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5 New Operas Set for New Bolshoi Season

By Raymond Stults

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As a prelude to its 237th season, the Bolshoi Theater is playing host to Milan's Teatro alla Scala, which opens its visit to the Bolshoi's Main Stage on Thursday with the first of three performances of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "Don Giovanni." On the podium that evening and at the performance on Sept. 8, as well as at an orchestral concert on Sept. 9, will be the company's renowned music director, Daniel Barenboim.

The Bolshoi season proper gets underway on Sept. 12 with the world premiere of contemporary Russian composer Sergei Nevsky's chamber opera "Frantsisk," the first of five new operatic productions in the theater's plans from now until next July.

Following on will be three classic works from the 19th century, Giuseppe Verdi's "La traviata," Alexander Borodin's "Prince Igor" and Vincenzo Bellini's "La sonnambula" — rather conservative choices, perhaps, but all of them filling major gaps in the theater's repertoire. Also on the schedule, and aimed at younger audiences, is Maurice Ravel's

"L'enfant et les sortileges."

"La traviata" had its Russian premiere at the Bolshoi in 1858 and has altogether been treated there to something on the order of 1,600 performances in ten different stagings, the last being a somewhat flimsy version the played in the latter half of the 1990s. For its eleventh "La traviata," which makes its debut on Oct. 7, the director will be American Francesca Zambello, whose previous stagings at the Bolshoi, Giacomo Puccini's "Turandot," in 2002, and Sergei Prokofiev's "The Fiery Angel," in 2004, count among the theater's very best.

Young French maestro Laurent Campellone is scheduled to conduct "La traviata" and slated for the principal roles in what looks to be the production's first cast are three outstanding singers well-known to Moscow audiences, though mostly to be heard these days in opera houses abroad — soprano Albina Shagimuratova, winner of a first prize at the 2007 Tchaikovsky Competition, tenor Alexei Dolgov, once a star attraction of the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theater, and baritone Vasily Ladyuk, a member of the Novaya Opera's troupe, but now rarely to be found on its stage.

"Prince Igor" counts among the operas most beloved of all by Russian audiences. Absent from the Bolshoi since playing there briefly in a rather heavy-handed production of the mid-1990s, it returns in December, this time in a staging by probably the most revered of all present-day Russian theatrical directors, Yury Lyubimov. Although known in Russia almost exclusively as a director of spoken drama, Lyubimov, who turns 95 at the end of September, has gained considerable experience and enjoyed much success in staging opera abroad. Conducting "Prince Igor" will be Bolshoi music director Vasily Sinaisky.

Apart from a few concert performances of Gaetano Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor" a dozen or so years ago, no opera of the Italian bel canto era has been produced at the Bolshoi since the last decade of the 19th century. And one of the loveliest works of that era, "Lasonnambula," has not graced the Bolshoi stage since its one and only previous production in 1837. Due to stage Bellini's opera next March is Pier Luigi Pizzi, one of Italy's foremost opera directors, and due to sing the sleep-walking lady of its title is American coloratura soprano Laura Claycomb, who took a second prize at the Tchaikovsky Competition of 1994 and has since gained international fame as an interpreter of the extremely demanding roles created by bel canto era composers.

Conducting "La sonnambula" will be another noted bel canto specialist, Italian Enrique Mazzola. Like Claycomb, Mazzola is no newcomer to Moscow. Fourteen years ago, he made a remarkable debut here at Helikon Opera with a sparkling, idiomatic account of Gioacchino Rossini's "The Barber of Seville." In the interim, he has led a number of memorable concerts with Moscow orchestras.

Added to the new productions will be a return next June to the Bolshoi's Main Stage of a great audience favorite, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "The Tsar's Bride," with the classic, but long worn-out décor of Fyodor Fyodorovsky, dating from 1966, appearing in newly minted form. Staging it will be Israeli director Julia Pevsner, with Sinaisky providing the musical direction. Over the past few years, the Bolshoi has increasingly moved away from its outmoded traditional system of scheduling performances of its repertoire in helter-skelter fashion throughout the season and toward aligning itself with most of the world's major

opera houses by presenting each work in a series of closely spaced performances. In the upcoming season, the transition in that direction looks to be nearly complete.

In addition, the theater is providing more information than ever before about its schedule. Now available to the public are the complete performance dates of all new productions, the entire performance schedule through December and the schedule by month of performance from January to July.

See www.bolshoi.ru for more details.

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