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')*

PROKOFIEV
Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major, Op.19 (23')*
Andantino
Scherzo: Vivacissimo
Finale: Moderato

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

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 in D Major, Op.19
Sergei Prokofiev
(b. Sontsovka, 1891 / d. St. Petersburg, 1953)

First performed: October 18, 1923 in Paris
Last ESO performance: March 2008

After announcing his presence on the scene with some fiercely virtuosic and cutting-edge piano works, Sergei Prokofiev must have decided that public acceptance might come more readily with a slightly less aggressive approach. Ironically, this new, softer stance was occurring as his native land was whipping itself up into the frenzy of the Bolshevik Revolution. Trying to make his way in the music world, touring and concertizing, took up much of his time, and the concerto was not premiered until years later in Paris. Even still, it did not truly begin to find widespread public acceptance until Josef Szigeti began to champion the piece.

Pensive violin opens the work alone, though woodwinds join in soon enough – the violin was not Prokofiev's instrument, which perhaps led him to a more lyrical use of it than the abrasive bravura piano which was so much a part of his musicianship. The slow, melodic opening increases in pace, but still quietly, as the violin leads the orchestra around a twirling, flight-filled central section. Prokofiev uses unique directions in this movement: the slow opening is marked "sognando" (roughly, "as if in a

dream"), while the faster central section is labeled "narrante" ("as if telling a story"). At the movement's end, the flute takes on the music the violin had played at the beginning. The violin's upper register and an arpeggiating flute close the movement on a whisper.

In a bit of reverse order, Prokofiev's concerto is in a "slow-fast-slow" layout, so its second movement is a dashing Scherzo. This is certainly more in line with the *enfant terrible* composer who had scandalized the St. Petersburg Conservatory with his outlandish pianism. The music jumps out, a series of ostinatos and an almost comically exaggerated heavy-bowed violin lead to a mad dash for all the instruments, especially the soloist's, with a taxing, rhythmic series of challenges, interspersed with brief cries from the orchestra.

The final movement begins entirely unexpectedly, with bassoons against plucked strings, for all the world not unlike the ox-carts depicted by Borodin or Rimsky-Korsakov a generation before. But the violin, once it enters, is now transformed into a beguiling songstress. The music's intensity increases, as do the challenges presented the soloist, until the movement's loudest moment brings the orchestra (spotlighting the tuba!) together in a recollection of the opening bassoon passage. The final moments take us back to the violin which, as if satisfied with the journey it has led, alights gently at the conclusion with another long-held high note.

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."