

artist bio

AIGUL AKHMETSHINA: AIGUL

*In her debut album *Aigul*, the illustrious young opera singer Aigul Akhmetshina finds her voice in the role of Carmen and traces a path through her own remarkable journey.*

In the iconic aria Habanera or “L'amour est un oiseau rebelle” from Bizet’s opera *Carmen*, the title character sings of love as a rebellious, untameable bird. Through her sensational performances of this role, another fiery, free-spirited bird has landed on the international opera stage: the vibrant Russian mezzo soprano Aigul Akhmetshina.

Akhmetshina soared to prominence at the age of 21 when, as an understudy, she made a resounding debut as Carmen at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and astonished the world with her burnished voice and sparkling virtuosity. She has since performed on many of the esteemed stages in Europe, including the Salzburger Festspiele, Opéra national de Paris, Bayerische Staatsoper, Deutsche Oper Berlin, and Teatro Real de Madrid.

Now 27, Akhmetshina is hailed as “the world’s go-to Carmen” (*The Observer*). In the 2023-2024 season, she stars in a landmark new production of *Carmen* at the Metropolitan Opera—the youngest singer ever to do so—before performing the role at the Royal Opera House, Arena di Verona, Teatro San Carlo di Napoli and the Glyndebourne Festival. The ovations continue: Akhmetshina’s future engagements span the globe, and she recently won Female Singer of the Year at the International Opera Awards.

Akhmetshina’s accolades are all the more extraordinary for her backstory. Born in a small rural village, she faced daunting challenges and cut an unlikely path to stardom with persistence and adaptability now fused with her artistry. In her debut album *Aigul* released on Decca Classics, and recorded with the Royal Philharmonic under conductor Daniele Rustioni, Akhmetshina distills the magic of her signature role and brings fresh perspective to other renowned arias that mark key points in her life and career. More than a showcase of a prodigious emerging talent, *Aigul* paints a personal portrait of a brilliant, determined young artist who is making her own way in opera and in the world.

Akhmetshina grew up in Bashkortostan, raised by a single mother of three children in a small apartment. She developed a love for music early on and, as a toddler, began performing native folk songs. With neither money nor space for a piano, Akhmetshina resolved to master the instrument that was available—her grandfather’s accordion. She also relished psychology books, transforming into different characters, and donning costumes. Her passion for performing led her to be known in her hometown as “Aigul the singer”; with her open heart and adventurous spirit, her family called her “free bird.”

At the age of 14, Akhmetshina left home to study singing in the nearest city, Ufa. She supported herself through college by working odd jobs—from waitressing to stilt walking—while training diligently with

support from her devoted teacher. Her aspirations seemed to unravel, however, when she was denied admission to the Gnesin Academy of Music in Moscow. Soon thereafter, she suffered a car accident that left her unable to sing. Clouded by doubt, Akhmetshina contemplated abandoning her dream even though a life off of the stage seemed unimaginable. Her teacher refused to let her quit and worked with her daily to rebuild her voice, note by painful note.

“I’m a fighter,” Akhmetshina says. “I had to be, and when you have to prove that you own your place, that gives you extra strength.” She kept fighting, and at a competition in Moscow, Akhmetshina was scouted and invited to audition for the prestigious Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at the Royal Opera House. With no prior knowledge of the program or ability to speak English, she arrived in London an unlikely candidate—and among 365 applicants, landed one of the five coveted positions.

When Akhmetshina got the last-minute, life changing call and the curtain went up at the Royal Opera House, she was ready to walk onstage as Carmen. “Every time when I perform Carmen I don’t actually play. I live, and it goes through my experience,” she says. “It’s about a woman from a difficult past, a difficult childhood who also dreams about a happy future.” With so many performances to her credit, Akhmetshina still finds numerous different nuances to highlight—with her easy laugh, she calls it the “Fifty Shades of Carmen”—ranging from flirty and playful to heavier and nostalgic. “Everyone can find something of themselves in her. The magic of this role is that every night you discover a new Carmen you want to share with your audience.”

Habanera is the heart of the album. Onstage, Akhmetshina’s presence as Carmen is often praised as magnetic and captivating, with a “molten yet agile tone” (*The New York Times*), and “a voice equally suited to silken lightness as leathery depth” (*Washington Post*). Her recording captures this allure and a rich, velvety fluidity throughout her vocal range.

Aigul also features an aria from Akhmetshina’s first professional appearance: Rossini’s *La Cenerentola*, or Cinderella, for which she performed the title role in 2017 at the Opéra de Baugé Festival. The fairy tale was Akhmetshina’s favourite as a child and mirrors her own Cinderella story. Similarly, she had cherished Massenet’s *Werther* starting from her teenage years, when she fell in love with a Met: Live In HD recording featuring tenor Jonas Kaufman. She never imagined she would sing this dream role—much less with Kaufman himself, which she did in 2023 at the Royal Opera House.

Akhmetshina also reprises her lauded debut as Romeo in Bellini’s *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* at the 2023 Salzburger Festspiele. Press noted her “honeyed timbre that shimmers colourfully both in the lows and in the highs that soar effortlessly over the orchestra” (*Bachtrack*) and emotional portrayal of Romeo. Rosina from Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, which Akhmetshina played to great acclaim in 2022 at Opéra de Paris, is another favourite. It brings out Akhmetshina’s comic side: “Rosina is fun, stubborn, and very smart. She is trapped and she wants out, she wants freedom. She is smarter even than Figaro and adapts to every situation.”

While Akhmetshina holds all of this music close, she treasures “Nightingale,” a Bashkort folk song which was arranged specifically for the album. Her grandmother sang it frequently. Though the region is unknown to most, Bashkortostan has a distinct language and rich musical traditions—and everybody sings. Akhmetshina draws parallels between Bashkort folk songs and bel canto, both of which use a wide vocal range and colourfully ornamented melodies and require long, controlled breath. “It helped develop my voice in a healthy way,” she says. In the future, Akhmetshina wants to introduce her cultural heritage more broadly and bring other lesser-known repertoire to the fore.

Akhmetshina now calls London home, but feels fortunate to be a citizen of the world. She frequently expresses gratitude for all those who have helped her towards her dream—especially her family, teacher, and manager, and the many singers and colleagues who have shown her generosity. Akhmetshina finds inspiration in anyone “who loves life and loves what they do.” Flying freely at this stage in her career, she feels she has a mission to spread beauty. “I now have a responsibility. I have a voice not only for singing, but for actually impacting people.”