

**Prior's New Violin Concerto**

**Saturday, June 1 – 8 pm**

**Alexander Prior**, conductor

**Simone Porter**, violin

Symphony Prelude, Saturday 7 pm, Upper Circle (Third Level) Lobby with Amanda Banister

**ESTACIO**

*Borealis*

(10')\*

**PRIOR**

*Violin Concerto No. 1 "The Second"* (World Premiere)

(30')\*

"Sue the horse"

"I reckon California should be pronounced with a Stockholm accent"

"There's antifreeze in your pipes"

**BRAHMS** (arr. Schoenberg)

*Piano Quartet in G minor, Op.25*

(47')\*

Allegro

Intermezzo

Andante con moto

Rondo alla zingarese

program subject to change

\*indicates approximate performance duration

*Borealis* (1997 ESO commission)

**John Estacio**

(b. Newmarket, Ontario, 1966)

First performance of *Borealis* (single movement): January 25, 1997 in Edmonton

Last ESO performance: November 2010

Program note by the composer:

The first time ever I experienced the glorious spectacle of the Aurora Borealis was some years ago when I arrived in Edmonton. Up until that moment I had to settle for textbook explanations and a geography teacher's descriptions. I had no idea what I was seeing when I first noticed the majestic curtains of swirling green light in the sky one crisp October evening until a friend confirmed that it was indeed the Northern Lights. I was completely captivated and awestruck by the magical sight; how could I not be inspired to compose a piece of music?! Having recently completed two serious compositions, it was the right time to revisit a style for unabashed lyrical melodies and joyous bright orchestral colours that *Borealis* would require.

The work is meant to be awe-invoking; the ephemeral nature of these celestial happenings is represented by the sudden colourful outbursts followed by movements of near silence. The movement begins with the strings playing a major chord and then gradually glissing (bending the pitch) until they all arrive at a different chord; for me, this musical gesture captures the essence of bending curtains of light and serves as a recurring motive throughout this movement. A solo flute introduces fragments of a melody; this melody is not heard in its entirety until later in the piece when it is performed by a solo bassoon and then an English horn. The strings perform the melody and the composition swells to its climax featuring the brass and the sound splashes provided by the percussion. *Borealis* concludes with a unique auditory effect in the percussion section that again attempts to convey the enchanting and magical quality of the borealis.

### ***Violin Concerto No. 1 "The Second"* (World Premiere)**

**Alexander Prior**

(b. London, 1992)

This is the World Premiere of the piece

The following notes were prepared by the composer. Read at your own risk, and best of luck to you.

Before the concerto begins, the audience will be asked to vote on which ending they would like to hear tonight: a tragic and confused ending, a confused and passive-aggressive ending, or a wistful and somber ending. The option receiving the second highest number of votes wins.

The concerto

This concerto is all about the pursuit of logic through antiphonal forces of shenkerian distal polyphony. Diatonic stamps are swapped out for polyamorous clichés throughout the work. Quasi-anthropomorphic melodic lines bring us to a state of total inner peace, a nightmarish state of wokeness and harmonic pontification.

1st movement: "Sue the horse"

In the first movement a highly modified sonata form can be compared to the arts and crafts movement in visual art, in terms of bending the norms of light into structural forms upon which the composition is built. They serve as a sort of foundation for the horizontal elements of the work, taking us diagonally to new keys and new worlds, pursued by previous polytonal functions of the original sequence. The 2nd subject of this sonata form is loosely based on my earlier work – the 4th basset horn sonatina "Is it a swallow?". The recapitulation is of a fairly conventional type, excluding the parthenogenesistic cries for help coming from the back of the orchestra, and the distressed Morris dancing which the bass-section breaks into just before the coda of the movement.

2nd movement: "I reckon California should be pronounced with a Stockholm accent"

This movement starts with a long cello solo, accompanied only by tubular bells and a guitarist shouting the word "Beetle" every now and then. This heart-wrenching solo is then entirely ignored by the violinist who proceeds to play the main theme (never repeated or developed) of this classical rondo. The mood of this movement is inspired by the elegance of the classical movement of composers (think Haydn, Mozart etc.) but with just a slight hint of southeastern Andorran traditional balalaika music. One can feel the tension building to the point where one may wish to exit the concert hall. A better time for doing so will, however, make itself available. The oppressive weight of the totalitarian nature of the Rondo begins to work itself into a frenzy and results in a sort of boiling over of temperament and even the scientifically grounded rules of resonance, acoustics, and tonality themselves begin to fracture, resulting in our musical reality becoming porous and uncertain, balance being lost, gravity itself defied.

3rd movement, finale: "There's antifreeze in your pipes"

In the last movement I aim to capture the spirit of tonal inversion by conjuring up inspirational timbres through quasi-peripheral spheres of tonality. Gradually the music evolves into a more polytonal structural concept out of its' original Aristotelian-like pulse. One can, at times, hear the speeches of Greg Sikorsky resonating through the tunnels of Montmartre, however these moments are fleeting and designed to be but a tantalizing whiff of a more refined ancient past, when such quasi-peripheral spheres of tonality were a daily topic of conversation around the breakfast table. This all splits into a semi-post-pointalistic deconstruction of the melodic material into its constituent elements, taking the listener on a journey of unimaginable peril and harmonic deceit. In the coda I attempt to unite all the elements of the work into a binary singularity, wherein the Haydn-like use of the tam tam draws an arc in the structure. We are brought back to the same emotional world as the opening of the work, but with a more East-coast concept of harmonic structure, influenced by the writings of the Coptic Gnostics.

In the end – what was the most perspirational dialectic of this work? Perhaps the answer will only come with a second or third listening.

### ***Piano Quartet in G minor, Op.25* (arr. Schoenberg)**

**Johannes Brahms**

(b. Hamburg, 1833 / d. Vienna, 1897)

original Brahms quartet first played:

Schoenberg orchestrations first played:

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

In a 1950 publication, *Style and Idea*, Arnold Schoenberg – revolutionary and controversial composer and creator of a new way of thinking about tonal relationships in music that nearly single-handedly ushered in our concept of "modern" music – contributed an article with the provocative and unexpected title "Brahms the Progressive." Brahms, after all, was regarded as the great bastion of tradition from the prior century – the man whose adherence and respect for the forms and conventions of past generations was the chief weapon flung at the Wagnerites and others who sought to move past such anachronistic thinking. So why was the modernist *ne plus ultra* Schoenberg paying homage to Brahms in this way?

Because from a certain, very important, perspective, Brahms *was* progressive, and daringly so. Working within recognizable frameworks, Brahms pushed the boundaries of harmony, rhythm, and even sonata form, and Schoenberg knew it. It was that admiration for Brahms that led Schoenberg to orchestrate a mid-period chamber work by Brahms. In a famous letter to San Francisco music scribe Alfred

Frankenstein, Schoenberg set out his reasons for taking on Brahms G minor Piano Quartet: "I like the piece. It is seldom played. It is always very badly played, because the better the pianist, the louder he plays and you hear nothing from the strings. I wanted once to hear everything, and this I achieved."

He "achieved" it by taking advantage of an orchestra Brahms would not have had at his disposal. Schoenberg's arrangement calls for xylophone, for example, and the extended range of instruments (such as from the clarinet family) that Brahms never used. What he was after, Schoenberg said, was to remain true to Brahms, and create a work Brahms himself might have done with the modern orchestra of the day.

Brahms' own conception of chamber music was nearly symphonic in scope, giving Schoenberg ample inroads in his realization. The opening movement, for example, is in an inventive, highly compacted sonata form, the main theme for which is a slender one-bar falling motif, from which Brahms wrests a host of ideas. The range of emotion is also large, though the sense of tension and unsettledness dominates in the eddying undercurrents of rhythm playing against the surface melody.

The second movement might have been considered the work's Scherzo – a word Brahms used in an earlier version of the score. But he eschews that for "Intermezzo," a word he would use ever after, to portray his intent simply and less formulaically. Groups of instruments take up the melody in turn, set to an undulating 9/8. The central trio is a mischievous romp, scurrying nimbly among the strings and woodwinds.

The third movement is the most recognizably "Brahmsian," in its stirring, string-filled replication of the polyrhythmic nature of a Brahms symphonic movement, as well as the warm colours of the woodwinds (particularly the clarinet). So the decidedly "newer" orchestral sounds employed in the merry, rousing "alla Zingarese" ("in gypsy style") finale bring the work forward in time, while still playfully recapturing Brahms' halcyon days as the accompanist to Eduard Reményi. One of Schoenberg's cleverest touches is in the part of Brahms' original work that had the piano's cadenza. Here, Schoenberg re-imagines it in pizzicato strings – a move that even Stravinsky (never a fan of Schoenberg in general) called "a master stroke."

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