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Dark Knight

Ildar Abdrazakov

Centerstage in a
New *Prince Igor* at the Met

BY F. PAUL DRISCOLL

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of Borodin's *Prince Igor*

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As Verdi's Attila at the Met, 2010

By F. Paul Driscoll

This month, Ildar Abdrazakov takes on the title role in the Metropolitan Opera's new production of Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor* — the Russian bass's fourth new production for the Met since his 2004 company debut. On a Saturday afternoon last September, when he was midway through a run as Boito's Mefistofele at San Francisco Opera, Abdrazakov sat down for an interview with OPERA NEWS in the press room of the War Memorial Opera House.

ILDAR ABDRAZAKOV: How are we doing?

OPERA NEWS: Good.

IA: Good.

ON: You know this is for the February cover.

IA: I know. I'm already scared.

ON: No, no, no. There's nothing to be scared about. Let's talk about *Prince Igor*, shall we?

IA: The opera *Prince Igor*? Or the real person?

ON: The historical character. When you were in school in Ufa, was he someone that you studied?

IA: Yes, of course. In school, it was in our literature program — the [*Tale of Igor's Campaign*], the epic of Aleksei Musin-Pushkin. So, we studied it. Of course I did not know at that time — I did not dream — that in the future I would be singing this or that role in any opera. Now I will be Prince Igor, of course. I should have paid more attention back then, yes? Now, it's an enormous thing — oh, wow. Times have changed, and the Metropolitan Opera will be bringing back the *Prince Igor* in a new production, and I will sing the debut. It is a big advance, yeah?

ON: And this will be only your second Russian role at the Met. I was surprised to read that Dosifei in *Khovanshchina* [in 2012] was the first time you'd sung Russian music outside of Russia.

IA: Yes, exactly.

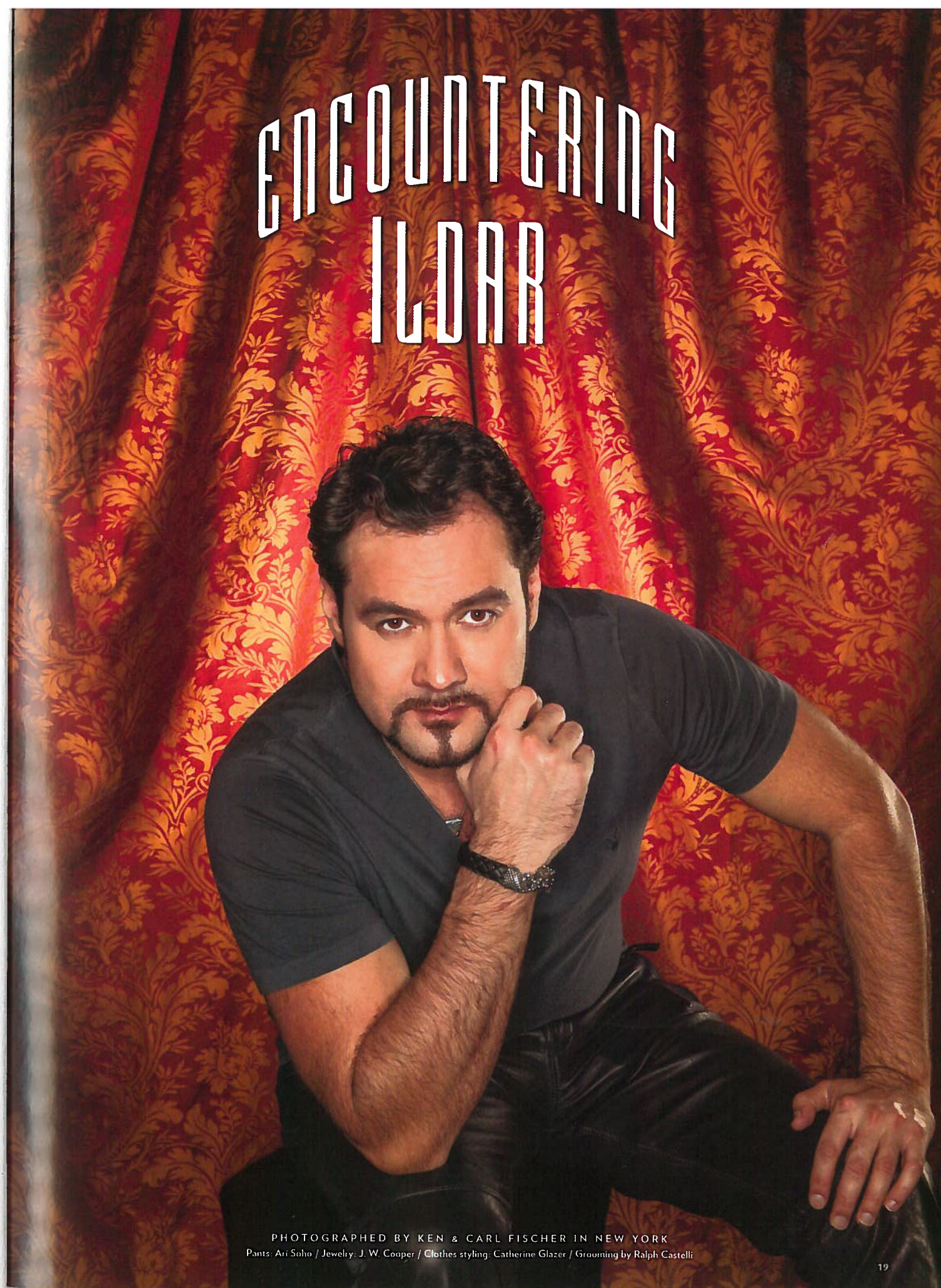
ON: Why is that? You seem to have moved right into Italian music when your international career began.

IA: I have worked a lot within Italy. From the first contract — from the first day when I was there — they offered me only Italian and French repertoire. I don't know why. I don't know — perhaps I am the first Russian singer to sing only Italian repertoire there.

ON: Obviously you do it very well, but is the Italian repertoire something that feels good?

IA: Yes, completely. It's because of my voice. My voice is more close to that bel canto sound than it is to the sound one needs for the big, big Russian things. But the language itself, the Italian language, came naturally to me. I didn't speak Italian at all when I first went there. But I studied very hard, and after just six months, I did my first interview in my professional life in Italian. And Italy is a second home for any singer — any opera singer. Like Mecca is for the Muslim people, for the opera singers, it is La Scala. Of course, for the Russian singers who remember the period when the opportunity to sing there was closed, to be in Milan on that stage was our dream.

ON: How old were you when the barriers broke down and people were able to travel more?



PHOTOGRAPHED BY KEN & CARL FISCHER IN NEW YORK
Pants: Ari Soho / Jewelry: J. W. Cooper / Clothes styling: Catherine Glazer / Grooming by Ralph Castelli

IA: It was 1992. I was sixteen.

ON: You made your La Scala debut when you were in your early twenties. Was it intimidating working with Riccardo Muti for the first time?

IA: No, because I was only covering the first time I worked with him. I sat there, and I just saw the rehearsals. I watched every bit of Muti's work that I could — how he worked with other singers, what he did, what advice, what direction he offered about the vocal line or the meaning of the words. It was very, very interesting — a real education for me, because he worked at the piano with the cast at least three weeks before the opening. Sometimes he played himself, other times he works from the side. But it was always amazing.

ON: When you were starting to work with him, did you ever think that you'd be doing *Attila* at the Metropolitan Opera with him? How did your relationship develop? By the time I saw you work with him [in 2010], you clearly had an extraordinary musical partnership. Was that something that took a long time to develop, or was it there right from the beginning?

IA: [Pause] I don't know. I can't remember. It's something from here [points to heart], from here, you know? I can't explain what this is. It's like love. I don't know what this is in words, but words are not ...

ON: Adequate?

IA: Yes. Words are not enough. But we — he and I — feel the music together. With the ear, with the breath, with the eyes. It is a big connection.

ON: So back to *Prince Igor* for a little bit. Most people who will be seeing this at the Metropolitan Opera will never have seen *Prince Igor* before. What is it about this opera that makes it a great work?

IA: I know this opera a long time. You know what's the beautiful thing, actually? When I was fourteen years old, I worked at the Bashkir State Opera and Ballet Theatre in Ufa, where I was born, as a super. And I was onstage in their production of *Prince Igor*. I was one of the guys with the shield and the spear. So. The music is fantastic. Beautiful. The famous dance of the Polovtsians everyone loves. And the aria for Prince Igor, this is very important, a wonderful piece. Amazing. But — [Pause] it's a difficult

opera, not only for people who see this the first time, but for everyone. The personage of Prince Igor himself is not easy. He destroys himself. In the beginning of the opera, he seems as if he is going to be a hero, but in the middle of the opera it is clear that he is not. He goes with the people — he does what he does to be in favor with them, yeah? And he is destroyed.

ON: So you think he is a difficult character for people to understand?

IA: In many ways, yes. The role is not difficult — of course I can do it. But from the aspect of the dramaturgy, the *Regie* — it is difficult for the stage director to put Igor in place in the opera in a way that makes what he does easy to understand.

ON: How do you like to work with a director on a new production? Do you have a method for starting work on a character, or do you like to wait until the rehearsals begin?

IA: Before the rehearsals, I think about what I want to do for my character or explain to the stage director. Of course, first, I need to see the stage designs — is it a modern production, is it old, or classic?

ON: Do you have a preference?

IA: No, no. I can do everything, so modern or classic is fine. Just maybe not to be vulgar. I hate to be vulgar. I'm not conservative, but I prefer to do the things beautifully.

ON: Obviously, you've worked with some of the best conductors in the world. Do you wait to see how a conductor is going to work before you offer a musical opinion?

IA: My beginning is the composer. I want to sing what the composer wrote. That is first. Everything is there in the score. Then, maybe the conductor and I can find some small things we can discuss — places to maybe go a little bit faster or a little bit more broad. To choose what to accent. If we both study the score, I don't need to explain to the conductor what I want to do. I do what the composer says for my character, my personage. And then, if the conductor has something to tell me, to explain some force in the music, he will do that. I'm flexible in this

discussion.

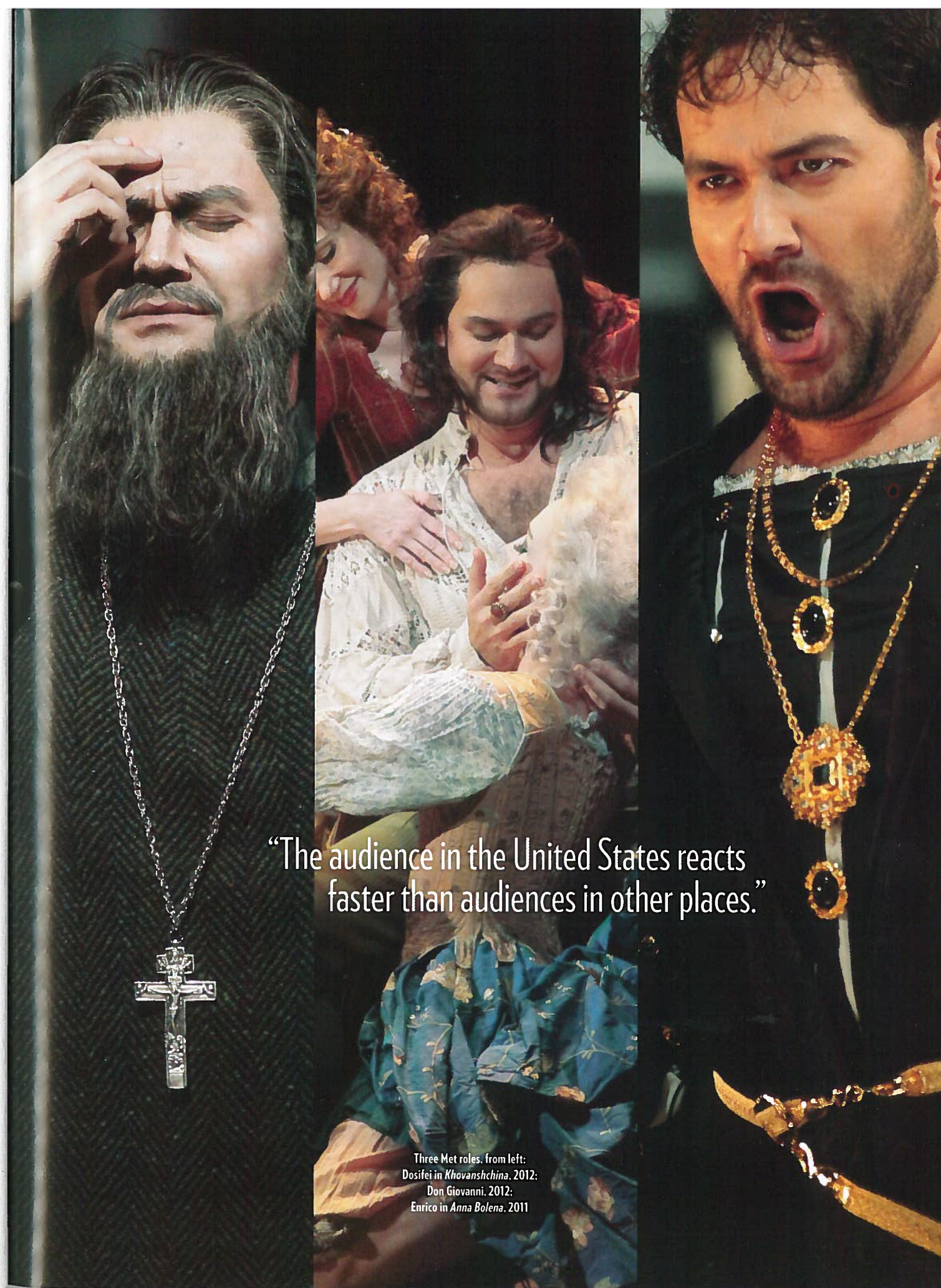
ON: Do you ever wish that you could spend more time playing a romantic part, someone closer to your own age? Basses don't



In the Met's *Contes d'Hoffmann*, 2010



As Banco at La Scala, 2008. above: Coppelius in *Hoffmann* at La Scala, 2012



Three Met roles. From left: Dosifei in *Khovanshchina*, 2012; Don Giovanni, 2012; Enrico in *Anna Bolena*, 2011

seem to get to do that much, do they?

IA: No. Just in *Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* ... and maybe as Méphistophélès. But in the Verdi operas it's only Attila and then Banco [in *Macbeth*]. Beautiful young men roles are more for baritone. Like Escamillo — okay, I can sing it, but still, it's a lit-

tle too high. And the big aria has just one color. You need to push, because it is short but it is important. Everyone knows this music. The voice needs to move up, which is hard, and the role is on the stage like [claps hands] and starts to sing at once. It is like fireworks! Or it should be!

ON: When you were singing Henry VIII in *Anna Bolena* at the Met, you said [in an interview for *Opera*] that Donizetti was your composer.

IA: I love Donizetti. What he wrote for bass is fantastic. The aria from *Lucia di Lammermoor* is a beautiful aria for the bass — it's like young Verdi, for example, like the music for *Attila*. We can see the very close connection between them in the years and in the style. So Donizetti is for my voice — not too high and not too low. So, it's for me. I choose my repertoire using my voice. But I never think about — is this for baritone or for bass? If I can do it, let's try it. Why not? For example, I

know that right now the Inquisitor in *Don Carlos* is not for me, for sure. I have no voice like that — and my voice is maybe not big enough for that, but it's still young, thank God, and flexible. That's good. I would like to sing Mustafa [in *L'italiana in Algeri*] again — I would like to continue with Rossini, with Mozart now. Of the Mozart, I love *Don Giovanni*. It's more fun for me than *Figaro*. *Giovanni* asks more of a singer — more acting. And the ensemble is beautiful.

Someday, yes, the operas written for the heavy voices will work for me. Now, they would be ridiculous. When a child is born, he can't walk immediately. First he crawls, then he stands, then he runs. So, I need to understand exactly which roles I am ready for. I have many dreams. Now, I just need to wait. I hope *Boris Godunov* coming in the future — maybe five, seven years. And I'm ready for *Don Quichotte* of Massenet. Someday, maybe, the Dutchman. We'll see.

ON: Is there any bass of the past that you look to as a model?

IA: Not as a model, but I like very much Cesare Siepi. Nicolai Ghiaurov, of course. Samuel Ramey. He is great.

ON: What about Chaliapin? He suppos-

edly made his debut in your hometown, didn't he?

IA: Yes, exactly, exactly. Chaliapin was of course one of the best basses in Russia in his time. But I don't believe that someone now could start to sing like Chaliapin and make a career today. [He] sounds old school. We are in another age.

ON: What was it like growing up in Ufa? You had a great deal of exposure to the arts.

IA: Yes, but I thought I would stay in Ufa and sing in our Philharmonia, our opera house. That's it. And then, after I studied in the conservatory for two years, I thought I would like to do some competitions. And I won. Irina Arkhipova invited me to her competition, and when I won, I started to work with her. We had this group of five or seven singers, and we did concerts in all of Russia. Valery Gergiev heard me at one of the concerts, and he invited me to the Mariinsky. I had never, never thought to do that.

ON: Was Arkhipova supportive of your career?

IA: A great deal. Yes. She supported not only me, but she supported Dmitri Hvorostovsky, she supported Anna Netrebko, she supported Olga Borodina — many more. For this generation who are now stars, Arkhipova was like the

mother of Russian singers.

ON: Are the audiences in the United States very different from the audiences in Europe and in Russia?

IA: I don't want to say that one audience is easier than the other, but the audience in the United States reacts faster than audiences in other places. They are enthusiastic. They like to have fun. Each word, each movement onstage they react. Their

behavior is not conservative. If they like it, they scream. In Italy, if they love it, they scream like here. If they don't love it in Italy — phew! Here, the audiences don't do that. They boo just stage directors — not singers. [Laughs]

ON: I'm told that you play a fair amount of the video game *Angry Birds*.

IA: Not anymore. I'm finished with *Angry Birds* now.

ON: Really?

IA: Yes. Now I play *Candy Crush*.

ON: *Candy Crush*?

IA: It's a good game. When I was traveling from Europe to San Francisco, I saw maybe half the plane playing this. I play it when I have a break between acts. I don't need to think — I just go chh, chh, chh with that. So, that's it. □



As Mozart's Figaro at the Met, 2012



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Above: Christa Ludwig as Charlotte in

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Viewpoint

The Prince of the City

Bass Ildar Abdrazakov is not yet forty, but he has built an impressive resumé in the years since his 1998 debut at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, as Mozart's Figaro. At twenty-five, Abdrazakov made his debut at La Scala, where he was soon established as a great favorite; other theaters that have welcomed him include Rome Opera, Covent Garden, Paris Opera, the Salzburg Festival, Vienna State Opera, Teatro Real in Madrid, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Los Angeles Opera, Washington National Opera and San Francisco Opera, where he opened the 2013–14 season in the title role of *Mefistofele*.

Abdrazakov made his Met debut in 2004, as Masetto in *Don Giovanni*. His current tally of more than one hundred performances with the company includes leading roles in two Met premieres — Enrico (Henry VIII) in *Anna Bolena* and the title role in Verdi's *Attila* — as well as memorable out-

ings as Escamillo, Méphistophélès, Don Giovanni and the four villains in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. *Attila* gave New York audiences a chance to sample Abdrazakov's impressive musical partnership with Riccardo Muti, who has paced the bass in Milan, Chicago, Rome and elsewhere in a variety of Italian repertoire.

Abdrazakov sings most of his roles these days in Italian or French: unlike many other Russian artists of his generation, he is not identified with Russian repertoire in the theaters of Western Europe and North America. In fact, Abdrazakov's Dosifei in the Met's superb 2012 revival of *Khovanshchina* marked the first time that he had sung a Russian-language role outside of Russia. His Russian repertoire list is due to expand this month, when Abdrazakov sings Prince Igor in a new

Met production of Borodin's thorny masterpiece by the brilliant Russian director and designer Dmitri Tcherniakov. The new *Prince Igor*, which marks Tcherniakov's Met debut, is one of the most anticipated productions of the year. Tcherniakov's work is unconventional but fascinating; his bracing productions are often audacious in detail but invariably intelligent, offering dramatic and musical cohesion of a rare order.

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F. PAUL DRISCOLL

CORRECTION: In "Molto Buffo" (Dec.), baritone Ambrogio Maestri states that his teacher, tenor Umberto Grilli "never came to the U.S.A., because he was afraid of flying." Grilli did appear in the U.S. in 1975, when he sang Percy in Dallas Opera's production of *Anna Bolena* with Renata Scottò, Tatiana Troyanos and Ezio Flagello.

In "In Review" (Dec.), Ferrando's cavatina from Act II of *Così Fan Tutte*, "Tradito, schernito" (No. 27), is cited as "often-cut." The Ferrando Act II aria that properly deserves this description is "Ah! Lo veggio" (No. 24), which has been omitted from some Met revivals of the opera, as well as several *Così* recordings. Matthew Polenzani, the Ferrando of the Met's *Così* performance under review, sang both pieces — superbly.



Abdrazakov, the Met's new Prince Igor

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