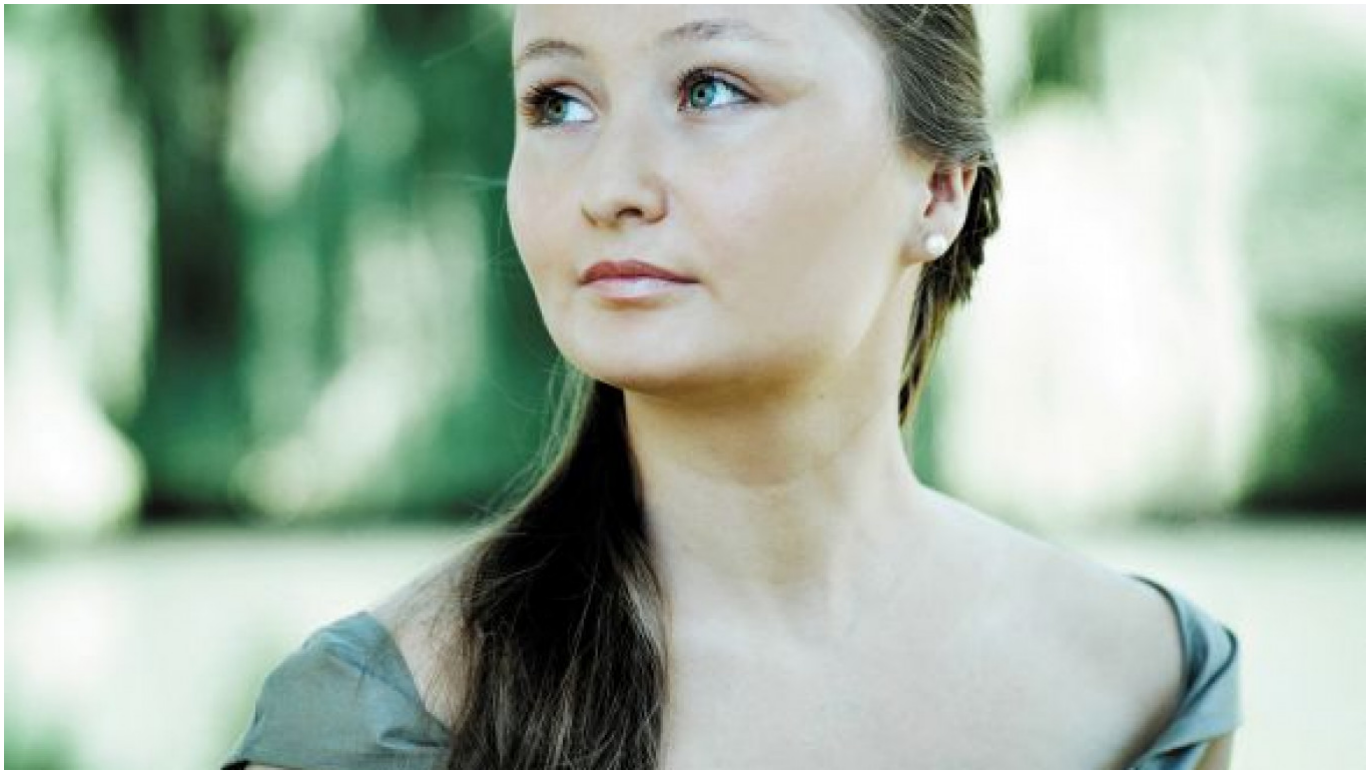
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Julia Lezhneva: A Rising Star in European Opera

By Diana Kondrashin

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Born in far-eastern Sakhalin, Lezhneva is a making her name in Europe. **Franck Juery**

From the freezing cold and cars packing the crossroads of one of central Moscow's main avenues, I find shelter in a warm cafe to meet Julia Lezhneva, one of the brightest young Russian sopranos to emerge in European opera.

Gifted with a strong voice and great range, Lezhneva, 23, has been hailed by the European media as a rising star in the classical music community. She was born on the far-eastern island of Sakhalin, in the capital Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, and was accepted into music college at the age of 13, four years before most of her peers.

At age 18, she appeared on stage with influential French conductor Marc Minkowski to sing Bach's Mass in B minor. Ever since, Lezhneva has performed and recorded with a variety of world-renowned orchestras and singers. This year she signed with one of the biggest labels in classical music: Decca Records.

Barely finding time in her busy schedule to perform in Russia, Julia stayed in Moscow for two weeks this December to join Vladimir Fedoseyev's orchestra on Wednesday on stage at the Moscow Conservatory.

Q: How did it happen that you became extremely popular throughout Europe but still rarely perform in Russia?

A: I always dreamed of studying abroad, apparently because of my passion for Baroque music. In school I always took more of Bach, Handel or Mozart to sing, and it was sort of a psychological difficulty for me to sing those folk songs that I had to prepare for exams, though I really love that music too. I realized I had to move on, to study language. I was lucky to get into a school in Cardiff, Wales.

Q: How did you enter the professional scene in Europe?

A: I think I should credit the great conductor Marc Minkowski for introducing me to the scene. He saw a video of mine on YouTube when I was a student back in Russia. I was performing at the Yelena Obraztsova competition in August 2007 and won the grand prize that day. The next time he was in Moscow in fall 2007, he called me for an audition, and shortly after invited me to sing the second soprano part in Bach's Mass in B minor. He was recording a piece by Bach for the first time in his life with his orchestra, Les Musiciens du Louvre. He decided to take only 10 soloists instead of a choir, so they were singing both as a choir and as soloists. It was my first important performance abroad. And after the CD, Marc started inviting me practically each time I could work for his set. He also introduced me to the Salzburg festival for a solo concert, where I sang a Mozart program with his orchestra. It was truly important.

Q: Now you appear both in operas and solo in front of orchestras, as well as in striking duos. Which genre seems more interesting for you?

A: I think that a concert opera is something that comes so easily for me. I had a wonderful experience with Vivaldi L'Oracolo in Messenia, where I was responsible for a very short but vivid role, and it was of great success. I think this genre is in high demand nowadays, especially in Europe and Asia. Sometimes it is semi-stage, however, the musicians are concentrated basically on music, not on the action. I am quite convinced that most of the time the music is performed on a more serious level than in opera, because opera is focused on action and visual effects.

Q: You are the first Russian singer to become an exclusive artist for the major label Decca Records, and you are going to release a new CD in 2013. How did you get connected with Decca?

A: Our school in Cardiff was unique in terms of the opportunities it presented. Many famous and influential people were invited to give master classes. And Kiri Te Kanawa came twice. On the second year of my studies I performed a Rossini aria in front of her, and she wanted me to become her protege at the Classic BRIT Awards. She was supposed to receive a lifetime achievement award at the ceremony, and she agreed to perform there if they accepted a young artist on stage with her. So she chose me to sing at the ceremony, and it was very successful. Of course, all possible record label managers were there that night, I was so nervous, but

people kindly approached me with their cards after the performance. Over the next two years I got proposals from majors, but I wasn't sure that I was ready for that. They didn't want to do it one-by-one, and I was happy to be free of any serious engagements, having a number of albums recorded. My contracts were made with a small French company, Naive. Eventually I realized that I needed some stability, and the majors were ready to give me freedom in what I want to record, so that is how I signed with Decca.

Q: What music did you put on the album?

A: There are four 18th-century motets by various composers — Vivaldi, Handel, Porpora and Mozart's "Exsultate, jubilate," which was written when he was 16. It was an overview of the genre through some of the greatest musical examples during the 18th century, from Baroque to finally the early Classical period. The Porpora's piece, a link between Handel and Mozart and an example of the Galante style, is a world premiere recording — the manuscript was recently discovered in the British Library. The Vivaldi and Handel pieces can also be considered among their more obscure works. All of these motets were written for extraordinary voices. Handel's motet, for instance, is written for a very high voice, it includes, perhaps, the highest note ever written by the composer: D in the third octave.

Q: Speaking about the range, do you feel that your ability to reach new notes develops?

A: Yes, I think so. I knew that I was going to be a soprano singer even when I was a child. My voice is soft in the middle register and sounds natural there, and in the past I felt unusual trying to reach the highest notes. I was good in the low notes, what made me think that I might be a mezzo-soprano. Sometimes I tried contralto, and people praised me for this and told me that I need to sing a lower repertoire. Nevertheless, through the years of practice I developed my high register, and my voice became softer in the high notes. Actually I think that the main aim for a musician is to represent different colors of the voice so that people could see what they want to find in you and, simultaneously, perform the most suitable repertoire for your voice — this is especially important for a young singer.

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