

Alexander **PRIOR**



Velesslavitsa

Concerto for Piano,
Two Violins and Cello



Zhang Xiao Ming, piano
Michael Province, violin
Simone Porter, violin
Nathan Chan, cello
Northern Sinfonia
Alexander Prior, conductor

FIRST RECORDING

ALEXANDER PRIOR – A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

by Martin Anderson

I first encountered Alexander Prior two years ago, when he was fourteen: a mutual friend, the pianist Wu Qian, thought I might be interested in the music he was composing.¹ I was thus invited to the Priors' London flat, so that Alex could let me hear some of his most recent pieces. I knew that he was already enrolled at the St Petersburg Conservatory – the youngest student to be admitted since Prokofiev in 1904. Indeed, he is just beginning his fourth year year there, studying conducting with Alexander Alexeev and composition with Boris Tishchenko, making him a 'grand-student' of Shostakovich. At the time of this first meeting, I was midway through reading Anthony Phillips' masterly translation of Volume 1 of Prokofiev's diaries,² which begin with Prokofiev's student life at that very institution, and I mentioned the fact to Alex. I was taken aback by his response: 'I've read them'. 'But only Volume 1 has been translated.' 'I read them in Russian.' Alex's mother is Russian: I should have guessed he'd be fluent in the language. In return he told me what he was reading – *Beowulf*, in the original Anglo-Saxon. So I knew this was no ordinary fourteen-year-old before I had heard any of his music.

Mostly using MIDI files, since much of the music was still unperformed, he played me a selection of his compositions. I was unprepared for the quality of the music he had written, even at that young age. Nor did I expect it to be so explicitly Russian. But Alex's imagination is fired by major historical events, Russian history in particular, and his music can engage directly with its stimuli. His First Symphony, for example, then a work in progress (scored for strings and percussion, it was finished in 2007), contains an elegiac slow movement inspired by the execution of the Russian royal family in 1918. The symphonic poem *Stalin's March* (2006) takes its cue from the terror that followed, bringing out what Alex calls the

¹ She has recorded Prior's *Svyatogor's Quest*, a set of variations written in 2008, on the Dal Segno label, along with Schumann and Liszt (DSPRCD 041).

² Sergei Prokofiev, *Diaries 1907–1914: Prodigious Youth*, Faber and Faber, London, 2006.

‘barbaric brutality’ of some of his music. Although much of the music he has written has its inspiration elsewhere – there’s a one-act ballet *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from 2006, for instance; the ballet *Mowgli* (2006–7) is based on Kipling’s *Jungle Book*; and the Second Symphony, the *Northern Symphony* of 2007, is dedicated to Grieg, Nielsen and Sibelius – it seems fair to see his music as part of the Russian symphonic mainstream. Indeed, I was struck on that first visit by apparent echoes of the work of Sviridov and Weinberg, both Shostakovich acolytes – although at the time Alex did not know their music (he does now!); he had absorbed the language from the musical tradition that surrounds him.

Since then his catalogue of works has expanded to include two more symphonies, an opera (*The Desert*, written in 2008), another ballet, a generous quantity of other orchestral pieces, chamber music and much more. His Second Piano Concerto, *Northern Dances* (2007), won second place in the International Prokofiev Composers’ Competition in 2008. In 2008, too, the Rossica Choir toured his choral cycle *Sounds of the Homeland* and parts of his *All-Night Vigil* round the UK. And in November 2009 he will conduct the premiere of an oratorio, *Nevsky Prospekt*, based on short stories by Gogol.

The first two episodes of the three-part Channel 4 TV series *The World’s Greatest Musical Prodigies* showed Alex in Florida and Shanghai, selecting four musicians even younger than he to take part in a concerto he was then to write: excerpts of its premiere, conducted by the composer, formed the climax of the series. Sitting in the audience at The Sage, Gateshead, to review the first performance of *Velesslavitsa*, a latter-day *concerto grosso*, I was not surprised to hear that in its melodic contours and modal harmony the work lay downstream from Rimsky-Korsakov and Mussorgsky: its composer, after all, is a Russian Romantic.

Alex had made the UK television news with his conducting of The State Symphony Orchestra of St Petersburg in a concert of his own compositions (including the First Symphony) and The New Opera Orchestra of Moscow in the premiere of his ballet *Mowgli* in February 2008. Personally, though, I had no prior (sorry) experience of his work on the podium, and I was startled to discover just how good he was. The Gateshead concert began with him conducting the first movement of a mainstream concerto for each of the young soloists who were to feature in *Velesslavitsa* in its second half: the ten-year-old Zhang Xiao Ming in the Beethoven

Second Piano Concerto; Michael Province, then thirteen, in the Mendelssohn E minor Violin Concerto; Simone Porter, twelve, in the Haydn C major Violin Concerto; and Nathan Chan, fifteen, in the Dvořák Cello Concerto. It was clear that he knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it; he was also very attentive to his soloists, moulding the orchestral accompaniment to their playing.

But the judgement that carries most weight doesn't come my part of the hall: there's no one as unforgiving of amateurishness or poor preparation as an orchestral musician – they've seen it all. So after the concert I asked Bradley Creswick, the leader of the Northern Sinfonia, what Alex had been like to work with – he was, the answer came, the consummate professional: his gestures were to the point, his intentions communicated with clarity. The news that, a month later, he was runner-up in the Ninth Leeds Conductors' Competition (he conducted the Orchestra of Opera North in Sibelius' Third Symphony in the final round) was now no surprise.

Martin Anderson writes on music for a number of publications, including Tempo and International Piano in Britain, Fanfare in the United States, Finnish Music Quarterly and Klassisk in Norway. He also runs Toccata Classics.

CHANNEL 4 AND THE CULTIVATION OF NEW TALENT

by Jan Younghusband

The role of Channel Four in television is to innovate, which is why we decided a few years ago to offer artists the TV screen as a 'canvas'. This idea in time has brought some striking new films to the screen, from Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* and Lloyd Newson's 'DV8' presentation *The Cost of Living* to, most recently, Steve McQueen's *Hunger*; we have also commissioned new opera films from Jonathan Dove and Judith Weir. I came across Alex Prior a while back and was fascinated by the musical talent of this brilliant young composer. When RDF Television approached me wanting to make a series about him, I was delighted: I had long wanted to tell a story about what it is like to be born with music as your main language. In the spirit of creating new work, we invited Alex to write a concerto for the series and, fortunately for us, he agreed. I am very grateful to him because it was a very risky decision to compose 'for the camera', but it meant that we could show what it is really like to create and perform a new work today (just as it must have been for composers through time), to cast his soloists from around the world and work in partnership with one of the UK's major concert venues, The Sage in Gateshead. RDF searched throughout the world, with Alex, to find young soloists to take part in the series. It was very touching to see what making music means to these brilliant young musicians, to hear them talk about music and discover what it means to them. I look forward to seeing what they all do next, and I am sure we will be seeing and hearing lots more of them all in the future.

Jan Younghusband is Head of Arts and Performance, Channel 4.

ALEXANDER PRIOR ON HIS *VELESSLAVITSA*

I started writing *Velesslavitsa* in November 2008, after choosing the four soloists for the premiere. The title of this concerto translates as ‘Glory to Veles’, who is the Slavic god of music. Thus it is amongst other things an ode to music, to the glory of the process of music-making. *Velesslavitsa* is a synthesis of pagan and Christian cultural and musical traditions, and so much of the drama of the piece comes from the conflict of these two contrasting worlds. This is a particularly common idea in Russian music, as even today pagan rituals and beliefs live side by side with Christian ones. The concerto has a recurring theme, which acts as a link between all the movements: a variant on a fifteenth-century chant from the Valaam Monastery in Karelia (North Russia), ‘Glory be to God’.

Velesslavitsa was conceived to reflect both my inner world and also the personalities of the soloists for whom it was written: Zhang Xiao Ming, Michael Province, Simone Porter and Nathan Chan. The piano part is lyrical and playful, bold and valiant – and more often than not with a touch of humour. Violin 1 is sensitive, poetic, highly expressive, yet often very gentle, at other times running into a vigorous swirl of energy and power, and always kind and loving. Violin 2 is a very neat and precise part, technically harder as she is a player with more of a focus on technique, but also much cooler than Violin 1. It also calls for strong character and tone, which is abundant in her playing. The cello part is both expressive and rational, often creating polyphonic contrast with the orchestra.

The concerto starts with a *Maestoso* introduction, from which many of the themes of the work will be derived. It opens with the recurring chant theme in the brass – cold, proud, harsh, majestic – interspersed with highly emotional and dramatic responses from the soloists. After the introduction culminates in a chorale version of the chant theme, the sonata allegro begins. It is in traditional sonata form. The main theme is dance-like – already a pagan side to the music. The secondary theme is lyrical yet somewhat playful. The development section starts with a fugato, which is contrasted by a harsh solo from violin 1, and from here the music begins to acquire dramatic tension. As elsewhere, the soloists seek to resolve, to come to a climax, but the climaxes they attain are always very short and abrupt. The material develops and reaches its

first true, major climax. It is followed by a deeply felt duet from the two violins, who play in dialogue. The material is taken over by the piano, then the cello. The piano enters with a kind of insane waltz, and then after a short response from the orchestra in the same waltz mode, violin 1 washes all the drama away, with material very similar to the first theme. Then the second theme comes back almost in its original form, predicting the condensed recapitulation that, after a short cadenza from violin 2, soon follows, with a short *stretto* coda.

The second movement, *Grave*, was inspired to a trip to Lake Ilmen, south of St Petersburg, in late autumn 2008. The movement, which is in mirror form, opens with dark, harsh unison and fifths in the low register, and only when violin 1 comes in does this icy music begin to melt. As all the soloists gradually enter, the music becomes more and more expressive, more and more human. The cello plays the second material – a long flowing theme, accompanied by a murmuring orchestra. It wants to break into a climax, but the piano brings it back to the icy mood of the beginning. The middle section starts to gain speed and energy, until the chant theme breaks into the music, this time in the entire orchestra. Then the mirror begins, and gradually we return to the icy flavour with which it started, although before that material that was previously not allowed to climax does so.

The third movement, *Presto*, is in rondo form. After the main material is played by both the orchestra and the soloists, it gradually modulates to the second theme. But very quickly the main material returns in a grander form. The piano plays a third theme, slightly sarcastic and humorous. All the soloists take it up, but the orchestra intrudes and overpowers them. It repeats its solemn theme. The soloists seem to imitate it, but very soon they are into a folk-dance type of motive, very much Finno-Ugrian in its character, which leads back to the main material. The orchestra has a powerful and ecstatic climax. The cello complies with this mood, but the piano calls for another dance. This time it's a Russian dance, a comical *chastushka*. The string soloists play pizzicato, imitating folk instruments. The orchestra tries to intervene several times, and eventually gets its way. Now all come together for a powerful coda, where the main theme of the movement and the recurring chant theme coincide to create a powerful, uplifting, glorifying ending.

A Postscript to *Velesslavitsa*

After writing rehearsing and performing *Velesslavitsa*, I felt that this was too interesting and emotional a project to leave at that. I was so inspired by the playing, dedication and personalities of the young soloists that I have decided to devote an entire cycle of works to them. It will range from miniatures to concerti – all melodically and stylistically related to some degree. And it will also include Anna De Loi, the stunning young harpist whom I was unable to include in *Velesslavitsa*. The first work in this cycle is a violin concerto, *Hope*, which is dedicated to Michael. It is a turn in a different direction for me as a composer, and marks a new, more lyrical, emotional, heartfelt, less aggressive style, although retaining the melodic essence of previous works. It was written in the very short period of just over a month: the music seemed just to flow out of me. I was in a rather sentimental state of mind: I will not hide the fact that I was missing my young musician-friends, which only added to the lyrical effect of the piece. Harmonically, too, it is different from earlier works and uses a system, influenced by Richard Strauss to some extent, which is relatively chromatic and complex. And in this work, as in all the compositions in this cycle, I am seeking to simplify both melody and form as much as possible, so as to reflect the pure and innocent spirits of these children. The concerto is entitled *Hope* because in Michael, as in all these children, I see hope for the world – beauty and kindness amidst anger and hatred. Indeed, I may entitle the entire cycle *Hope*.

The next work is a cello concerto for Nathan. It treats the cello like a human voice, so the melodic line is simple but lyrical. There is some anger in the work, but it always returns to the cello-song of hope. After that I picture a suite for violin and orchestra for Simone, much of it dance-like, but not restricted to the simplicity of a dance suite. For Xiao Ming I have written, and am still writing, a cycle of pieces called *Dream Songs*, small dream-like pieces which suit his kind, gentle and yet charismatic behaviour. For the harp I shall write a concerto.

I hope that this cycle that will reflect our strong and close friendship, and continues to do so for a long, long time.

Alexander Prior © 2009

The pianist **Zhang Xiao Ming** (English name, Jack) is ten years old and comes from Shanghai. His pianistic gifts were discovered while he was in kindergarten and he started formal lessons at the age of five. Xiao Ming's teacher suggested then that he should aim to become a professional and study like one, and so in 2007 he started lessons with the renowned concert pianist and former piano-prodigy William Chen at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. From the age of eight Xiao Ming began to enter various piano competitions and won first prizes in quite a few of them, including the Shanghai Zhangjiang High-Tech Cup and the Hong Kong Hailun Cup. Though often practising many hours a day, Xiao Ming also loves to play badminton and enjoys reading.

Michael Province was thirteen years old when this recording was made. He has been studying violin for eight years and is currently a student of Carol Cole at Lynn University. Michael recently appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* featuring the world's smartest and most talented kids. At age ten, he made his debut with the Treasure Coast Symphony in Mozart's G Major Concerto after being awarded the Young Artist Scholarship. Michael has been a Florida Federation state winner in 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007 and 2008. Also in 2008 he was granted the esteemed Irene Muir Award for extraordinary talent and potential after being chosen from thirteen hundred entrants as one of the fifteen nominees and then went on to win, playing Haydn's G Major Concerto. In summer 2006 and 2007, he attended the prestigious four-week String Academy at the Indiana University Jacob School of Music as one of the youngest participants. He was awarded first place in the 2004 Stars of the Future instrumental competition, the 2006 Palm Beach Idol contest and the 2009 Palm Beach Youth Orchestra concerto competition; he has also been heard on WQCS Art Spotlight. He has played in master-classes for Ida Haendel, Elmar Oliveira, Barnabas Kelemen and Mimi Zweig. Michael idolises Joshua Bell, who said of him in a recent interview: 'What I look for when I get excited by a young person is that factor that's hard to put your finger on, that presence and he seems to have it. Michael becomes the music and that's very rare and really great when you do see it'. Michael is home-schooled and currently studies ballet, jazz, tap, acting and piano; he has also starred in several plays. In his own words, 'Performing makes me feel alive!'

Simone Porter, twelve, began her violin studies with Amy Evans in Salt Lake City at the age of three; upon moving to Seattle in 2002, she joined the Margaret Pressley Violin Studio. Summer studies have included attendance at the Indiana University Summer String Academy, the Schlern

International Music Festival and the Aspen Music Festival. Currently Simone flies to Los Angeles every week to study with Robert Lipsett of the Colburn Conservatory of Music. Simone had her orchestral debut when she was eight, and has performed solo with over ten orchestras, giving her professional debut with the Seattle Symphony in October 2006. Simone was a featured performer on the nationally syndicated radio show *From the Top* in 2007, and in March 2008 she had her Carnegie Hall debut broadcast 'Live from Carnegie Hall' on *From the Top*. In spring 2009 she opened a ceremony honouring the Dalai Lama for 55,000 people. Simone has won a number of competitions, most recently the Seattle Young Artist Music Festival; as winner she appeared as soloist in the Khachaturian Violin Concerto with the Philharmonia Northwest. She is an active member of the Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestra, where she is in the first-violin section. She is in sixth grade at Washington Middle School. In addition to playing and listening to music, she loves to draw, write stories and play with her dog, a Tibetan terrier called Olivia.

Nathan Chan, cello, made his first public performance at the age of three with the San Jose Chamber Orchestra, conducting a set of variations by Mozart, a debut made possible when a conductor saw him 'air-conducting' at one of his mother's concerts. The next year, Nathan conducted Beethoven's Fifth Symphony with the Palo Alto Philharmonic. He began playing the cello at five and featured, as a cellist, in *The Music in Me*, a documentary on talented young musicians by director Amy Schatz, six times winner of Emmy awards; filmed in New York and broadcast in October 2006 on the HBO network, it won the prestigious Peabody Award for 2007 and led to invitations to perform in Carnegie Hall, for the 'NAMM International Music Merchants' Convention, and for a special gala performance honouring Ravi Shankar. It also caught the attention of the singer Roberta Flack who invited Nathan (as a substitute for Yo Yo Ma, who was unavailable for the project) to collaborate with her on her next CD of Beatles songs, scheduled for release on Sony. Nathan made his solo debut with the San Francisco Symphony earlier in 2008 and again in 2009. He has also performed with the Peninsula Symphony Orchestra and San Francisco Sunset Youth Orchestra and will make his debut with the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra in the 2009–10 season. He has performed solo recitals for the San Francisco Symphony League, the Young Masters Project of the Vancouver Recital Society, the National Cello Institute, the American String Teachers' Association and California Summer Music.



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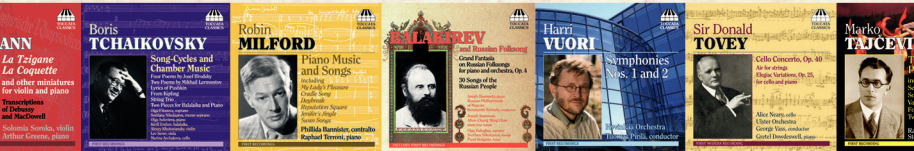
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In autumn 2008 Channel 4 sent the sixteen-year-old British-Russian composer-conductor Alex Prior around the world: his task, to find 'The World's Greatest Musical Prodigies' for a TV series with that title and to compose a concerto for them, which Alex would conduct. The resulting work, *Velesslavitsa* (the title means 'Glory to Veles', the god of music in ancient Slav cultures), is steeped in the Russian Romantic tradition, with echoes especially of Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. This live recording features the ten-year-old Chinese pianist Zhang Xiao Ming, the American violinists Simone Porter and Michael Province, twelve and thirteen, and the fifteen-year-old American cellist Nathan Chan.



ALEXANDER PRIOR *Velesslavitsa*

1	Maestoso – Allegro	17:08	'a triumph. The concerto is an exhilarating, rip-roaring melodic noise [...]. And the four young musicians [...] rise to the occasion like seasoned professionals'	<i>The Times</i>
2	Grave	17:42		
3	Presto	11:45		

Zhang Xiao Ming , piano
 Michael Province, violin 1
 Simone Porter, violin 2
 Nathan Chan, cello
 Northern Sinfonia
 Alexander Prior, conductor

TT 46:35

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