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# From Russia with love country style

By Michael Commins on 31 August 2017



Larissa Tormey. \ Philip Doyle

**Larissa Tormey is a lady you don't meet every day, writes Michael Commins**

Tormey's story could be the genesis of a top novel out of Russia, where love of a classic story runs deep in the history of that country. Growing up in Bashkortostan, between the Volga River and the Ural mountains, Larissa was unaware of a land way to the west where one day she would make her home.

Life changed for Larissa, the classically trained opera singer, one night when she was performing her own show with a group of dancers in an upmarket venue in Moscow, back in 2001. In the audience was a group of lads on a stag party out from the midlands of Ireland. Among them was Christy Tormey, from a well-known farming family in Kibbegan.

"We met by pure accident," smiles Larissa. "I was singing in Russian and had only about two words of English. But whatever it was, we communicated as best we could and I offered to show Christy around Moscow the next day. We met on three days and he invited me over to Ireland.

"Soon we started to speak on the phone every week. I got out a dictionary and began to translate words to English and write them down. I got a visa sorted out and came to Ireland for two weeks. The Tormey's were so nice to me.

"I returned to Moscow for a while, but six months after I met Christy I was sitting here. It can be very fast how these things happen in life."

Moving to Ireland did not bother her parents, as there is a tradition for those who want to make it in the arts and showbusiness to move from the more rural regions to Moscow.

"I finished college and university, and received the necessary training in opera singing and piano. I became a classical choir conductor and pianist. If you do well in your home region but want to become better known outside it, you tend to move to Moscow, which I did in the late 1990s.

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"My late mother was a poet and was very artistic. She had books of poems published in Russia. My father, who is Tatar, still resides there as does one of my brothers while the other lives in San Francisco.

"When I moved to Moscow, I did not speak any English at all. But after 16 years of practice and living here in Westmeath, I now speak it fluently and I also think and write songs in English."

Larissa settled into life on a beef farm beside Kilbeggan with natural ease and grace. She quickly became familiar with the seasons and the tranquillity of the countryside.

She took charge of the office work and documentation, as her English language skills improved week by week, and she helped out with various tasks on the farm, as well as supporting Christy in his butcher shop in Tullamore. Such is her grasp of the scene that she won a Bord Bia Quality Assurance Award for farm management.

"I know all the breeds of cattle and everything that goes on in the running of such an enterprise. It is a huge change from singing in the clubs in Moscow, but Ireland is my home now and I love it."

"I suppose it was my intention to give up my music and stay on the farm. It never crossed my mind that anyone foreign could make it on the music scene. My break came when I was invited to be a choir conductor at Tullamore College at the request of the principal, Edward McEvoy.

"I stayed working with them for three years and they were very kind to me.

"My decision then was to start singing in church for weddings, and soon I was being asked to perform in churches all around the midlands. I sang songs like Ave Maria, Panis Angelicus, You Raise Me Up and I still enjoy singing in churches for weddings ceremonies. I was getting more work and getting more confident."

In 2014, she recorded her first album in Ventry Studios in Balbriggan, another dream come true for Larissa. With the exception of one song, the album, Perfect As I Am, featured all her own songs, some achievement for a person who less than two decades ago had barely a word of English.

"The first country song I recorded was Only A Woman, a song pitched to me by BG Pollack from Tyrone. I played it for my husband when he came home and he liked it. After it was released, I started to meet radio deejays. Hugh O'Brien featured it on his Hot Country show and more and more people got to hear and see me.

"I started to gain a following and soon I began to realise that most of them liked country music. Some suggested I go and start doing spots on country shows. My attitude was God loves a trier and I said okay. Christy is also into American country music.

"The melodies of many country songs suit my voice and I love meaningful songs, ones that appeal to the emotions. They have to have good lyrics and that is so important."

God Loves a Trier became the title track of her second album, released in March 2017, another collection which features mostly her own songs (including some-co-writes with BG Pollack), with the exception of a cover of I'm Gonna Be A Country Girl Again.

Another album is on the way and this will see Larissa feature some of the well-known country and folk classics from over the years.

"I know a lot of people like to hear songs they are familiar with, so I am going to have all covers on my next album.

"I have already recorded Rambling Man which was a great song for Philomena Begley, Everybody's Somebody's Fool, and a Charlie Lansborough song. Charlie is a very spiritual singer and writer."

Some weeks ago, Larissa did a spot on the popular RTÉ Radio One Saturday morning Country Wide programme where she was interviewed by Brenda Donohue.

"I had a huge response to that interview and got some lovely messages from all over the country. It was amazing really."

Larissa is a joyful spirit, consumed with her love of music. As she brings me a cup of coffee and some homemade rhubarb tart, she breaks into the familiar strains of a song that has crossed the oceans: "And I will take you back, Kathleen, to where your heart will feel no pain. And when the fields are fresh and green, I will take you to your home Kathleen."

It is haunting and beautiful and so evocative when sung in an accent from beyond the Ural mountains.

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Larisa is happy with the pace of life's journey right now.

"I did not want to be an overnight success. I believe it is better to get there gradually and be ready for it if it happens. I have never been to Nashville or America. I am gearing my promotion to Ireland. I am not sure if America is ready for someone from Russia in country music just yet.

"Most foreigners have this mental thing to go back home. Mine was 'I'm going to stay here whether you like me or not!' I'm in love with Ireland and Irish people." CL

Visit [www.larissatormey.com](http://www.larissatormey.com)

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