in Germany, he gave her a letter of introduction to a colleague at the Cologne Conservatory. But before she could travel, she had to face the KGB and request a visa.

"What could there be anywhere else that does not exist here?" the government agents asked.

Freedom! thought Nina. Then, in a sweet voice, she answered, "I just want to see another part of the world. I'll be back in a month." Unbelievably, they let her go.

And so, in the spring of 1989, Nina gave her state-owned cello back to the Moscow Conservatory. She packed a suitcase, took some Russian nesting dolls and a bottle of vodka for gifts, grabbed her father's beloved bass and, on a sunny spring afternoon, boarded a train for Germany.

BY NOW, GLASNOST was beginning to spread a sense of hope and greater freedom across the Soviet Union. Nina was accepted at the Cologne Conservatory and studied there until 1990. Returning to Russia, she was struck

by the changes already sweeping the country. Still, even in this new political climate, she realized her future lay elsewhere—in America.

In 1992 she accepted a full-tuition scholarship at Yale University. But her days in the Ivy League were short-lived; after only two months the little money she'd saved ran out, forcing her to leave Yale. Living in New York, she became increasingly desperate as she searched for a job.

One day a friend suggested that Nina, a natural beauty with high cheekbones and beguiling eyes, go

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Composed Moment—At home between concerts, Nina looks through *Reminiscence*, a piece she wrote in memory of her father.

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to an open call at the Ford modeling agency. Nina rejected the idea at first; music alone was her love.

But she had no money, no cello. She did, however, have her looks. So she dabbed on a bit of mascara for the first time in her life and reluctantly headed down to the tryout.

The agency signed her up, and before long she was dashing from one photo shoot to another. After a short while with Ford,

she left to join an agency called Click.

Yet even with all the attention, Nina never took well to the world of haute couture. *This is nonsense*, she thought as the cameras clicked and whirled. She felt embarrassed that her body had become simply a hanger for fancy clothes.

"Ninka," as she called herself briefly, hardly recognized the glamorous creature that began to appear in American and European fashion magazines. "That girl is not really me," she once told an autograph seeker. "She's my twin sister."

With her first paycheck—all of \$300—Nina bought a cheap cello, and from then on it was as much a part of her life as her makeup box. When she traveled she bought a second airline ticket for "Mr. Cello."

And when she wasn't sashaying down the catwalk or posing for the

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camera, she was practicing, losing herself in the music she could now create with her hands, not just hear in her head.

Gradually, the musical side of her life took over, and in 1995 Nina quit modeling and moved to London to join her mother and stepfather. Her modeling friends were shocked. How could she simply quit?

Nina, on the other hand, was exuberant. She never doubted she would return to music. "I'd been a musician since I was seven years old," she says. "It possesses you."

Month after month she worked to get in shape for her new life. Then, in the spring of 1996, her mother and stepfather decided to give Nina's career a fitting send-off with

a party at their London home.

There was champagne, caviar and, as the main attraction, a performance by Nina in the family's private concert hall. The event, held on Ivan Kotov's birthday, marked Nina's re-emergence in the world of music.

It turned out to be a prelude for grander things to come. Four months after her musical "coming out" party, Nina got a call from her manager. As he explained, one of the musicians scheduled to perform at an upcoming concert in London's prestigious Wigmore Hall had suddenly

dropped out. The show was only two weeks away. Could Nina fill in?

DRESSED IN A RED SILK gown her mother had designed, Nina looked dazzling as she sat with her cello on the stage at Wigmore Hall. It was July 22, 1996, and she was about to debut her own composition in the auditorium that had hosted the London debuts of nearly every major musician of the past 90 years.

Looking calm and relaxed, she touched her bow to the strings and launched into one demanding piece after another. Sergei Prokofiev, Boris Tchaikovsky—and then, Nina Kotova: "Sketches From the Catwalk," a musical interpretation of her two dizzying years as a fashion model.

The performance launched Nina on a whole new trajectory. Suddenly a media darling, she became the subject of articles not only in music magazines, but in the same slick glossies whose pages she'd graced as a model.

In the struggling classical-music business, Nina was a marketer's dream. Photos on her 1999 debut album, recorded under the domed ceiling in Moscow where her father had performed, show Nina draped in richly patterned silks and satins,

makeup highlighting her gazelle eyes. Buyers found her irresistible: her first CD sold some 46,000 copies, an amazing figure for a classical recording.

SINCE SHE LEFT MODELING, Nina has performed in major concert halls all over the world. She has lovingly retired Mr. Cello and now plays a \$1-million 1696 Guarneri. She's living in a cavernous town house in Dallas and renovating another house not far away, where she'll move after her upcoming marriage.

For Nina, though, her greatest triumph is that, finally, she has found happiness in a world of music.

Wearing jeans and a gray silk kimono, Nina glides into a spare bedroom at home and sits on a straight-backed chair. She pulls her cello close and begins to play.

Now soaring, now tripping and dancing, the music weaves a tale of delight and wonder. Nina closes her eyes as her mind floods with memories—of Russia, of her childhood, of her father.

She plays for him still. And somewhere, she knows, Ivan Kotov is listening.

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