

## opera

# An operatic search for my ancestor, Pushkin

**Marita Phillips**, the great-great-great-granddaughter of the Russian poet, on her quest to find the real man

I am often asked — but only by Russians — what it feels like to be descended from Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin. Or they challenge how I, a foreigner, dare to write about someone I could not possibly understand.

Such questions reveal the depth of feeling that Russians have for their beloved poet. It is totally different from our relationship with Shakespeare. For the British, art is a luxury. For the Russians, it is a necessity. Russia is the land of icons; they make their tsars into saints and their presidents into tsars, they revere their artists, their writers and musicians. Not much is sacred to the British.

Pushkin, poet, playwright, novelist, founder of modern Russian literature, descendant of Peter the Great's famous African general, was born in 1799 and killed in a duel aged 37.

Next month Konstantin Boyarsky's new opera, *Pushkin*, will have its premiere at Grange Park Opera in Surrey. My libretto tells the story of two dominant men, Pushkin and Nicholas I, the nation's poet and the nation's tsar, whose relationship starts with mutual admiration and need, and ends in Pushkin's death. It is the story of a creative genius unable to bend to the will of the state, whose self-destructiveness led him into troubles that others might have avoided.

For me Pushkin's death was not an accident. Some of the storyline of *Pushkin* is invented, but its core character, events and relationships come from life.

What neither man could have guessed is that nearly 60 years after Pushkin's death their grandchildren, Grand Duke Michael Mikhailovich and Sophie von Merenberg, would elope and marry in San Remo. They were my grandmother's parents. They were banished from Russia and consequently survived when Grand Duke Michael's brothers and most of the Romanov family were murdered in July 1918, almost 100 years to the day before the premiere of this opera.

They lived in England from 1900 and my family have lived here ever since. My grandmother spoke Russian, but it faded after that — I have learnt, but never mastered it. So I descend from Nicholas I, Pushkin and his wife, Natalya — the three main characters in the opera. I grew up mildly aware that being related to this poet was something to be proud of, although with a child's lack of context I had no idea why. Aged 17, I booked a tour to a very Soviet Russia and have returned many times, often invited with my

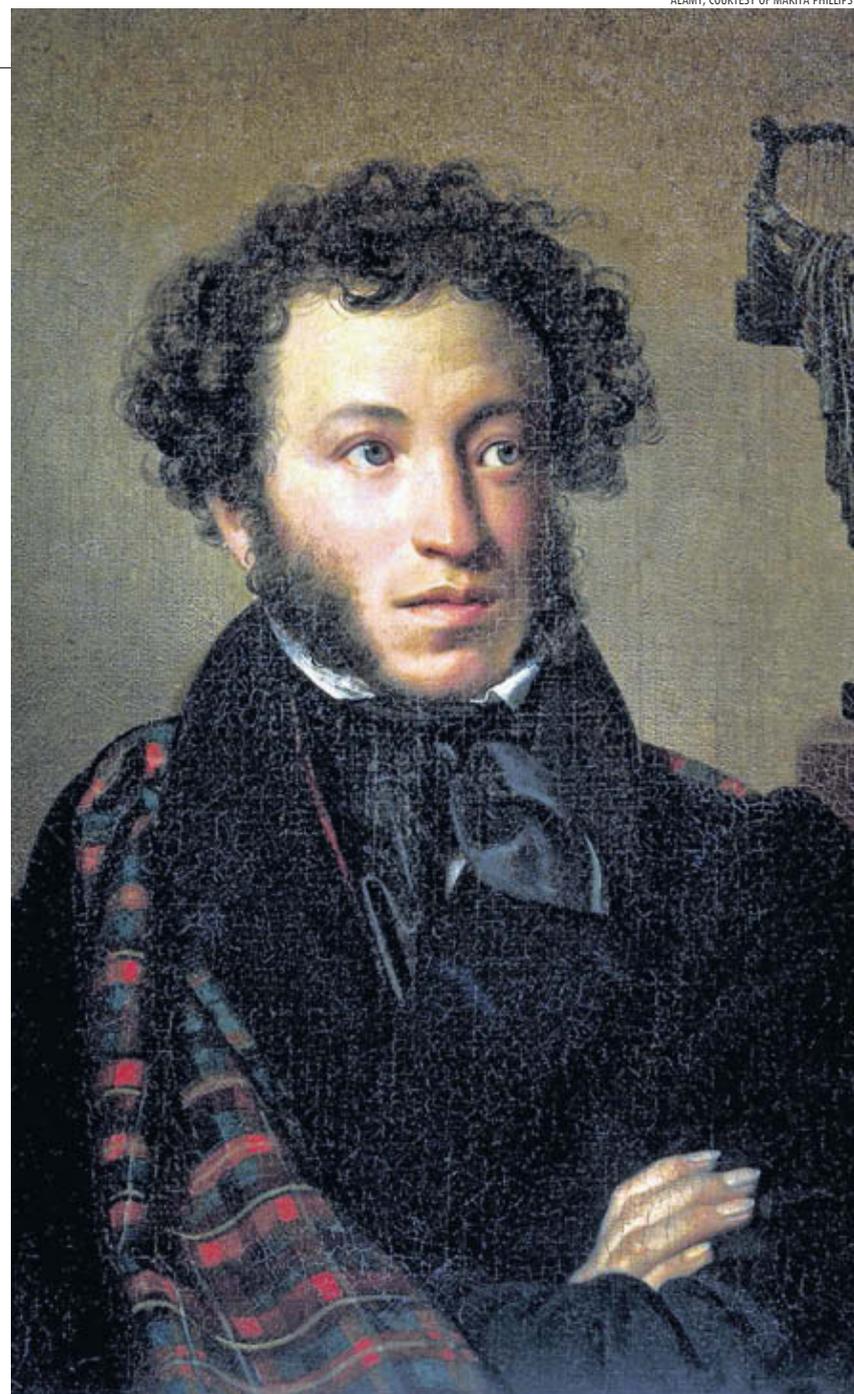
family for Pushkin anniversaries. I have sat at his desk in the Lycée next to the Catherine Palace, just south of St Petersburg, and visited the house near the Estonian border where his nanny retold him fairy stories after he was exiled for writing *Ode to Liberty*. I have held his rings and seen the clock stopped at 14.45 — the minute he died.

The Russian adoration of Pushkin is a passionate and personal love not only for the poet's words, but for the man. In this vast country where the "little man" has always been at the mercy of its rulers, they feel Pushkin is one of them. I wanted to understand the man behind the myth.

Yet reducing Pushkin to a mortal can amount to blasphemy. Years ago I met a director of the Mikhailovsky Theatre in St Petersburg. He declared that Pushkin absolutely could not appear in person on stage. When my husband politely mentioned that Britain had staged *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*, he retorted: "That is Jesus Christ. We are talking about Pushkin!"

Over the years I spoke to professors, writers, curators and ordinary Russian people and learnt a lot, but I also noticed an absence of curiosity as to what Pushkin was actually like. Two hundred years of loving the man may have obscured the psychology that made him great, but which also destroyed him so young. Children are introduced to Pushkin almost before they can speak.

Perhaps it is such overfamiliarity combined with veneration that explains their unquestioning acceptance. Or maybe his words are enough. Another consequence of Pushkin's place on a pedestal is that the characters living alongside him become two-dimensional. Tsar Nicholas I had his limitations, but he was not an evil dictator. Pushkin's wife, although very young, was not an empty-headed beauty. Pushkin's



Alexander Pushkin, painted in 1827. Below left: Grand Duke Michael Mikhailovich and his wife, Sophie von Merenberg, with their daughter Zia

personal weaknesses and flaws stand in stark contrast to the profound understanding and compassion for human nature and the human condition expressed in his writings.

The key to dramatising his turbulent life came from my belief that Pushkin's fatal duel with his brother-in-law was a death-wish. His personality, together with a series of events, choices, characters and circumstances, drove him to a place where he was unable to write. This depression, or maybe nervous breakdown, might have passed, but without a channel of expression his life became untenable.

Pushkin represents the eternal creative: often at odds with authority, self-destructive, melancholic, yet possessing an unconscious that sifts experiences to produce jewels of glittering humour, purity and truth. Pushkin could never go against his gods and demons. They, after all, had to express their own truth — through him. It is that integrity, combined with his gift, that ensures his vibrancy today and makes his story timeless.

A series of chances took my finished libretto from a piece of paper to a fully staged performance by Novaya Opera at Grange Park. The whole venture has become exotically Russo-British. Russians introduced me to Jan Latham-Koenig. British by birth, he is the chief conductor and artistic director of the Moscow company.

Latham-Koenig in turn introduced me to Boyarsky. A Russian who left his country as a child, Boyarsky is a

principal viola player at the Royal Opera House in London. Imbued with Pushkin, he has lived outside Russia long enough not to feel inhibited. His music is overwhelmingly Russian, full of passion, unashamedly emotional and often very beautiful. Pushkin will be played by a Brit, Peter Auty, fresh from singing Lensky in *Eugene Onegin* — Pushkin's masterpiece, adapted by Tchaikovsky — with Scottish Opera.

In February 2017 Latham-Koenig persuaded Novaya to put on a concert performance of *Pushkin* in Moscow. They wanted to sing it in Russian, but the composer and I insisted it remain in the language in which it had been written. I wanted to show it was an outsider's perspective. I was asked by interviewers and others, with genuine mystification, why I had written about Pushkin. One said: "We wouldn't write about Shakespeare." Another that it was like a Muslim writing about Jesus. On the other hand they seemed to think, because I carried Pushkin's genes, that I must have insights.

I'm sure there were some at that Moscow concert who remained hostile to a foreign librettist, but they clearly loved the music. They applauded for what seemed an age. Afterwards we went to the Pushkin Café on Tverskoy Boulevard, where a leading intellectual quietly said to me: "I came to this evening open-minded, but what I did not expect was to learn something."

**Pushkin is at West Horsley Place, Surrey (01962 737373), on July 11 & 12**

“**Russia's adoration of Pushkin is a deeply personal love for the words and the man**”

