

Music's boy wonder: Composer, conductor, singer... and he's only fifteen

Alex Prior is in Moscow conducting his own ballet score – the latest in a series of amazing feats. But, as Jessica Duchen reports, the stories of child prodigies do not always have a happy ending

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This week, Alex Prior has been in Moscow, conducting his ballet score, *Jungle Book: Mowgli* at the Kremlin. A prolific London-born composer and conductor, he has written more than 40 works, including operas, symphonies and a requiem for the children of Beslan. He's also wielded the baton over a fair number of them. The great-grandson of the Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavsky, he is writing an opera based on Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and has said that his ambition is to become chief conductor at the home of Wagner in Bayreuth. He is a student in St Petersburg, an international star – and 15 years old.

It sounds like a glamorous life: the fulfilment of a God-given talent. But what is the reality of a life such as his? What lies in store for him and what are the likely hurdles? And just how much of the Prior machine is the real thing in terms of musical genius?

He has fine credentials by the dozen. His father is English, his mother Russian and, through the latter, it is claimed, he is related not only to Stanislavsky but to Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky. More important, though, is what is made of the present – not only by Prior but by those closest to him: his family and managers. And there is plenty to make of it.

He has been writing music since he was eight; at 12 he was the youngest composer to be commended in the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition. In terms of composition, he is more than just a gifted lad being thrust into questionable limelight. His list of works would not disgrace a man three times his age: four symphonies, with another on the way, plus symphonic poems and a "symphonietta"; a ballet or two; the Requiem for Beslan; seven concerti (four of them "in progress"); and a parade of works for solo instrument, chamber orchestra, chorus and even electronica.

A definite voice is emerging in his work, too, even if *Mowgli* doesn't blow Disney's *Jungle Book* aside just yet. Prior's 50-minute Northern Symphony, his second, is dedicated to Nielsen, Grieg and Sibelius, just some of the canonists from whom he is clearly taking some of his cues. He follows in the grand symphonic tradition, back to Mahler and beyond, but bypasses over-experimental and avant-garde "squeaky gate" music. His Russian roots are palpable: images of pine-forest landscapes abound; one orchestral piece evokes the miseries of life under Communism, *Stalin's March*, which was played by the City of London Sinfonia as

part of a new-music day; and he often has a post-Shostakovich flavour, with terrific rhythmic drive, sweeping gestures and grand-scale thinking removed from the strictures of Western modernism or Brittenesque containment.

That he already has such a strong identity in his musical language speaks volumes, but it will be interesting to see how his idiom develops. And that is assuming that, when he reaches the point of taking stock, he remains determined enough to see his talent through to the other side.

Parenting, plus good teaching, is what helps any child prodigy to sink or swim; it cannot be otherwise. Almost a hundred years ago, a boy from Vilna (now Vilnius, capital of Lithuania) named Jascha Heifetz made his debut at the age of seven; he grew up to be (arguably) the best violinist of the 20th century. He said: "Child prodigism – if I may coin a word – is a disease which is generally fatal. I was among the few to have the good fortune to survive." Many haven't been so lucky.

A few years ago, Prior's parents took part in a television documentary which, they told interviewers, they had understood would be called *Talented Children*. When the programme came out, its title was *Pushy Parents*. Neither his father, Peter, a renewable-energy consultant, nor his mother, Elena, a former actress, is a professional musician – and they were not pleased with the portrayal. Well, every prodigy denies having been pushed, and every parent denies pushing. A few could be telling the truth; after all, a talent presents itself and can't be conjured up if it doesn't exist. All that parents can do is to respond as they think best for their child.

Getting the balance right is next to impossible. Hard work remains essential, however strong the talent, and some parents go to great lengths to ensure the practising gets done. Yehudi Menuhin's apparently used to lock a sibling in a cupboard so the boy genius wouldn't be distracted.

Yet, without a parent who is supportive at best and pushy at worst, Mozart himself would not necessarily have succeeded. At first, Prior's mother undertook his management, though he is now represented by Van Walsum, a long-established artists' management firm in London. His recordings and DVDs, though, are out only on his own label, available to buy exclusively through his lavishly informative (if erratically designed) website.

That's not to say that all of Prior's musical activities have been so inspiring. Early in his precocious career, he began to make a name not only for composition but for singing. He was touted by publicists as "the little Pavarotti". Blessed with excellent pitch, he rendered Puccini's "Nessun Dorma" from *Turandot* powerfully, if peculiarly, at the Kremlin in November 2004. You can see this performance on his website, and I would say that watching it is a peculiar experience.

A tallish pre-teen in a white jacket paces down the stairs on a glitzy set, performing with great aplomb, well-schooled gestures and a slightly glassy stare. The breath control is nowhere near beefy enough and the piece is sung into a microphone, rendering size of tone insignificant. The voice itself has some quality, though, and the pronunciation fine – he had been well coached. But appropriateness in style, emotional content and voice type doesn't come into it. And the stone-faced Kremlin audience observing him is almost as scary.

This was a mile away from the genial, unmixed miracle that used to be Aled Jones in his boy-treble days – more akin, perhaps, to the early marketer's-dream excesses of Charlotte Church. The website is now notably short on advertising future singing engagements, and quiet on the reasons. Perhaps, now that he is 15 and his voice has broken, continuing on that path is not viable any longer. That may be just as well.

Everyone makes mistakes, though – and at best, the parents of child prodigies do want a well-guided, motivated youngster to spend a rewarding lifetime in music. But when I started researching prodigies for my novels *Alicia's Gift* (about a pianist prodigy in Buxton, Derbyshire) and *Hungarian Dances* (in which a young Roma girl is adopted in 1925 and turned into a classical musician), there was no shortage of real-life source material. Some parents nourish a frightening ambition to beat the rest; some eye the money; still more are living out their own frustrated fantasies. Practical causes can play a role: in Heifetz's time, prodigydom could be an escape route to a better life for Jewish families born into pogrom-ridden eastern Europe (it's a similar situation for my fictional Gypsy violinist).

Today, plenty of British parents long for a gifted child, their eye on music scholarships to expensive schools. But schools, at least in this country, are not generally equipped to deal with extreme talent; even music colleges would be apt to go into meltdown when faced with a real prodigy.

Prior left school in 2006; he now attends the St Petersburg Conservatory. Exams are tackled with the help of a home tutor. In Prior's case, this has almost certainly been the right solution; it is hard to imagine a teenager with such a compulsion towards music being shoe-horned into conformity with lazy-schoolboy "cool", let alone double chemistry.

The prodigy lifestyle, though, can become all-consuming and very dangerous. Parent-prodigy relationships can turn terrifying. Leopold Mozart, a violin teacher, was trailing his wunderkind around Europe by the time Wolfgang was seven; their barbed bond has kept biographers and film-makers busy ever since. Reading Leopold's letters, one can't help wondering if he was sane. When the 22-year-old Wolfgang was living in Paris in 1778, Leopold wrote to brow-beat him for not working hard enough, not making the right contacts, and above all, not putting his father's well-being – including financial – ahead of all else.

Many prodigies, as Heifetz pointed out, never recover. The miraculous violinist Josef Hassid (1923-1950) was diagnosed schizophrenic and died at the age of 26 after a lobotomy. David Helfgott, the Australian pianist whose story was told in the film *Shine*, spent years in a mental institution, suffering schizoaffective disorder. Terence Judd, a fabulous British pianist who made his concerto debut with the London Philharmonic aged 12, threw himself off Beachy Head after winning the Tchaikovsky Competition in 1979. The list could carry on.

Yet the strongest do more than survive: born to be musicians, they grow into greatness and leave a legacy. Here is a final example: Mieczyslaw Horszowski, a much-loved Polish pianist, began giving recitals at the age of six and played at London's Wigmore Hall when he was 99. Except, the story went, his parents had made out that he was two years younger than he truly was, to make his prodigydom appear more miraculous. By that token, at that last concert, he was 101.

What about Prior? We will doubtless be hearing much more of this remarkable teenager. Good luck to him. Chances are that he is going to need it.

Alicia's Gift by Jessica Duchon is published by Hodder & Stoughton. Her next novel, Hungarian Dances, is out in March

Other prodigies of classical music

DANIEL BARENBOIM

The pianist and conductor was playing concertos at the age of 11 and learnt his musical values from the German composer and conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler. He is arguably the most recognised and respected classical musician of his time.

MAXIM VENGEROV

Nobody who was there will forget his debut recital at the Wigmore Hall aged 14: a schoolboy playing like Paganini reincarnated. The Russian-born violinist's career has gone from strength to strength, enhanced by his showmanship, but he was grounded last year by a shoulder injury.

ERICH KORNGOLD

Korngold was one of the greatest composing child prodigies, but suffered under the influence of his domineering father, a powerful critic in Vienna who held him back from exploring progressive music. He wrote film scores and his father never forgave him.

HILARY HAHN

The American former prodigy violinist is now in her late twenties and has established a superb career, garnering huge acclaim for her seriousness of purpose and intelligent musicality. She's also making a vital effort to attract younger listeners to music through a website.

LISE DE LA SALLE

This stunning French pianist, turning 20 this year, made her concerto debut at 13, stepping in at short notice to play Beethoven's Second Concerto.