ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

TRAVELS WITH A DIVA

On the road with the soprano Marina Poplavskaya.

BY GAY TALESE

On an August night this past summer, the opera singer Marina Poplavskaya lay motionless for nearly three hours on the floor of her mother's apartment in Moscow, having collapsed shortly after 4 A.M. from inhaling noxious smoke from the forest fires that were burning out of control in the countryside; she was feverish and had no clothes on, after a sleepless night in hundred-degree heat with no air-conditioning. Since Russia began keeping weather records, a hundred and thirty years ago, there had never been a heat wave comparable to this one. And never before in Poplavskaya's career as a soprano, in which she had frequently performed from a prone position and was often dead or dying by the final curtain—smothered by her husband in "Otello," stabbed by her own hand in "Turandot," drowned in boiling water in "La Juive," wasted with tuberculosis in "La Traviata"—had she imagined that the melodramatic scenes she had regularly given voice to would bear any relation to her life offstage.

Even after she was revived by two emergency medical technicians, who had come to the apartment at around 8 A.M. in response to a call from her mother, Poplavskaya, who is thirty-three, lacked the strength to get to her feet. Her mother placed cool wet towels on her forehead and supported the back of her neck with a chilled bottle of Friuli wine that Poplavskaya had bought at the duty-free shop in the Frankfurt airport the week before.

She had just enough strength to telephone a friend.

"Darling, I'm about to die," she whispered into the receiver. "And so I ask that you help take care of my mother!"

A few days earlier, Poplavskaya had returned to Moscow for a visit with her mother and her grandmother before going on the road again: first to Buenos Aires, as a soloist in two concerts under the direction of Daniel Barenboim; next to Barcelona, to sing the part of Micaela in "Carmen"; and then to the Metropolitan Opera House, in New York, where, in November, she would appear as the mismated Queen Elisabeth of Valois in "Don Carlo." On New Year's Eve, she is scheduled to open in "La Traviata," singing the role of the self-sacrificing courtesan Violetta Valéry.

Poplavskaya made her début at the Met in December of 2007, as Natasha Rostova, the hopeful but abandoned maiden-in-waiting in "War and Peace," and she returned in 2009, with "Turandot." Of "Turandot," Anthony Tommasini wrote in the *Times* that "the most complete performance came from the elegant Russian soprano, Marina Poplavskaya, as Liù, the slave girl. . . . She sang with warmth, beautifully earthy colorings and captivating pianissimo high notes."

Since then, she has kept a busy performing schedule, being increasingly in demand and shuttling between opera houses around the world. I had been introduced to her in New York, when she was rehearsing for "War and Peace." One night, she came out to dinner with me and my wife and a few friends, at Elaine's. During dessert, she suddenly got up from the table, raised her arms, and began to sing a Russian folk song. The noisy diners stopped talking. After serenading the restaurant with a few more, she bowed deeply and undoubtedly became the first opera singer at Elaine's to get a standing ovation.

Marina Poplavskaya was still a relative unknown in New York. During rehearsals, she had been relegated to the second cast, with the soprano Irina Mataeva singing the role of Natasha in the first cast. The Met's general manager, Peter Gelb, however, had become much taken by Poplavskaya's singing and stage manner, and, shortly before the opening, the two sopranos switched places. "Her presence is extraordinary," Gelb told me. "Some singers have it, others do not. It's something beyond practice—it's a natural phenomenon. She has it."

Aside from her powerful voice, which emanates from a body that retains its robustness through her devotion to such physical exercises as swimming and salsa dancing, her most distinctive features are her expressive blue-gray eyes, pearl-white complexion, and blond hair, which falls to her waist.

On the occasions when I saw Poplavskaya during the run of "War and Peace," and two years later, during "Turandot," we discussed the possibility of my visiting her in Moscow. I was curious to see what it was like for an independent young singer on the rise to travel back and forth between the world's leading stages, with no fixed home, coping with the challenge of singing well while enduring the fatigues and frustrations of travel—the cancelled flights, the visa problems, the lost luggage, the tedium of checking in and out of hotels. I had never been to Russia, and when she suggested that late summer would be a good time to come I made the arrangements. As it turned out, my travel dates coincided with the forest fires and the heat wave that were smothering Moscow. Despite Poplavskaya's warnings—she called to tell me about the night she spent unconscious on her mother's floor—I stuck to my plan and told her that I would be happy to wait out the weather in my air-conditioned hotel near Red Square. She relented, asking only that I bring from New York as many surgical masks as I could find. They were in short supply, she said, since people were wearing them not only in the streets but also in their workplaces and homes.

As my plane made its descent into Moscow, I could smell smoke from the fires thousands of feet below. An hour

later, my cab pulled up to the Hotel National, and I could only vaguely make out the clock tower of the Kremlin and St. Basil's Cathedral, a few hundred yards away. While I was unpacking, Poplavskaya called to confirm our lunch date for the following day, but she told me that my promised tour of the city would have to be cut short. She could barely speak, much less sing, and with her hectic schedule in the weeks ahead—requiring that she perform in Buenos Aires, Barcelona, and New York—it was essential that she recover her health as quickly as possible. The cool air in Argentina, where it was winter, was a good place to start.

And so, during the following days, I saw a bit of Moscow, travelling in an air-conditioned 2002 Toyota silver hatchback that was driven by Poplavskaya's mother, Elena, who serves as her daughter's chauffeur, not only in Moscow but in foreign cities as well. Elena has always appreciated classical music; Poplavskaya told me that while her mother was in labor with her, she was singing Schubert's "Ave Maria." Elena's goal as a young woman had been to become a competitive bicyclist, but she was forced to abandon the idea after she was struck by a truck in a drunk-driving accident. As part of her rehabilitation regimen, she exercised at a local swimming pool, and that was where she met her future husband and Marina's father, Vladimir. He had bumped into her in the water, and he apologized. Elena told me that this was the first and last time that Vladimir apologized for anything. In 1976, after a quick courtship, during which she found him at times to be obstinate and evasive (she never really knew what he did for a living), she married him. Marina was born the following year, and by the time her brother, Stanislav, arrived, in 1982, her parents' marriage was so contentious that she lived most of the time with her grandmother.

I was taken to visit the grandmother, Tamara, on my second day in Moscow. She is a plain but vital woman with alert brown eyes, a rosy complexion, and silver hair that she wears secured in a short ponytail. She lives as a widow in a tidy two-room apartment on the twelfth floor of a much patched and repainted gray cement building.

The first thing I saw when I entered the living room with Poplavskaya and her mother was a large poster of the singer, advertising a performance at Covent Garden. It bore the caption "Turbocharged. Marina can do 0-60 in one second. Decibels that is. One voice. Complete control. Total power. Va va voom." A bookcase contained works by such writers as Georges Simenon, Mark Twain, Leo Tolstoy, and Alexandre Dumas *père* and *fils*.

"At the age of eight, I would sit here reading Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and all the Russian greats, because they were right here on the wall in front of me," Poplavskaya said, seated between her grandmother and her mother on a sofa. She described her childhood self as a blend of precocity and immaturity—a third-grade misfit whom many of her teachers and fellow-students resented, because she was in the habit of using big words. When she was bored in class, she recalled, she would interrupt the proceedings with a song. After she had done that a few times, some of her teachers pronounced her mentally disturbed and recommended that she be sent to a facility where such children received special treatment.

At this, Poplavskaya's mother and grandmother exchanged some soft words in Russian. What they were saying, as Poplavskaya translated, was that her so-called mental problems in school had nothing to do with her but were the result of the backwardness of the Soviet education system.

Poplavskaya got up to show me around the apartment. She pointed out the sofa in the living room where she had slept as a child, and the spot where she once kept cages containing a hamster, turtles, and a parrot. She said that she had not been allowed to have pets at her parents' apartment. After they separated, she said, everyone in the family except her father moved in with her grandmother. She never understood or cared for the remote man her mother had married, but even so, she said, "I always missed having a father." Elena now lives alone in the apartment in central Moscow. When Poplavskaya is in town, she stays with her mother and sleeps on the couch.

On my last night in Moscow, I arranged with the concierge to be awakened the following morning at four-thirty. I was to meet Poplavskaya at the airport for a 7:25 flight to Madrid, where we would change planes and travel for another sixteen hours to Buenos Aires. Poplavskaya's mother would be taking her to the airport but would not be joining us on the trip.

I was a bit concerned about seeing Poplavskaya that morning, because the previous evening a slight rift had developed between us. The ill-feeling had begun shortly after we left her grandmother's apartment. Her mother had gone off to do errands, and Poplavskaya wanted to walk me around the old neighborhood. She showed me her school, and the playground where she had fallen and cut her lip as a child. Suddenly, she looked at her watch and said, "Oh, it's getting late! I must get to my rehearsal!" She added, "You're making me talk too much."

She ran and I followed her, watching as she held her right hand in the air in the direction of the oncoming traffic. Several taxi-drivers slowed, but she waved them away. "They're thieves," she told me. "They overcharge, and they also might kidnap and kill you. We stay away from them."

A private car pulled up, and she leaned in to speak to the young man behind the wheel. Grabbing the rear door handle, she motioned for me to get in. Within seconds, we were speeding through traffic and soon arrived at our destination. The man, who revealed that he was a professional race-car driver, refused Poplavskaya's offer to pay him.

I followed her into a small recital hall that had a piano in front and a few dozen folding chairs arranged in uneven rows behind it. Except for Poplavskaya and her accompanist, I was the only one present, and for at least an hour I sat in the back enjoying the vibrancy of her voice as she sang, in Latin, lines from Verdi's Requiem, which she was to per-

form in Buenos Aires as a soloist with La Scala's orchestra and chorus.

Every once in a while during the rehearsal, she suddenly stopped singing. She stood and stared at the sheet music she held at eye level and began to shake her head in a way that sent her long loose hair thrashing about in whiplash fashion. She spoke harshly to the pianist, who would draw himself up and sit quietly, looking down at the keyboard. Tense moments of silence followed, punctuated only by a sound coming from Poplavskaya's cell phone, which sat on a nearby table. The phone had been programmed to function as a metronome. No matter what Poplavskaya was doing, it performed its duty: *tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.*

Then, after nodding at the accompanist, she started again, singing in Latin: "*Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?*" ("What shall I say, wretch that I am?") . . . "*Lacrimosa dies illa qua resurget ex favilla iudicandus homo reus.*" ("Tearful will be that day, when shall rise out of the ashes the guilty to be judged.")

The word "*lacrimosa*" seemed to present a problem regarding pitch or intonation, and she paused to repeat it many times: "*Lacrimosa! . . . Lacrimosa! . . . Lacrimosa!*" Once, as she sang the word, she slammed her right palm down on the top of the piano.

The pianist sat in silence.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.

After the rehearsal, she and the pianist parted cordially. Then she walked over to me and said she was sorry that I had to sit through such a trying session. She stiffened and went on to suggest that her flawed singing and her fatigue were partly attributable to having me around. With her voice rising, and her tone almost as harsh as when she had been talking to the pianist, she said that answering so many of my questions and serving as my interpreter with her mother and grandmother had taken a toll on her throat. It was my fault that she had sung so poorly.

I expressed my regrets and promised that, from now on, I would be content to attend her performances and restrict our conversations to times of her choosing. The next morning, I was relieved, when I spotted Poplavskaya across the business-class lounge at the airport, to see her smiling at me and waving me in her direction.

After landing in Madrid, we had a beer together while we waited to change planes, and she told me a long story about sleeping on an airport bench in London one night in 2008 because of a visa mixup. This sort of thing was almost unavoidable, she said, because, with her career moving so quickly and with enticing opportunities being offered on short notice, her travel dates were often switched at the last minute.

A few examples: In early January of 2008, she flew to Moscow from New York, having completed the run of "War and Peace" at the Met. Then she went right back to New York, because she could not resist the opportunity to perform at Avery Fisher Hall on January 25th with the conductor Leon Botstein and his American Symphony Orchestra, in a concert called "The Russian Futurists." During that period, Poplavskaya spent a lot of time in London, where she appeared in four productions under the auspices of the Royal Opera House: "Götterdämmerung," "Don Giovanni," "Eugene Onegin," and "Don Carlo." During her final scene on the last night of "Onegin," as she walked offstage she stumbled and fell, chipping a bone in her foot and tearing a few ligaments. She had to cancel a flight to Spain, where she had planned to visit San Lorenzo Escorial, a royal palace, as a method of preparing emotionally for her role as the queen in "Don Carlo." She walked with crutches for two and a half months, and when she was rehearsing for "Don Carlo" she wore an air boot under her gown to ease the pain. Six weeks later, she was singing the part of Desdemona in the Salzburg Festival's production of "Otello," conducted by Riccardo Muti. Her schedule is booked for the next five years.

With the plane to Buenos Aires ready for boarding, I followed a few steps behind Poplavskaya. Not for the first time did I notice how gracefully she carries herself and how nearly perfect is her posture, her spine straight, her shoulders back, her head held high. Her carry-on bag, slung over her right shoulder, appeared to be very heavy, but she carried it with ease. Inside it, in addition to her laptop, which contains downloaded recordings of hundreds of operas and symphonies, she keeps many books and in-

structional pamphlets. That day, she had a copy of "Practical Method of Italian Singing," by Nicola Vaccai (1790-1848), and "Esercizi per la Vocalizzazione," by Girolamo Crescentini, an eighteenth-century Italian castrato. She also carried the full operatic score of "Carmen," all six hundred and fifty-three pages of it. She is one of the few opera singers who not only know their own part in each opera and concert but are also familiar with the parts played by every other singer and instrumentalist in the orchestra.

In her bag, she also had the two-hundred-and-seventy-page conductor's score of Verdi's Requiem, which she had annotated with pencilled notations. She carries a dozen or so colored pencils with her, each representing to her a particular emotional color or key. Her notes on the score are color-coded to signify mood shifts or changes in harmonics. B minor is represented by emerald green, C major, by a shade of goldish red.

Shortly after we took off, Poplavskaya removed a headset from her bag and, after placing it over her ears, began listening to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, one of the pieces she would be performing under Barenboim in Buenos Aires. She briefly lent me the earphones so that I could appreciate the sound quality. Then, after she had readjusted it over her ears, she leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes.

I tried to get some sleep, too, but I kept recalling scenes and sights from my brief visit to Moscow—the Bolshoi Theatre, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, the food market where I had watched as Poplavskaya skipped down the aisle pushing a cart filled with groceries for her grandmother, humming along with Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 2, which was playing over a loudspeaker.

It was evident that she had loved music all her life. Her beloved grandmother Tamara played the guitar and taught her folk songs. (She has mixed feelings about her grandfather Sergei, who had trouble holding his liquor and his job. He once took young Marina to a barber, who, without consulting her, lopped off her long braids. Later, she surmised that he had sold her hair to pay his bar bill.)

When Poplavskaya was nine, she told me, she was home alone after school one day when she heard an announcement on the radio that the Bolshoi Theatre was auditioning youngsters for its children's choir. She immediately headed to the arts center, leaving a note on the kitchen table for her mother and grandmother. After a fifty-minute subway ride and a forty-minute bus ride, she stood in line outside the recital hall for a few hours with more than a hundred other children, all of them escorted by parents or guardians. When it was her turn, she took her place onstage in front of a director, who sat behind a desk. He ignored her and looked around, as if he expected to speak first to the adult who had brought her. Then he turned to her and asked, "Why are you here?"

"That's a strange question," she replied. "I'm here to sing."

"And what will you sing?"

"I can sing many things," Poplavskaya said, "but I'll start with a folk song."

After she had sung two songs, the director asked, "And now would you like to sing the scales?"

"I find that odd," she told him. "Because I've already sung."

"Oh, this little girl has a strong character," the director said.

"May I go now?" she asked.

"Don't you want to wait for the results?" a pianist asked.

"No, I must get home," Poplavskaya said. She wrote down her telephone number for them, and said, "Please call me. If I've passed, fine. If not, I shall sing in another choir."

It was nearly 10 P.M. when Poplavskaya returned home. Her mother was angry at her, but she asked, "Well, did you at least pass?"

"They will call," Poplavskaya said. "Or maybe they won't."

A week later, Elena got a call from the director, who told her, "Your extraordinary child has been accepted for a probation period to sing with the Bolshoi Theatre Choir. We will pay her sixty rubles a month."

With her first paycheck, Poplavskaya bought herself a pair of red leather boots. Before long, she was singing with the choir at concerts and operas all over Russia and Europe, requiring at times that she be excused from school. This did little to increase her popularity with her teachers and her fellow-students.

At fifteen, having completed the tenth grade, her last year at school, she enrolled at the Ippolitov-Ivanov Music Institute, in Moscow, where she studied with a stern Siberian-born teacher

named Peter Tarasov. Three years later, Poplavskaya fell in love with and married a language teacher named Victor Ivanovsky, who was twenty-two years her senior and the son of the venerable Russian tenor Vladimir Ivanovsky. Tarasov became infuriated with Poplavskaya, warning that her marriage would be the end of her career. "He thought I exchanged my talent for the family life and he got so furious that he didn't coach or speak to me for two years," she told me.

As it happened, the career went on and the marriage ended. Poplavskaya would have four husbands over the next eleven years—two legal and two common-law—without any of them altering her routine of living out of a suitcase and travelling all over the world in search of competitive musical events offering prize money and prestige.

In 1997, when she was nineteen, she won first prize for her group in the Bella Voce competition for young Russian singers. In 1999, she took second prize in the Elena Obraztsova International Competition for young opera singers, in St. Petersburg. A year later, in Belgium, she was a finalist in the Queen Elisabeth Competition.

By this time, her marriage to Victor Ivanovsky was over. As she later described it in an e-mail to me, "I left in February 2002 at 4:30 in the morning after I was another time told that I am not a good wife, as I do not manage well with my 'obligations' as a house wife. Meaning: ironing tons of clothing, washing everyday toilet and bathroom, after I am back home from my studies (which was after 10 p.m. sometimes). . . . I just left, I ran from not being free, from it, from not being understood and not being loved."

That August, while seeking a divorce, Poplavskaya pledged herself, in her fashion, to a tenor from Kazakhstan whom she referred to as her "social husband." She lived with him for a while in her grandmother's apartment. She was then twenty-five and a soloist at the Bolshoi Theatre, soon to make her operatic début singing the role of Ann Truelove in Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress." By the following March, she had a new "social husband," a Greek diplomat posted in Moscow. She was on the Bolshoi stage a good deal that year, first in Tchaikovsky's "Mazeppa," and then in Wagner's "Flying Dutchman." In June, during the second act of "Dutchman," her character sings the famous lines about the cursed Dutchman needing a faithful wife, and is crushed in the arms of the bass-baritone who plays him. She found herself enjoying the feeling. "It was," she told me, "love from one sight."

In keeping with Poplavskaya's preference for older men, the bass-baritone who played the Dutchman was an American some thirty years her senior named Robert Hale. (She ultimately married Hale in a Presbyterian church in Arizona, on August 2, 2006. Within a few months, she had filed for a divorce.)

When she met Hale onstage at the Bolshoi, she was less fluent in English than in German, French, and Italian. But after she rented an apartment in London that year, under the auspices of the Covent Garden Young Artists Programme, her mastery of English improved. So did her mastery of public relations. The British press praised her singing but was particularly charmed by her personality and her offstage antics.

One morning in 2005, she had a nine-o'clock audition at the Royal Opera House and was also expected to be in Moscow that evening at the International Performing Arts Center to rehearse for her role in Stravinsky's "Les Noces." After completing her audition, she rushed out the stage door, still wearing her long concert dress, and met, by prearrangement, a motorcycle driver who was employed by a courier service. They sped from the center of London to the airport in twenty-five minutes, Poplavskaya's arms wrapped around the man's waist and her hair streaming from under a helmet. She made her 11 A.M. flight and was in Moscow by early evening, in time for the rehearsal. The London papers covered the motorbike incident, and, later, the Royal Opera House created an ad campaign featuring her that resulted in the "Turbocharged" poster I had seen in her grandmother's apartment.

After sleeping for several hours on the plane, I turned and saw Poplavskaya still wearing her headset and with both eyes closed, except that now she was waving a yellow pencil in front of her face, as if holding a baton, unmindful of the attention she was attracting among a few passengers.

Finally, nearly twenty-four hours after leaving the smoldering city of Moscow, we landed in Buenos Aires. The weather was frigid—winter in the Southern Hemisphere. A driver sent by the concert's promoters met us and took us to a small hotel in the center of town, across the street from the ornate Teatro Colón. Unable to get a room in the hotel where Poplavskaya was staying, I had found accommodations a few doors away, at a larger hotel called the Panamericano, although I was told by the desk clerk there that, owing to a forthcoming convention, I would be able to stay for only five days. Poplavskaya's first concert, conducted by Barenboim, would not occur for nearly two weeks.

But, even before I had completed my registration at the hotel's front desk, I heard my name being called in a loud and strident voice. Turning, I saw Poplavskaya walking swiftly in my direction bearing a large suitcase in each hand, her carry-on bag slung over a shoulder. Making no attempt to conceal her agitation, she announced that the other hotel had assigned her to a smoking room, and she could not accept this. She went on to say that the manager had refused to give her another room, and, furthermore, he expected her to pay for the first room. She had protested so vociferously that the manager finally backed down, being by then relieved just to have her remove her hostile presence from his lobby.

Now she asked the Panamericano's desk clerk for a non-smoking room. Fortunately, he had one available, but he made it clear, as he had to me, that she could stay for only five days. She was eager to be off the road, though, and so, after we had registered, we headed toward the elevator, porters following with our luggage. As we said good night, we made a plan to meet for breakfast.

The next morning, I did not see her. Nor did I telephone her. This would be my policy throughout our five-day stay at the Panamericano. She called me with enough regularity that I never felt out of touch. I knew that, before big performances, she sometimes sought seclusion for days at a time.

But she was unpredictable. Sometimes she appeared to hate being alone,

and she would suddenly call to suggest that we take a walk or dine at one of the waterside steak restaurants on the Puerto Madero. More often than not, after she had taken a bite of what the chef had presented, she would send it back with word that the meat was insufficiently tender or too salty. Once, after the chef had washed the salt off her steak and returned it, she complained that the meat had come back too wet.

On mornings when we had breakfast together in the hotel's dining room, it was rare that she did not find something to complain about: the table linen was unclean, or the glassware was smudged, or there were too many flies buzzing around the buffet table. Once, she carefully trapped two flies in an empty glass; then, after placing her hand over the top of it, she carried it over to the maître d' and said, "Here, this is yours."

I was sometimes less amused than embarrassed by her demanding nature. After she had complained to the chambermaid about stains she found on her mattress, she reminded me that her grandmother Tamara had worked for a while as a chambermaid in a hotel, after she was forced to retire from her job working in an automobile plant. Her grandmother had been meticulous, she said, supervising other chambermaids and holding them to her own high standard. As a young girl, Poplavskaya would sometimes accompany Tamara as she made her rounds. I got the impression that she was holding the people who served her—the Panamericano's chambermaids, chef, and waiters—to the same artistic standards that a conductor demanded of an orchestra. At the hotel, she asked to switch rooms at least twice, and once she demanded that an electrician be sent to her room to check the heating system.

One evening when we were returning from dinner, after Poplavskaya had paid the taxi-driver, she looked at the change and announced that he had given her counterfeit bills. She and the driver got into an argument. We had already stepped out of the taxi, but, as the argument escalated, the driver pulled away from the hotel, with the cab's rear door still open, and with Poplavskaya's handbag on the back seat. She ran into the street after the cab and, unable to catch up with it, screamed, "Police! Police!"

The Panamericano's doorman was standing inside the entrance to the hotel, but he did not respond. A female guest witnessed the episode, however, and wrote down the taxi's license-plate number. I later accompanied Poplavskaya to the police station as she filed a report, but even though the license-plate number was made available to the authorities, nothing was done to retrieve Poplavskaya's lost handbag—which contained her wallet, filled with credit cards and cash—or to apprehend the taxi-driver.

After returning from the police station, Poplavskaya told the Panamericano's night manager that she would not pay her bill because there had been no doorman on duty to provide proper security. When we checked out of the Panamericano, Poplavskaya had not only succeeded in getting her bill significantly reduced; she had also seen to it that five hundred dollars was deducted from my bill. We had booked two new rooms in a hotel across the street called the NH Tango, but the Panamericano's porters would not transport our luggage there. Nor would the new hotel's porters come to us. So Poplavskaya took a brass-arched trolley from the Panamericano's lobby, piled our many pieces of luggage onto it, and rolled it outside and onto the avenue 9 de Julio. The avenue 9 de Julio is a fourteen-lane boulevard with four-lane streets on either side, and, as Poplavskaya piloted the trolley across, it bumped over multiple train tracks, dodging buses and cars and crowds of puzzled pedestrians, tourists, and panhandlers. Twenty minutes later, she gave the wheeled conveyance a final shove, and it rolled past a security guard and right into the lobby of the NH Tango. Because we were pre-registered, she pushed the cart, which was the property of the Panamericano, right past the Tango's porters, directly into the elevator, and up to her room on the ninth floor.

During the weeks in Argentina, Poplavskaya had some time to get acquainted with Barenboim, whom she worked with for the first time in Buenos Aires. (He was born in Buenos Aires, and the concerts were part of a series of events commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of his career as a conductor.)She told me that the part she was singing in Verdi's Requiem is more demanding than any operatic role she sings, and she was nervous. One afternoon, we sat in the Teatro Colón watching Barenboim rehearse the orchestra. The theatre's ornate chairs are upholstered in red velvet, and their carved-wood backs are topped with gold filigree; Poplavskaya sat fidgeting, poking at one of the gold decorations with a metal hair clip. Later, she said to me, "Oh, I hope I will be good enough for him."

Several days later, on August 25th, in

front of a capacity audience at the Teatro Colón, whose horseshoe-shaped auditorium has two thousand four hundred and seventy-eight seats, with additional standing-room space for five hundred, Barenboim conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Poplavskaya was well received. The critic Margarita Pollini, in *Ámbito Financiero*, wrote, "The level of the soloists (wisely placed between the choir and the orchestra) showed its highest peak with the soprano Marina Poplavskaya, with such a voice that the very difficult Beethoven melismas did not sound strident almost for the first time."

Poplavskaya was also in good form five nights later, when Barenboim conducted Verdi's Requiem. Sitting in the audience, I could hardly wait for her to sing the word "*lacrimosa*." This time, she had no trouble with it. As I listened to her, I thought about her voice: making that sound requires such energy and skill, yet it never sounded forced. At one point, she held a note for ten seconds, and it cut like a diamond sabre right through the sounds of a hundred choral singers and a hundred instrumentalists.

Backstage, after the concert, Barenboim told her, "You are blessed with an exceptional voice, and you have trained it very well." (Later that evening, he told me that he had never known a singer who worked with a conductor's score.) He asked her to meet with him soon in Berlin, where he lives, to discuss the possibility of participating in projects under his direction at the Staatsoper, the Berlin State Opera.

The Teatro Colón hosted parties after each of the concerts in Buenos Aires, and Poplavskaya was often at Barenboim's side, although she smoothly stepped away whenever he reached into his pocket for one of his thick, gold-labelled cigars ("Edicion Limitada 2010") and struck a match under it. Far from Moscow, she was still avoiding smoke.

The next day, when she packed for Barcelona, to rehearse for "Carmen," she made sure to include her bathing suit, so that she could take some restorative dips in the Mediterranean. She also packed a stuffed toy dog, which she had bought for a euro in Rome, and which she takes with her everywhere. When she gets cold in bed at night, she places the dog over her throat for comfort. (The careful packing ended up being in vain: the airline lost her luggage en route to Barcelona.)

She had already arranged for the rental of a three-room apartment in Barcelona, within a short walk of the Gran Teatre del Liceu, where the "Carmen" rehearsals would be held. Poplavskaya was to sing the part of Micaela, the demure love match seeking the attention of Don José, played by the tenor Roberto Alagna. Among the challenges confronting her in this opera was having to sing in French, which she had not done, so she arranged to work with a special tutor. She felt quite comfortable with Alagna, having heard him sing before, and was looking forward to joining him at the Met this month, where he is appearing opposite her in "Don Carlo."

Poplavskaya left Barcelona and, after stopping in Berlin and Moscow, arrived in New York in late October to start rehearsals for "Don Carlo." She is singing the part of Elisabeth, a role that is considered particularly challenging in terms of interpretation. Through a Ukrainian-born friend, she found a nice furnished apartment near Lincoln Center for a hundred and fifteen dollars a day. She will live in it for more than two months, through the runs of "Don Carlo" and "La Traviata." Her living room, on the twenty-second floor, overlooks the twelve-story Empire Hotel, and sometimes, when he is standing near his window, she can see her co-star, Alagna.

On the afternoon of the "Don Carlo" opening, after Poplavskaya cooked herself a late lunch (meat ragout with vegetables and a glass of water), she walked over to Lincoln Center, with her cell phone turned off and her mind on the music that she would soon be singing. She passed through security at the Met's stage door and went to her dressing room. For the next half hour, while doing warmup vocalizing exercises, she set about sanitizing her quarters, wiping the top of her vanity table and all the surfaces around it with paper towels doused in Purell. Her dressing room measures about ten feet by twelve; against one wall is an upright Yamaha piano, and against another is a sofa covered in coral brocade. There is a bathroom with a shower, and Poplavskaya brings her own towels from home, having more than once complained to her Ukrainian friend that those provided by the Met did not conform to her standards of cleanliness.

Shortly after seven o'clock, wearing the hunting attire of Elisabeth of Valois, Poplavskaya was onstage wandering through the forest near Fontainebleau when, by chance, she meets Don Carlo (Alagna), the son of the Spanish king. It is "love from one sight," as Poplavskaya might have phrased it, but it would not survive Act I. By Act V, more than four hours later, Poplavskaya is lying onstage with Don Carlo dying in her arms, bringing to a close their love and Verdi's long opera. When it was over, the audience whooped and applauded for many minutes, and the next day, in the *Times*, Anthony Tommasini wrote, "The lovely Russian soprano Marina Poplavskaya, as Elisabeth, does not have a classic Verdi voice. Still, with her luminous singing, beautiful pianissimo high notes and unforced power, she was a noble, elegant Elisabeth. Somehow, the cool Russian colorings of her voice brought out the apartness of the character, a young woman in a loveless marriage in a foreign land."

It was nearly midnight before Poplavskaya left her dressing room, having changed into a simple long-sleeved black jersey and a skirt that she had purchased the day before. She was on her way to a gala party on the Met's mezzanine. Onstage, the "Don Carlo" set was being noisily dismantled, and the crew was setting up scenery for the next day's rehearsals of Puccini's "La Fanciulla del West." On her way to the party, Poplavskaya paused in the hallway to put some personal items into her locker. Hanging there, in a cloth bag, were a pair of red patent-leather pumps with five-inch heels. She will wear them onstage on New Year's Eve, when she sings the role of Violetta in "La Traviata."♦

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Gay Talese talks about Marina Poplavskaya.