

Georgian-born Katie Melua is one of Britain's most successful recording artists and is also a patron of the Gift of Life charity. Sophia Charalambous catches up with Katie prior to her tour with the Gori Women's Choir



Some of Russia and the CIS community's biggest hitters are also important players in the world of philanthropy. We meet the stars using their influence and fortune for the greater good

GIVING BACK, WHERE IT COUNTS

Katie Melua became a patron of a children's cancer charity foundation, Gift of Life UK, in January 2013. The singer has supported the work of the charity ever since with her mesmerising performances at Gift of Life's charity galas. Over the past years, Katie has donated some fabulous lots to the charity auctions in aid of Gift of Life, including two guitars with her signed autograph, premium tickets to her show in Moscow in 2014 with backstage greetings, and a private guitar lesson in her personal studio in London.

Tell me about growing up in Georgia.

I have many wonderful childhood memories from Georgia; we were always outside playing. Summers were spent by the Black Sea swimming in the mornings and early evenings, then one of my favourite things was eating salty corn on the cob after a swim.

There was always a supra (a Georgian feast), because my granddad is a great chef and he had guests almost every day at the house in Tbilisi. That was where the entire family lived, including my uncles, and they were the ones who introduced me to music from the West. They'd play Led Zeppelin, Queen, Black Sabbath all throughout the house. It was a busy, chaotic and a very happy childhood.

Why was the move to Britain so crucial for you and your career?

Georgia, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, went through a very turbulent time. Every bit of infrastructure, economic and otherwise, came to a standstill for the good part of a decade. People couldn't get jobs, schools weren't heated and so dad, having recently qualified as a doctor, sent his CV to many hospitals in the UK. When he secured a post in Belfast I was nine years old, and so moving at that age and getting an English education was probably the key to taking me to where I am now. I realised quite early on what an opportunity I had to be living in a country where there were jobs for women as well as men, and that if I worked hard at school, anything

was possible in the land where Freddie Mercury made his music. I know that sounds naïve but I believe that crazy optimism has also been a big factor to influencing my path in the music industry.

Why music? What is it about making music that resonates with you?

Ever since I remember I've been drawn to songs, and I'm still curious about how timeless songs are made and how they are capable of changing the listener's feelings so effectively.

I'm fascinated by how a lyric's intricate mechanisms work to speak to the listener, and that they induce almost obsessive adoration from the listener to the voice that's singing to them. That's an incredible power for a three-minute work to possess.

Who would you have loved to collaborate with, past or present?

There are many musicians I look up to;

JJ Cale would have been an incredible guitarist to have worked with, and probably Big Mama Thornton too.

You've been both the UK and Europe's highest selling female artist. What does that feel like?

It's not easy to describe what the feeling is when you end up living a story that many people might want to also experience. But in the end, all I can say is that it's the same as achieving any dream or goal; as soon as you have it, it doesn't appear as valuable or as precious as when you were going after it. Which is why it's important to keep growing and setting new goals. So I have new dreams now about the type of records I want to make and where I think the song format could possibly go.

Your new album, *In Winter*, sounds like it's very personal to you. What was it like to record with the Gori Women's Choir?

The Gori Women's Choir and I belong to two different musical worlds; they are a classical choir from Georgia while I've worked in pop music, so the coming together of these two worlds had to be an experiment.

It's the practical things that sometimes have an influence on the music too, like recording everything in the old culture centre in Gori, where we had to ship the studio equipment from England.

I got to learn from the choir how art can be fed by perfectionism and being very meticulous, and certain steps that can be taken to set an artistic goal, and then how to make it come to life.

Did all your inspiration for *In Winter* come from Georgia?

It was more about a sense of home, of belonging to two places and being lucky enough to view each one from the other perspective, which was what inspired *In Winter*.

CHARITY CONCERT IN AID OF GIFT OF LIFE

Teodor Currentzis and MusicAeterna: Prokofiev's Romeo & Juliet

Taking place at the Royal Festival Hall, January 14, the concert will raise money for children with cancer in Russia.

Teodor Currentzis and his famous orchestra, MusicAeterna, are returning to London to perform the music from Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo & Juliet*, in aid of the Gift of Life charity. Currentzis, who has won multiple awards for his captivating performances, including three National Theatre Award Golden Masks, has personally arranged a selection of Prokofiev's most enduring classics. The evening will also include recitals from highly acclaimed Russian actresses Chulpan Khamatova and Dina Korzun, the founders of Gift of Life's sister charity, Podari Zhizn.

For tickets, tel: 020 7960 4200 or see southbankcentre.co.uk

What do you miss most about Georgia?

Food at my grandparents' house, collecting mulberries from the mulberry trees, swimming in the Black Sea, living life not having to make any scheduled plans, calling friends last minute, and being able to do almost anything without too much planning.

How much did it mean to your family to become British citizens?

That was a huge deal for my family. The Georgian passport back in the 90s wasn't that great for freedom of movement. I still had my Georgian passport when I released my first album and I remember the disbelief of my management company when they had to apply for visas for me to visit Europe and Ireland on work trips. The British passport was a freeway to travelling almost anywhere in the world.

You take part in a lot of charity work. What is your motivation to be active in this area?

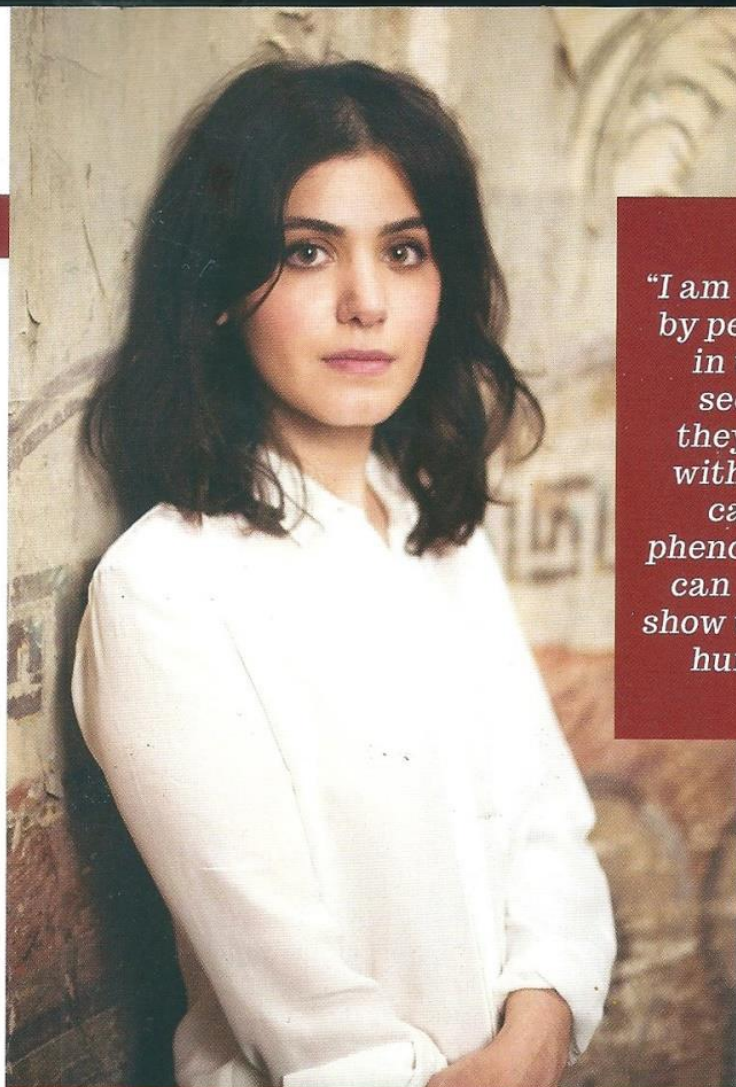
I am often inspired by the people working in the charity sector. When they're working with a truly just cause, some phenomenal things can happen that show the best of the human spirit. The team at Gift of Life raises money to help children in Russia affected by cancer and other blood-related diseases. They're working towards raising funds to help those with a chance of survival get the medicine and treatment they need.

What does being Georgian mean to you?

Now that Georgia is starting to stand on its own feet, I am so proud to be witnessing this revival of my home country; my visibility of this is from the arts, of course.

They renovated the old Tbilisi Opera House, a great cultural symbol and there are so many artists, musicians and young writers that are making a name for themselves.

Another thing I value the most about being Georgian is the importance and respect that the elderly still get in society. They are listened to and considered the wisest among us.



"I am often inspired by people working in the charity sector. When they're working with a truly just cause, some phenomenal things can happen that show the best of the human spirit"

What has been your proudest achievement to date?

Bringing this album to life with a classical choir from home, and doing it without an established music producer is something I'm very proud of. Myself and Cecil Bartlett, my co-producer, were ready to call a professional in but, in the end, we were able to refine everything ourselves, from the tracking all the way to mixing.

Is there anything you've still not done that you'd love to do?

I want to be a better guitarist, which will take many years of practice. There are so many books I want to read, and one day I'd love to build a great library.

Is married life everything you hoped it would be?

This might sound funny but I didn't have any over-the-top ideals about married life, so actually it's massively exceeded all my expectations. I married a Yorkshire man [former Superbike racer James Toseland] and he's taught me that humour is the greatest ally in keeping a marriage happy.

Do you and James plan to start a family in the near future?

We'd love to have a family and, being Georgian, both my parents are applying the hardcore pressure of wanting to be grandparents soon.

Who has been your greatest inspiration?

My dad. He taught me to love reading and to stay curious with everything I do.

What is the hardest lesson you've had to learn?

That you have to pace yourself and set realistic goals.

What do you hope the next five years will bring?

I hope I can carry on performing and making records.

In Winter is out now through BMG. Katie Melua's UK tour with the Gori Women's Choir begins on November 23. See katiemelua.com