

You might not have heard of Russian superstar Valeriya yet but you will soon. The 40-year-old mum is one of the country's bestselling pop singers, with 17 number ones and sales exceeding £1million, and is even known as 'the Russian Madonna'. Now she's released her first single over here – The Party's Over – which reached number three in the UK dance charts. Could she be as big as the original Material Girl? She tells Denise Morton about her career, and the domestic abuse she suffered at the hands of her second husband...

A fairytale – that's how the outside world saw my life.

With a blossoming pop career, a charming husband and a nice house in the Moscow suburbs, how could things be any more perfect?

But for my ten years of marriage, I'd been hiding relentless psychological and physical abuse.

Alexander Shulgin was my manager, and my second husband.

I'd married young the first time and ended up leaving because I fell out of love, so I was determined to make this marriage work.

But after a year of marriage, Alexander became violent and controlling.

He'd say things like: "You shouldn't have said that! Keep quiet from now on."

He criticised my tone of voice, even the way I sat.

When he shouted at me in front of my friends and family, they started to suspect something was up.

But I was too scared to tell them.

Alexander was very controlling and I could barely blink without him knowing. My only freedom

came when I was on stage. I was classically trained

from the age of five and went to Moscow's Gnesin Academy of Music when I was 17.

Now my music was being played on national radio but I didn't earn a penny. Alexander controlled my career completely – just as he controlled my life.

Still, I didn't feel like I could leave. Alexander was a very clever man and he could switch his moods from raging fury to charming in a second.

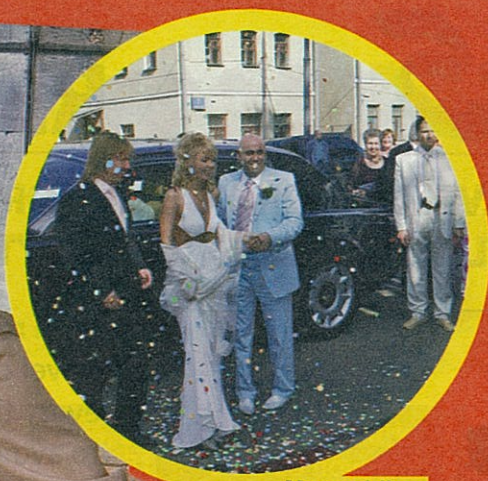
I knew he'd tell the police I was a nutter and that I was hurting myself.

I stayed with him for ten miserable years. You could barely call it living.

The worst times were when he was violent in front of our three children.

They lived in fear too and I felt helpless to protect them.

He'd scream at me: "I'm



My wedding to Joseph

your husband. No one forced you to marry me."

Eventually, when I could no longer bear to see the children so upset, I left and moved into my parents' flat in central Russia.

I had nowhere else to go as, despite my fame and success, I didn't have a penny to my name.

But that was the price I had to pay for my freedom and for the safety and happiness of my children, so it was worth it.

Living with my parents had its difficulties. There were six of us living in a one-bedroom flat so space was tight – especially for the children.

But in leaving Alexander, I gave my kids their childhood back and we needed time to recover. When I left my husband – my manager – I said goodbye to my career too and spent all of my time with the kids, trying to restore their confidence.

Alexander tracked me down and tried to persuade me to go back with him just once. He never made any efforts to see our children.

As the whole country heard about our divorce,

Meet the Russian Madonna!



Joseph, me and the kids

Alexander branded me a liar. But once my story was out, I got a huge amount of support from women all over Russia. They thanked me for giving them the confidence to leave their violent marriages.

With such a huge media interest in the divorce, music producers got in touch to offer me record deals.

I said no to all of them. I wanted my children to recover a bit more before I went back to work.

After two years, I got a call from Joseph Prigozhin, a producer. He was charming and the time felt right so I decided to give it a go.

Soon he confessed he'd fallen in love with me at first sight but it wasn't the same for me. It was more gradual.

I didn't want another husband and I didn't want to lose my freedom again. I worried about my children and how they'd feel.

Still my feelings for Joseph developed and I fell in love with him too.

But I found myself asking people what he was really like, why his first marriage ended, whether he had a good reputation.

No one said a bad word about him. Eventually, I let myself fall in love.

We married two years ago and he travels all over the world with me. He's a wonderful man.

My children adore Joseph and he's got three children of his own, so we're now a family of eight.

Now that things have settled down and are back on track, I feel it's time to see if I can break the UK with my music.

I love London. It's so bustling and the architecture is amazing, yet there are beautiful parks and spaces.

So far I've been mistaken for Sarah Harding and called 'the Russian Madonna'.

Hopefully soon people will know me simply as Valeriya – a survivor.

Valeriya's CD, *Out of Control*, is out on September 1. Visit valeriya.co.uk for info.