

Premiere of the fortnight

If websites can give young composers a head start, then Dobrinka Tabakova is already right up there with www.dobrinka.com. Take a look. And Tabakova has a distinctive way with titles as well. *Take The Custard Tart Opera, What strikes the clocke....?*, *Dancing on Cobbled Streets* – and now, the concerto *The Song of the Enchanting Viola*, written for Maxim Rysanov.

Though British, Tabakova was born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, into a family of doctors and scientists who all shared a love of music. As early as the age of 14 she won a prize at the Vienna International Composition Competition. She met Rysanov when both were students at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in 1998. 'Max came to a concert featuring one of my pieces, after which he asked if I'd write for him.' *Pirin*, for solo viola, was the result.

Tabakova followed this by writing for the ASCH Trio, in which Rysanov plays, before the step up to the new concerto for viola and strings. 'Max is a stunningly virtuosic and expressive performer,' says Tabakova. 'I could write practically anything and he'd find a way to play it. The concerto is in four movements, going through a range of emotions. Max and I worked closely together developing ideas. For example, there's a passage for the viola between the second and third movements using a technique based on overtones which I've called "the Max Effect" – as he dreamt it up.'

As to the inspiration behind the piece? It seems the title is a prompt to audience members to paint their own pictures. 'I find it extremely rewarding to visualise images while listening to music. In the concerto I'm consciously inviting the audience to enjoy the sound world and choose their own story to go with the music.'

'Dobrinka's harmonic language is unique,' adds Rysanov, winner of the Valentino Bucchi International Viola Competition in Rome and runner-up at the last Lionel Tertis competition. 'It's fresh and new without being too complicated. The harmony is simple and bright, but at the same time

there's darkness and drama. She incorporates folk music, which introduces an element of dance.

'We set out to make this a super-difficult concerto in order to develop possibilities in viola playing. In the past every new viola concerto written has been more difficult than the previous one.'

'Personally, I prefer the register of the viola to that of the violin,' says Tabakova. 'It may be easier for a viola to get swamped by the orchestra, but apart from that there are no special problems. The real joy is using the low register, and it's this that gives the viola its richer harmonics and velvety sound. In many ways, it's an instrument that's only just receiving its due attention.'

The fact that *The Song of the Enchanting Viola* has performances with two orchestras in a matter of days in February reflects the backgrounds of composer and soloist.

The Russian Chamber Orchestra of

London jumped at the chance of scheduling the concerto after hearing the string trio Tabakova wrote for the ASCH Trio. Then, says Tabakova, 'the two performances with the Guildhall Chamber Orchestra (23 February at the GSMD and 24 February at Bishopsgate Hall, London) are a direct result of the fact that I started writing the concerto in my year as Composition Fellow at the Guildhall'.

Tabakova's work has been already been heard in London at St Paul's Cathedral, the Purcell Room and the Barbican, as well as at the Cheltenham and Bath festivals. Other recent projects have included a multimedia collaboration with Royal College of Art graduate Ellen Jacoby, presented in Bremen, and a solo work for pianist Evelyn Chang. Alongside all else is work on a PhD in composition at King's College, London.

Andrew Green

Violist Maxim Rysanov will be performing the premiere of Dobrinka Tabakova's The Song of the Enchanting Viola on 16 February at 7.30pm at St John's Smith Square, London with the Russian Chamber Orchestra of London. Box office 020 7222 1061



Dobrinka Tabakova:
fresh and new