In the world of international opera, Russian houses do better than others in maintaining an edge in native repertoire. Look at the Mariinsky’s record with Prokofiev’s magnificent but daunting War and Peace. The latest new production, in its splendid, year-old theatre (known as Mariinsky II), is the company’s fourth; other houses will be lucky to have mounted one. With nearly 70 solo roles and a huge choral content, just getting it to function on stage is an achievement. The Tolstoy-based opera is sometimes criticised for the split between its character-driven “peace” scenes, which come first, and the scenes in which Russians drive Napoleon’s army out of Moscow. But in one of his best recent productions, Graham Vick (who also directed the Mariinsky’s second production) overcomes this potential flaw, bringing on a tank immediately and having dancers wear gas masks; more important, the human drama is kept alive during the turbulence of military confrontation.

Vick tempers the extreme patriotism required by Soviet authorities by depicting the deified Russian commander Kutuzov (the rich-voiced Gennady Bezzubenkov) as prone to human foibles (he naps during a council of war). In one striking scene Paul Brown’s decor serves for a busy array of human activity, from dining to cello playing, but eventually ends up as rubble. His costumes, indeterminate as to time, allow Vick to bring out the Frenchified nature of early 19th-century Moscow society, but also the
materialism of contemporary Russia, as embodied by a glitzy ad for designer luggage and the dazzling, drug-taking Hélène Bezukhova (Maria Maksakova). No effort is made to deflect attention from Prokofiev’s opera by linking it to current military tensions. The superb cast mixes new and familiar Mariinsky singers. As Natasha and Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, Aida Garifullina and Andrei Bondarenko impress as major new talents, especially the limpid-voiced Garifullina. The reunion of Natasha and the dying Andrei, in which they recount their lost love, is devastating. Natasha is seen across a table from Pierre Bezukhov (Yevgeny Akimov, in expressive voice) at the close, suggesting a new relationship. Other singers include Vasily Gerello, a vainglorious Napoleon; Ilya Selivanov, a brash Kuragin; and Larisa Diadkova, authoritative as the society matron, Maria Akhrosimova. Chorus and orchestra give sterling performances in an unfailingly paced reading by Valery Gergiev. Given his estimable aversion to cuts, the performance clocks in at just under four hours, plus a long interval.