

Stars Head to St. Petersburg for White Nights Fest

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Rudolf Buchbinder will perform one of Brahms' piano concertos June 29.

ST. PETERSBURG — Modest Mussorgsky's opera "Boris Godunov," which has arguably become the most popular operatic piece by a Russian composer on the international stage in the past decade, has been revamped by renowned British director Graham Vick. The production, which will be staged Friday, Saturday and June 26, opens the 20th International Stars of the White Nights festival, which runs through July 15.

Spanning eight weeks, the annual festival at the Mariinsky Theater showcases a wealth of international classical music talent, from the La Scala Philharmonic Orchestra to Greek virtuoso violinist Leonidas Kavakos (June 19) and mesmerizing French pianist Helene Grimaud (June 18). The orchestra will perform Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique" under the baton of Mariinsky artistic director Valery Gergiev on June 27 and a Beethoven program the following day, conducted by Fabio Luisi.

"Boris Godunov," a joint production between the Mariinsky and Baden-Baden Opera House, will travel to Germany in July. While the director has been unwilling to share his vision of the production before the premiere, he has given a few hints as to the flavor of the staging.

"Great writers and composers base their works on stories of old, but seeing the past and foreseeing the future is something they can only do through the prism of their own experience," the director said. "This stage interpretation of Mussorgsky's opera means searching for a theatrical idiom that makes sense in our time; a dialogue that can show us how we are both like and unlike those distant times."

Vick sought inspiration from a number of sources — from Shakespearean verse to television reports about mass public protests in Moscow and other Russian cities that have brought together tens of thousands of people looking for an alternative to the Putin-Medvedev vertical power system.

"In the 16th century, the All-Russian autocrat Ivan the Terrible asked for the hand of Queen Elizabeth I of England," Graham said in an interview published on the Mariinsky Theater website. "Soon thereafter, Holinshed published his historic chronicles in which Shakespeare discovered the story of one of Scotland's kings — Macbeth. Three hundred years later Karamzin was to write his History of the Russian State, from which Pushkin borrowed the plot for his play in the Shakespearean spirit, Boris Godunov. And yet again dim and distant history was re-evaluated as a universal drama. Existentialist searches of the 19th century engendered a swamp of nihilistic works that depicted the human life cycle as one that was preordained to meet with disaster."

"From Wagner's 'Ring' to Mussorgsky's stunning work — Boris, a man moved by highly complex claims and aspirations, a man obsessed with the need for eternal life and who created so much — we come to negation, disappointment and devastation," Vick concluded.

At this year's festival, Gergiev is focusing on instrumentalists. Refined British pianist Christian Blackshaw will treat audiences to four consecutive piano recitals encompassing all of Mozart's piano sonatas (July 4, 5, 6 and 7), while the aspiring Dutch violinist Janine Jansen will go on stage June 9 playing Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2. Powerful Russian pianist Denis Matsuev, a Russian audience favorite, will play Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1 on June 22.

Thrilling Scottish percussionist Evelyn Glennie will perform a program on June 25 at the Mariinsky Concert Hall alongside the Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra and Valery Gergiev.

Deaf from the age of 12, Glennie gained international fame as one of the world's leading solo percussionists with her astounding technique and unique tactile approach to music: She has learnt to "hear" music through vibrations. Glennie, who is always barefoot on stage, senses low sounds through the floor while "hearing" high notes through her chest and neck.

The percussionist is teaching the self-taught method to hearing-impaired children at the Beethoven Fund, a London-based charity.

"There is no method really, it is simply listening," she said in an interview with The Moscow Times. "It is a choice that you make, whether or not you want to learn it. It would be the same if I decided tomorrow that I wanted to learn to play the cello: Mechanically I could learn over

a period of time. But you need to have a flair for the things that you do."

Glennie's repertoire consists primarily of new music, though the musician is keen to adapt existing scores.

"I have to play new music, otherwise I won't survive as a solo percussion player, because Mozart, Beethoven and Stravinsky did not write for solo percussionists," she smiles. "I try to find a balance between written pieces and improvised works. I love to give concerts when I am fully improvising because it asks the audiences to listen in a completely different way. And it gets much more of me as a musician because I can explore all sorts of colors and moods, which is not always possible in a concerto."

The musician believes that a piece of music does not always have to be "enjoyable" in the usual sense of the word.

"It could be the most squeaky gig on the planet, but there could be something really exciting about, say, the use of percussion or the orchestration," she said. "It is just that the composer must hang on to his own unique voice. For performers, it is equally important to be able to listen to their own inner voices."

The festival's symphonic programs this year will favor Brahms: The Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Gergiev is embarking on a series of performances that will see all four of Brahms' symphonies (June 13, 15, 21 and 29) and all of the composer's instrumental concertos. Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1 will be performed by Austrian virtuoso Rudolf Buchbinder (June 29), while Piano Concerto No. 2 will be played by Yefim Bronfman (June 13).

For a full schedule see www.mariinsky.ru

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