

She's Earned Her Bow

An ex-model who sounds as good as she looks

By TERRY TEACHOUT



A FUNNY THING HAPPENED to Russian cellist Nina Kotova on the way to Carnegie Hall: she became a fashion model instead. Nine years ago, she was just another down-at-heel ex-prodigy, so poor she didn't even own a cello. Then she wandered into an open call at New York City's Ford Modeling Agency, where the fact that she looks like a cross between Michelle Pfeiffer and Uma Thurman was considered an asset, not a distraction. Now Kotova, who turns 28 this month, is off the runways and back onstage, touring the U.S. and promoting her self-titled debut CD on Philips Classics. It is a collection of juicy romantic encores by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Rimsky-Korsakov, Fauré and Kotova, whose compositions include a three-movement suite called, appropriately enough, *Sketches from the Catwalk*.

Such stories—and such hazel-eyed looks—are a publicist's dream, especially at a time when classical-record sales are chronically depressed and many labels are willing to resort to any gimmick, however fatuous, in order to score crossover hits. But Kotova is more than just another megapretty face; she is also a musician of high seriousness and real talent.

Like other Soviet youngsters who showed musical promise at an early age, she had no real childhood. "All I did," she recalls in her fluent but slightly askew English, "was practice like crazy mad." She spent her youth studying cello, composition and piano ("I love piano. I still play but not in concert"), and gave her first public performance at age

seven. But her budding career hit the skids when her father, a prizewinning virtuoso bass player, was judged a political risk by the authorities. "He was incredible bassist," she says, "but he was so much exposed to the West, he started having problems getting work. Then he fell ill and was refused medical treatment." When Ivan Kotov died at age 35, his teenage daughter, unable to escape the stigma of guilt by association, decided to move to the West. She eventually made her

like a joke. I didn't tell them I was a musician. I didn't want to confuse them. But I am a person who is serious, and from the Day One, I wasn't completely happy, because I wanted to play concerts. There was a point when I thought there was no hope. No cello and no hope!" But after several years of modeling for Chanel, Armani and others, she finally made her way back to music in 1996, giving her London recital debut on a borrowed instrument. (She now plays a 1696 Guarnerius owned by a foundation run by her boyfriend, a music-loving Texas businessman.)

The soft-spoken Kotova eschews makeup and wears her hair pulled back severely, as if to persuade suspicious critics that her modeling days are over. Not

that her first CD leaves any doubt of it. The glamour-girl album art notwithstanding, her expressive performances of such yearning miniatures as Tchaikovsky's *D Minor Nocturne* and Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*—the second of which she orchestrated—are clearly the work of a gifted artist. Her tone is warm and focused, her interpretations restrained yet quietly intense. No less striking are her own compositions, especially *Sketches from the Catwalk*, a set of laconic, minimalist-flavored cameos in which a genuinely personal voice can be heard.

Kotova is scheduled to make her New York City debut this Saturday at Carnegie Hall, where she will play Tchaikovsky's showy *Variations on a Rococo Theme* with

the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, followed by a barnstorming tour that takes her all the way from Brazil to Japan. Though she already seems well launched toward stardom, anyone who expects her to take the low road to popular acclaim is in for a surprise. "I am asked so many times," she says, "what do you think, that classical music is dead, dead, dead? Not at all. It's starting to bloom again. That's what I think. And I am one who is fighting for it." ■



TED THOMAS FOR TIME

CROSSOVER On the runway in Missoni, above, but Kotova's best accessory is really her cello

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way to the U.S. to study at Yale, leaving her state-owned cello behind at the Moscow Conservatory.

When scholarship money proved insufficient, she dropped out of school and moved to New York City to look for work; within weeks, she was posing for *French Glamour*. "It's not that I wanted to model," she says, sounding for all the world like the survivor of an accident too gory to describe in detail. "It just happened. At first I thought it was ...

