

Russian, an award-winning cellist with a successful spell on the best international catwalks behind her, 25-year-old Nina Kotova is a walking blueprint for a heroine in an intense romantic novel.

The daughter of the Russian double bass player Ivan Kotova, Nina has been performing and composing since she made her debut appearance, aged nine, at the world-renowned Moscow State Conservatory. She started modelling when she was spotted on the streets of New York two years ago where she was pursuing her postgraduate studies in music.

"I was walking past the model agency and they talent-scouted me," Nina explains in her soft-spoken tones, without a hint of arrogance or drama as if it were an everyday occurrence. "They said, 'Girls like you don't just walk past every day.' There was one hour, about half an hour, when they showed me how to turn – and then you just express yourself. It all came quite naturally. Until I modelled, I never even wore make-up."

Expressing herself

is something of a recurring motif in Nina's life, be it through her modelling, music or her painting – another talent she has nurtured since the age of six. The only problem is which to choose. "When I started modelling, some other musicians couldn't accept that it's possible to do two things at the same time, to try other things in life. I have a natural urge to explore, which is extremely important to any artist. Just spending hours with an instrument wouldn't make you a whole person."

Nevertheless, Nina's cello accompanied her on the fashion circuit where she worked for names such as Chanel and Valentino and snatched practice sessions between photo shoots and shows. "At times I wished I played the flute," she jokes. "Then I wouldn't have had to carry this big cello about." This from a woman who still yearns to play the double bass like the father she extols as "extraordinary", and whose practising at their Moscow home forms one of her earliest memories.

The visual has a profound impact on Nina's work. "Being a musician is like being a painter – that's the best I can explain it," she says. "You can have the image of the painting in front of you and it's whatever you feel – your perception of things and events."

Certainly Nina's experience of the fashion world and her love of art are brought back to her music. Her impressions of life as a model inspired her recent cello sonata "Scenes from a

Catwalk", and she has just finished arranging a suite for the cello that interprets works of Picasso.

Picasso, Rachmaninov (the composer Nina feels happiest playing), her own musical style and her vibrantly coloured, slightly abstracted paintings, all share a boldness that belies her apparent shyness. "I like to make a statement," she smiles. And that's a statement that she makes through her looks as well, of course, although she is anxious to stress that she is, first and foremost, a musician, not a model. "Is modelling an art?" she asks. "For me it was." *Carly Strank*



Claret velvet rowl-neck top, special order only by Hussein Chalayan. For details, contact Selfridges, Oxford Street, London W1 (0171-629 1234); Jones, Floral Street, London WC2 (0171-240 8312); and Square, 3-4 The Corridor, Bath (01225 464997)

Opposite: plaidie cashmere top, £214, by Pinin Sud, from a selection at Whistles stores nationwide (0171-487 4484 for stockists). Printed georgette dress, £375, by Martin Margiela from Liberty, Regent Street, London W1 (0171-734 1234). Brown leather lace-ups, £90, by Gresson, from Selfridges (0171-629 1234)

Pink polyester shirt, £12, from Comucopia, 12 Upper Tachbrook Street, London SW1 (0171-428 5752). Blue polyester skirt, £199, by Clements Ribeiro, from Liberty (0171-734 1234). Brown lace-ups, by Gresson, as before

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Photographs: Matthew Donaldson. Stylist: Rachel Collins at GSM. Hair and make-up: Carole Hart, using Mary Quant. Location: Eastwell Manor, Ashford, Kent

