

Dmitri Hvorostovsky (1962-2017), one of opera's greatest baritones

Fred Mazelis
11 December 2017

Dmitri Hvorostovsky, who died late last month at the age of 55, was one of the greatest operatic baritones of his generation. The Siberian-born giant of the opera world announced two and a half years ago that he was suffering from a brain tumor.

Hvorostovsky stood out for the sheer beauty of his tone, his technical skills and his expressive and powerful performances in such operas as Verdi's *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata* and Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*. Among baritones of his generation, his stature was sometimes compared to the overpowering presence of Luciano Pavarotti among tenors some decades earlier.

There were hardly any major opera houses that Hvorostovsky did not appear at in the course of his three-decade career—180 performances in 13 different operas at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, but also hundreds of other appearances, at the Royal Opera in Covent Garden in London, the Vienna State Opera, the Berlin State Opera, La Scala in Milan, La Fenice in Venice, the Lyric Opera in Chicago and of course the Bolshoi Opera in Moscow.

Verdi and Tchaikovsky were probably the composers most often sung by Hvorostovsky, including most of Verdi's most famous works. Among these were *A Masked Ball*, *Il Trovatore*, *Don Carlo* and *Ernani*, in addition to *Traviata* and *Rigoletto*. He was also well known, among other roles, for that of Valentin in Charles Gounod's *Faust*, the title role in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Prokofiev's infrequently performed but powerful *War and Peace*.

The future opera star was born in 1962, far from the centers of the opera world, in the industrial city of Krasnoyarsk, the third-largest in Siberia, nearly 2,500 miles east of Moscow. His eventual success can be traced at least in part to the high level of music

education in the Soviet Union. After some difficult adolescent years, Hvorostovsky was accepted into an arts institute in Krasnoyarsk in 1978.

In 1989, at 26, the baritone became a sensation at the Cardiff (Wales) Singer of the World competition. Singing the famed *Ombra mai fu* ("Never was a shade..."), from Handel's 1738 opera *Xerxes* (or *Serse*, in Italian), as well as an aria from Verdi's *Don Carlo*, Hvorostovsky beat out the local favorite, Bryn Terfel, who also went on to an enormously successful international career.

Hvorostovsky's powerful stage presence is evident in video excerpts. His hair turned prematurely white in his mid-30s, which only added to his effectiveness in such important roles as Germont in *Traviata* and Rodrigo in *Don Carlo*. His smooth baritone, with its combination of Italian bel canto lyricism and Russian melancholy, made a commanding impression in live performances, as this writer can attest from personal experience of performances of *Trovatore* in 2011 and *Traviata* and *Ballo in Maschera* in 2012. Hvorostovsky was at the height of his powers at the time, although his career was to be tragically cut short a few years later.

Even though gravely ill, Hvorostovsky was able to take on the role of the Count di Luna in *Trovatore* at the Met for three performances in the fall of 2015. Over the next year he gave acclaimed performances in London and Vienna before finally announcing his retirement from opera in December 2016 because of balance problems caused by his illness. He nevertheless made a surprise appearance at a gala concert in May of this year, singing one of *Rigoletto*'s famous arias to an emotional audience on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera house in New York.

Hvorostovsky lived in London for the past 20 years,

but often performed in Russia, and retained some fond memories of his life in the former Soviet Union. He remained attached to Russian folk song as well as a more popular repertoire. In addition to a discography that includes Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Prokofiev, Bellini, Donizetti, Leoncavallo, Mascagni and Mozart, Hvorostovsky's albums have also featured Russian-language folk songs, romances and even contemporary music.

In 2003, he performed a program of songs of the Second World War entitled "Where Are You My Brothers?" at the Kremlin Palace, which by one account was seen on Russian television by a staggering 90 million viewers. In 2004, he performed the same program with the St. Petersburg Symphony for the survivors of the Siege of Leningrad.

His performances of the famous song Zhuravli ("Cranes"), which is associated with fallen Soviet soldiers in the Second World War, deserves special mention. In 2000, Hvorostovsky released his own version of the song for the 55th anniversary of Soviet Victory Day. The song was played at his funeral.

Hvorostovsky enjoyed a special affection among broader layers of the population, especially in the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, that is rare for contemporary performers of classical music. He worked, to great effect, to establish a deep personal connection to his audience. His singing was noted for the kind of emotional and expressive bond that is missing from the technically flawless but bland performances that are too often the norm.

Hvorostovsky's attitude was summed up very affectingly in an interview some years ago in the *New Yorker*, as recounted in the obituary by *New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini after Hvorostovsky's death. The Russian singer "recalled a concert he gave at 22 with fellow singers and instrumentalists in a bread factory in central Siberia in below-freezing weather," wrote Tommasini. "The audience was overcome. Those tears, Mr. Hvorostovsky said, 'were more precious to me than all the applause I could ever get again.'"

There have been many tributes to the late baritone, perhaps none more indicative of the high regard in which Hvorostovsky was held than the statement from the legendary 76-year-old tenor Placido Domingo. "Words cannot express my anguish that one of the greatest voices of our time has been silenced,"

Domingo said. "Dmitri's incomparably beautiful voice and peerless artistry touched the souls of millions of music lovers. His passing will be mourned by his countless admirers around the world and by those of us who were fortunate to know him."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact