

THE SMALL Swedish coast resort of Ystad is taking risks with its opera festival which specialises in reinstating forgotten operas. This year's attraction, Mascagni's *Le maschere* (The Masks), has gone down in operatic history as one of the most spectacular flops of all time.

Mascagni, basking in the fame and fortune of *Cavalleria rusticana*, arranged for his eighth opera to have world premieres in six leading Italian opera houses on the same night in 1901. All but the Rome performance, conducted by the composer himself, were disasters. At La Scala, Milan, where Caruso headed the cast, even Toscanini, according to one critic, "was unable to save *Le maschere*: but not even the Lord in His infinite power could have done so."

A baying audience forced the Genoa performance to be abandoned before they stormed out. Turin, Verona and Venice hissed in harmony. Apart from its overture, nothing of *Le maschere* has been heard since. (*Le maschere*, Ystad Opera Festival, Sweden, 15 July-1 August (+46 46 143751))

A PARIS bank has opened to the public for the first time the room where Marcel Proust wrote *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In 1906 the 34-year-old author rented an apartment from his widowed aunt at 102 Boulevard Haussmann. He chose it because of its sentimental associations with his mother who had died the year before. But the dust from the street aggravated his asthma and the traffic noise was so great he had to soundproof his study with cork. Nonetheless the move worked wonders on his spirits, and he set to work on the cycle of books that was to become his masterpiece. However, in 1919 his aunt sold the property to a bank which turned the study into an office. Today the only relics from Proust's time are the parquet floor and the marble fireplace, but the bank, Société Nancienne Varin-Bernier, has relined it with cork and admits visitors every Thursday between 14.00-16.00.

JUST as English football was vanquished by German football, the much-acclaimed Britpop has fallen foul of a new rival: Krautrock. This sounds like a kind of cosmic traffic jam and is the merging of rebel rock riffs and European avant-garde electronic music produced most notably by Seventies bands like Neu, Can, Faust and Amorphous Duul. In a summer where discerning fans demand increasingly esoteric sounds, and bands like Stereolab and Tortoise are reappraising the sounds of German alienation, a compilation of unreleased German Krautrock bands will bestow just the right measure of unfathomability on its purchasers when it is released on Virgin this month. *Unknown Deutschland The Krautrock Archives Volume One* includes tracks by such lesser-known artists as Golem, Temple, Cosmic Corridors, Astral Army, Galactic Explorers and Feuerrote.

# Translating colours into SOUND

Anna Tims meets Nina Kotova,  
a former model who is making her  
debut as a professional cellist

IN a classical music industry where image is as vital as talent, the defection of a catwalk model to the concert hall is a marketing dream. Already three leading record companies are competing to turn Nina Kotova, once favoured by Chanel and Valentino, into the face of their own CDs.

Kotova, a 25-year-old Russian, is giving up modelling to become a professional cellist. This summer she is performing Rachmaninov in London's leading concert halls.

The eagerness with which the record companies have responded to Kotova is as much a reflection of current competitiveness in the classical field as of her skill. Violinists Vanessa Mae and Anne-Sophie Mutter and cellist Ofra Harnoy have all been groomed into glamour queens to help shift records. With her Slavic beauty and catwalk grace, Kotova has a head start before she has even set foot in a recording studio.

The prospect of being exploited for her looks does not worry her as long as she is regarded as a serious musician and not an unusually talented model. "Music combines many different things," she says. "Not simply sound. Beauty, inner and outer, and sexiness also play a part. If my face helps people to discover beautiful music, that is good."

Her attraction is not simply cosmetic. The Finnish arts newspaper *Culture* has described her cello-playing as "close to perfection", and the world's most venerated cellist Mstislav Rostropovich took her on as a pupil after hearing her play. She has conquered New York's Carnegie Hall; on 22 July she makes her London debut at the Wigmore Hall; and she is booked for London's Barbican later in the year. She composes and is also an accomplished pianist and painter.

A meeting with this rarified figure is as extraordinary as her career. Since renouncing the fashion world Kotova has led a hermit-like existence in her stepfather's manor in the English county of Kent. She dedicates her time to music, closeted with her cello in her bedroom and keying compositions into her computer late at night.

The house, reached by a tangle of tunnel-like lanes, is guarded by extravagant topiary resembling castle ramparts, and I am received in a baronial hall with a tapestry overhanging the large hearth. Antlers sprout

from the wall alongside ancestral portraits from her stepfather's family. When Kotova appears, sliding almost unnoticed through a side door, I am struck by her stillness and an almost melancholy solemnity which must jar in the world of fashion. Her once modishly cropped hair has grown into more musicianly long curls, and she is wearing a fur-trimmed gown of maroon velvet. "Living here is like a second childhood - I am so spoilt," she says.

She is cagey about her personal past - partly because her English, while almost fluent, inhibits her - but questions about her music prompt a passionate eloquence. A form of synaesthesia means that she tends to translate colours into sounds and vice-versa, and she can play from a painter's canvas as well as a score. "When I was little I enjoyed painting a picture then turning it round and translating it into music," she says. At 13 she composed a suite based on Picasso paintings, astonishingly mature works combining lyricism and abstract freneticism.

Her talent is a fusion of skills from both her parents' families. On her mother's side are several generations of artists; her father's family were prominent in science. "I've inherited some of their mathematical talent and turned it into music," she says.

She was six when she joined a school in Moscow for musically gifted children. Her grandmother had attended the Moscow Conservatoire as a singer and pianist, and her father, Ivan Kotov, was a celebrated double bass player.

"I said to my parents I wanted to be a musician, a painter or a doctor," she says. "I wanted to play the double bass like my father, but it is a little bit strange for a girl to study that, so I said I'd learn the cello."

At seven she gave her first public performance in Moscow, by which time she was adding eight hours of practice to her school day. "It was hard, really hard. I never went out to play with friends and sometimes I was crying with exhaustion but I knew I was going to be a soloist."



Change of image: Nina Kotova the model (left) and playing her beloved cello (above)

*If my face helps some people to discover beautiful music, that is good'*

she won a scholarship to do a masters degree in the US, and it was there her career took an unexpected turn.

One day after graduation she was sightseeing in New York when she was stopped by a scout from the Ford modelling agency: "The agency said, 'How can such a girl be just walking about the streets!'" she says amusedly. "I was hired on the spot." She was quickly adopted by Chanel, Lagerfeld, Valentino and Ungaro. Although often bored by the routine, she regards this flirtation with the fashion world as a preparation for a music career. She practised between shoots, and the catwalk taught her skills of presentation that would come in handy on the concert platform.

"When I walked down the catwalk I felt like a performer, not just a clothes horse," she says. "Being in front of the camera gave me a feeling similar to when I play the cello." The experience also enriched her musical voice. One work in her London programme is a sonata for cello and piano

called *Scenes from the Catwalk*. In it she translates the colour and buzz of the fashion world into a musical hurly-burly with quiet lacunae reflecting waits between shoots.

Kotova says she will model on the side if she has time, but the subject seems to bore her. She loved the social life, but now rarely sees friends and has no interest in romance. Her hobbies are playing basketball and tennis with her four-year-old half-brother Oliver - who comes careering between us in a pedal car with a Persian cat riding in the passenger seat. Like Nina before him, Oliver is educated by his mother, who fears the barren intellect of state education; and like his half-sister, he is no ordinary mortal. "Meaning and laziness," he says suddenly. "The two are not necessarily bad."

Over in a corner a tiny drawing of a house he is working on rests importantly on an easel. Nina shows me her own paintings, some cubist and others haemorrhages of colour scarred by stabs with a pencil butt. "There's a lot of geometry in them," she says. She concedes that the vibrant colours from the catwalk have influenced her in this too, but by now she is clearly keen to withdraw to her bedroom and continue her solitary music-making. I ask her if she ever craves normality and she looks at me bewildered. "What is normal?" ■



She went on to study at the Moscow Conservatoire, and her solo career was launched in Russia when she won the Prague International Radio Competition.

Then the work dried up. Kotova skims over this period, but her mother hints that the Soviet regime was distrustful of her father's extraordinary success and was obstructing her own career. Kotov was forbidden to accept engagements in the West and he died of cancer at 35. His widow blamed the political pressures for hastening his death, and sent her 18-year-old daughter to Germany, where she was granted a scholarship for Cologne's music academy. Then