

# POUL RUDERS

( b. 1949 )

## **Piano Concerto No. 2** (2009–2010) [23:55]

- 1) I. Fluente [9:35]
- 2) II. Semplice [9:40]
- 3) III. Avanti risoluto [4:38]

Vassily Primakov, piano  
Norwegian Radio Orchestra  
Thomas Søndergård, conductor

- 4) **Bel Canto** (2004) [6:21]  
Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violin

## **Serenade on the Shores of the Cosmic Ocean** (2004) [33:28]

- 5) I. Introduction (Presto "Wildly Pulsating")  
("...we stand on an islet in the midst of an illimitable ocean of inexplicability") —T. H. Huxley, 1887 [3:10]
- 6) II. One Voice in the Cosmic Fugue (Adagio "Dreaming")  
("Probably all the organic beings that have ever lived on this earth have descended from some primordial form into which life was first breathed.")  
—Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 1859 [6:06]

- 7) III. Floating on the Wind (Prestissimo "Flying")  
("The Moon leaps in the Great River's current...floating on the Wind, what do I resemble?")  
—Du Fu, "Traveling at Night" Tang Dynasty, 765 [2:43]
- 8) IV. The Backbone of the Night (Kung bushmen, Kalahari Desert, Botswana: *their name for the Milky Way*) [2:48]
- 9) V. Stardust (Rubato) ("we are, as I like to say, starstuff")  
—Carl Sagan, "The Most Precious Thing",  
The Demon-Haunted World, 1995 [2:07]
- 10) VI. Threnos ("Beauty, truth and rarity/Grace in all simplicity/Here enclosed in cinders lie")  
—William Shakespeare, "The Phoenix and the Turtle", 1601 [7:22]
- 11) VII. Dream Catcher (Dolce sognante) (A Dream Catcher traps bad dreams and lets the good dreams filter down to the sleeper.) [4:12]
- 12) VIII. Heart of Darkness (Joseph Conrad, 1902) [2:17]
- 13) IX. Finale: Blinded by the Light  
(John Gribbin: *The Secret Life of the Sun*, 1991) [1:58]

Mikko Luoma, accordion  
iO String Quartet  
Christina McGann, violin 1; Sarah Crocker, violin 2  
Elizabeth Weisser, viola; Chris Gross, cello

Notes by Malcolm MacDonald

**P**oul Ruders is by now generally recognized as one of the most significant contemporary Danish composers, and his works are performed both in and outside of Denmark more frequently than those of any other. Born in Ringsted, he trained as an organist and studied orchestration with Karl Aage Rasmussen, though he regards himself as self-taught. He only emerged as a distinctive voice in the 1980s, but since then he has held the international stage. Ruders has admitted to a spiritual kinship with artists such as the painter Caspar David Friedrich and the poet Edgar Allan Poe: like them, he is fascinated by death, loneliness and melancholy. He is best known for a series of brilliant orchestral works as well as for his operas *Tycho* (1986), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1997–98), *Kafka's Trial* (2002), and *Selma Jezková* (2007), though he has written a large amount of chamber music also, his idiom ranging from abstract expressionism to time-travelling pastiche of former styles. He has also made much use of collage techniques.

*Piano Concerto No. 2* is one of Ruders's most recent works. Composed in 2009–10 specifically for the young Russian virtuoso Vassily Primakov, it was commissioned by the Norwegian Radio Orchestra and Jerome Lowenthal and is dedicated to Becky Starobin. Ruders admits that, faced with the task of writing a concerto for an international star like Primakov, he felt it would be absurd, a waste, to not go all-out to compose a wholesale, full-scale utterance for grand piano and full orchestra in the grandest tradition of the concerto genre. He cautions, however, that 'the piece is not a big, chunky "machine". Rather it is a transparently orchestrated neo-classic (for lack of a better word) composition in three movements'.

The first of those movements, marked *Fluente*, begins deceptively with a gentle, almost nostalgic opening passage for piano and strings, based on a rising arpeggio

and triadic harmonies. The only hint of 'modernity' is a buzz of sound on a bowed Chinese cymbal. Quite soon, though, the piano launches into biting, percussive piano writing in a predominantly *staccato* style which is to be its hallmark from now on. The orchestra is slow to adapt, however, and continues alongside the piano in the more lyrical and tonal style of the opening, with long-breathed melodic lines. Gradually the orchestra too becomes animated and is drawn into the vigorous and jagged style propounded by the piano, as the movement develops into a full-scale toccata for piano and orchestra in the tradition of Prokofiev or Bartók, but significantly updated. This tumultuous music is suddenly broken off, and a cadenza-like passage for the soloist begins with calm right-hand triads against *staccato* jabs in the left. This too becomes more animated, and leads into a climactic final display and a scintillating coda that closes, finally, with one of the gentle piano chords of the opening and the Chinese cymbal's sonority.

Ruders marks the slow movement *Semplice*, and the piano solo with which it begins is further marked 'slightly hesitant—like a child practising'. This is at first a single slow right-hand line, to which the 'child'-soloist adds tentative left-hand chords, and which is then shadowed and resonated by harp, vibraphone, and finally the strings. All it seems is innocence and safe. Then the walls of the nursery fall down and in shocking contrast a tremendous, jagged *Brutale* outburst leaps out at the listener like a horde of ravaging beasts. Yet somehow the simple, innocent pianism of the movement's opening contrives to be heard again, and the beasts begin to seem like pantomime monsters. Their final grumbles are almost placatory—the low brass playing with velvet mutes, as if the predators are moving on velvet paws—and the child-pianist is finally left alone to finish his simple solo with his accompanying friends the vibraphone, harp and solo violin.

Ruders describes the finale, which he marks *Avanti Risoluto* (forward, with resolve), as 'a crazy rondo of sorts' and also as 'a full throttle, no holds barred ride'. It is also the most virtuosic in the technical demands it makes upon the soloist. The movement

starts with a coruscating stream of firefly chromatics in piano and percussion, alternating with chunky, abrupt two-note figures with more than a touch of jazz piano about them. The general direction is always whirling or scrambling upward, a kind of transformation of the calm ascents at the beginning of the first movement. The fun grows ever faster and more furious, the bravura ever wilder, only to be interrupted by a *dolce espressivo* episode reminiscent of the child-like music of the slow movement. This does not last, however, and we are propelled ever more breathlessly towards the finishing line, where the piano finally outpaces the orchestra and has the last cluster chord to itself, *tutta forza*. Ruders has expressed the hope that this finale will be 'lots of fun for everybody'—and it certainly is that!

**Bel Canto** for solo violin was commissioned by and for The Carl Nielsen International Violin Competition of 2004. Ruders decided, instead of writing a conventionally virtuosic fast piece, that he would go for 'introverted beauty'. *Bel Canto* is of course a term that describes a specific manner of singing, but the original meaning of the Italian phrase is simply 'beautiful song'. Ruders set out to write a primarily melodic piece in hope that the melodies would be truly beautiful. Marked *Cantabile sempre*, the work is in effect a study in sensitive sustained playing and refined tone. The frank, open, spontaneous character of the melodic writing is offset by meaningfully dissonant double-stopping (for instance frequent, piercing minor seconds) which gives a melancholic edge to the violin's song yet must not be over-emphasized. Indeed as it progresses the music takes on the character of a desolate, keening lament. A simple hymn-like or folk-like tune makes its appearance, first *senza vibrato* and then in spectral harmonics, only to be dismissed with almost expressionistic vehemence. The lament returns and mounts to a brief passionate climax, and the work ends with a reminder, *con sord.*, of the hymn-like tune.

**Serenade on the Shores of the Cosmic Ocean** for accordion and string quartet was composed in 2004 in response to a commission from the Scottish free-bass accordionist Owen Murray. This nine-movement piece passes through an extraordinary gamut of styles and musical situations, but as it progresses one notices how much concerned it is with high-lying sounds: the accordion's topmost register, string harmonics, upward-swooping glissandi and so on. These elements give the music, as they traditionally do, a sense of altitude, a sense of staring skyward at the infinitely distant stars. Ruders has said that the title of the work was inspired by the book *Cosmos* (1980) by the astronomer, astrophysicist and popularizer of science Carl Sagan (the book was in fact written as a pendant to Sagan's phenomenally successful TV series of the same name). In Sagan's books Ruders found short quotations from original folklore, some of which he has used as epigraphs ('mental and spiritual appetizers', he calls them) to some of the movements of the *Serenade*; he was also inspired by quotations from Shakespeare, Charles Darwin, Joseph Conrad and the British science writer John Gribbin (b. 1946). The *Serenade* is essentially a tribute to Sagan's role as 'a great voice in the pursuit of knowledge and reason, an invaluable force in the struggle against ignorance and superstition'.

The 'Introduction' of the *Serenade*, which Ruders marks as 'wildly pulsating', is a furious heterophonic assault of dissonant chord-clusters, dynamic extremes, harmonics played *sul ponticello*, and swooping glissandi which eventually take over completely in the coda so that the piece ends as if zooming off into the sky. It seems an apt musical metaphor for T.H. Huxley's 'illimitable ocean of inexplicability'. In extreme contrast the second movement, 'One Voice in the Cosmic Fugue', muses in gentle diatonic simplicity. As the title suggests it is not a fugue but a 'dreaming' Adagio spun out of a single line in the accordion that is doubled, mimicked or otherwise supported by sparse, unemphatic muted strings. The title of the third movement, 'Floating on the Wind', might suggest more of the same, but this is suddenly a rapid wind that blows the music hither and thither, 'flying' in a coruscating *Prestissimo*

tempo, pausing only for a spectral reminder of a sentimental Viennese waltz.

The fourth movement is entitled 'Backbone of the Night'—the name given to the Milky Way by Kung Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert. In sparse textures and jabbing note-repetitions, this piece seems to evoke both stellar immensities and nocturnal tribal ritual. Carl Sagan liked to say that we are 'starstuff,' and the fifth movement, 'Stardust', is a homage to this idea. Again, there is a hint of a waltz in the accordion's bittersweet tune, which at the end spirals upwards while the first violin makes a melancholy descent.

'Threnos' is clearly a lament for all things that pass away. It presents long-held arches of melody so immensely slow they can hardly be sensed as such, that dissolve in and out of the soft but aching dissonance of their surroundings.

Movement VII, 'Dream Catcher', alludes to the Native American device for trapping bad dreams and allowing good dreams to reach the sleeper. Instead of the dissonance of the previous movement this music, marked *dolce sognante* (sweetly dreaming) is consonant and diatonic, even tuneful, like a lullaby, but it thins out progressively in texture, etching its last sounds against the stars in *flautando* harmonics. Immediately its radiance is blotted out by 'Heart of Darkness' (Sagan explicitly references Joseph Conrad's eponymous 1902 novel), a furious and obsessive cadenza in chord-clusters for the accordion that eventually returns us to the terrifying vision of the *Serenade's* opening movement. The 'Finale' enacts the idea of being blinded by light, with accelerating, rising figuration that creates a wild fanfare of shining dissonance.

1 Sagan's idea made its way into popular culture, for example the 1990s TV series *Babylon 5*, authored by J Michael Strazynski. Minbari ambassador Deleenn to Captain Sheridan: 'We are star-stuff. We are the Universe, made manifest, trying to figure itself out' (Series 2, episode entitled *A Distant Star*).

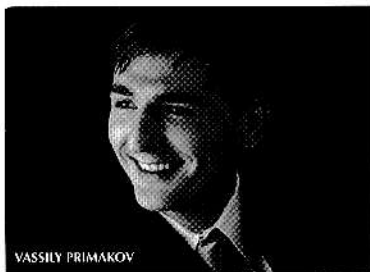
Poul Ruders was born in Ringsted, Denmark on March 27, 1949.

His early studies were in piano and organ. Ruders's first compositions date from the mid-60s, with his output growing steadily into a large catalog of operatic, symphonic, instrumental and vocal music. Writing about Ruders, the English critic Stephen Johnson states: "He can be gloriously, explosively extrovert one minute-withdrawn, haunted, intently inward-looking the next." During the past decade, performances of Ruders scores on both sides of the Atlantic have taken place with increasing regularity. With the success of his second opera, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1996–98), produced in Copenhagen (2000), Minnesota (2003), London (2003),

and Toronto (2004), Ruders's reputation grew exponentially, with commissions coming in rapid succession from The Berlin Philharmonic, The New York Philharmonic, The BBC Symphony Orchestra, and from The Royal Danish Opera. Recent works include the op-



er-*as Kafka's Trial* (produced 2005, Copenhagen), *Selma Jezková* (produced 2010, Denmark and Sweden; 2011, New York) and the orchestral compositions *Symphony No. 3 "Dream Catcher"* (2006); *Symphony No. 4 (An Organ Symphony)* (2008), a co-commission of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Odense Symphony Orchestra and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra; and *Handel Variations* (2009).



Vassily Primakov's performances and recordings have received glowing praise from the international press. Writing of his recording of the Chopin piano concertos *Gramophone* opined that "Primakov's empathy with Chopin's spirit could hardly be more complete," and *Music Web-International* called the disc "one of the great Chopin recordings of recent times." Vassily Primakov was born in Moscow in 1979. His first piano studies were with his mother, Marina Primakova. He entered Moscow's Central Special Music School at the age of eleven as a pupil of Vera Gornostaeva, and then came to New York to pursue studies at the Juilliard School with the noted

pianist, Jerome Lowenthal. Vassily Primakov's recordings for Bridge Records include: Schumann: *Carnaval, Kreisleriana, Arabeske*; Dvorak: *Piano Concerto, Op. 33*; Schubert: *Impromptus & Dances*; and Primakov in Concert, Vol. 1 (Brahms, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff). In 2010 Primakov's first DVD was released (Brahms, Chopin, Scriabin) and was named "DVD of the Month" by *BBC Music Magazine*. Vassily Primakov is currently recording the 27 Mozart piano concertos with the Odense Symphony Orchestra (Denmark).



Thomas Søndergård is one of the finest Scandinavian conductors to have emerged in recent years. He

became Principal Conductor and Musical Adviser of the Norwegian Radio Orchestra in 2009. Last season he made critically-acclaimed débuts with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Royal Scottish National Orchestra and BBC National Orchestra of Wales.

The 2010/11 Season and beyond includes re-invitations to all of the above orchestras as well as Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie and NACO Ottawa, and débuts with Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra and Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse. Highlights of recent seasons have included performances at Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln, Bamberger Symphoniker and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra as well as Swedish Radio and many other orchestras in Scandinavia. Future opera projects include *Luisa Miller* at Stuttgart Staatsteater and *Tosca* at Royal Swedish Opera.



The Norwegian Radio Orchestra's history is also the history of Norwegian broadcasting and therefore represents the country's own cultural history. During the tenure of its first Principal Conductor, Øivind Bergh, the Norwegian Radio Orchestra won great popularity in Norway for its programming of entertainment music and light classics. Since that time the orchestra has steadily expanded its repertoire and its international reputation. Sverre Bruland, Principal Conductor 1976–1988, established the orchestra's commitment to presenting contemporary Norwegian music; while Avi Ostrowsky, Music Director and Chief Conductor from 1989–1992, successfully steered the orchestra's programming towards

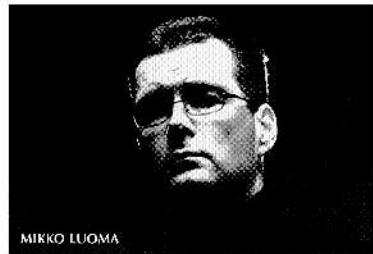
a more international and challenging repertoire. From 1994 to 2002 Ari Rasilainen oversaw continuing artistic development and an increasing number of public concerts, his work continued by the Norwegian conductor, Rolf Gupta, from 2003–2005. In recent years the orchestra has collaborated with musicians and conductors including Mario Venzago, Juano Mena, Kees Bakels, Mikail Jurowski, Anna Netrebko, Truls Mørk, Chloë Hanslip, Yo-Yo Ma, Stephen Kovacevich as well as the privilege of performing every year at the Nobel Peace Prize Concert. In the 2009/10 season, the Danish conductor, Thomas Søndergård, became Principal Conductor and Musical Adviser. The orchestra's principal Guest Conductor is Andrew Manze.

**R**une Tonsgaard Sørensen was born in 1983 and started playing the violin at the age of five. In May 2002 he won the Jacob Gades Violin Competition, and in June 2008 won the special prize for the best interpretation of Carl Nielsen's works at the Carl Nielsen International Violin Competition. In



2008, Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen became the concert master of the Copenhagen Philharmonic and began teaching violin and chamber music at the Royal Danish Academy. He has appeared as soloist with orchestras including the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra, Odense Symphony Orchestra, Copenhagen Philharmonic and The Royal Danish Academy's Symphony Orchestra. He is a member of The Danish String Quartet with whom he has won first prize in numerous competitions. The quartet's recording of Carl Nielsen's complete works for quartet, was chosen Editors Choice by *Gramophone*. As an active folk musician Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen plays with the Danish group Zar, and has performed at festivals, both in

Denmark and internationally. Together with the two leading folk musicians Nikolaj Busk and Ale Carr, he is part of the trio Dreamers Circus.



**M**ikko Luoma graduated from the Sibelius-Academy with the highest possible honors, studying under Matti Rantanen. He also graduated from the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Trossingen under Prof. Hugo Noth. He gave his debut concert in 1995 in Helsinki. In 1997–1998 Mr. Luoma sharpened his skills and knowledge during the course of a Fulbright scholarship at the City University of New York, where he studied music analysis and performance practice of contemporary music. Mikko Luoma currently holds a position as senior lecturer in classical accom-

dion and contemporary chamber music at Turku Music Academy in Finland. He has lectured and given master classes at the Juilliard School of Music, Columbia University, the Hochschule für Musik in Lübeck and the Musik Akademie Franz Liszt in Weimar. At Turku Music Academy, Luoma programs an annual series of three concerts focusing on contemporary music titled "ABOJA NOVA". He also conducts the chamber orchestra "Music Academy Now". Mikko Luoma has conducted the Finnish premieres of works by Gerard Grisey, Per Nørgård, Michael Torke, Morton Feldman. Prior to these activities he taught at the Sibelius-Academy and Turku Conservatoire.

The New York City-based iO String Quartet works to find a common aesthetic vision between the works of the past and the works of today. The group was the 2006–2008 Billy Joel Graduate String Quartet-in-Residence at SUNY Purchase and the 2008–2009 Fellowship Ensemble at Monadnock Music as well as prizewinners of the 2008 Chamber Music Yellow Springs Competition. They were awarded the 2008 Chamber Music America Commissioning Grant for a



new multimedia work by composer Du Yun. They have worked with composer Helmut Lachenmann, performing his String Quartet No. 3 at Oberlin College and currently curate the new monthly concert series iO: INSIDE Out Chamber Music at Roger Smith Arts. Since its formation in 2005, the group has performed at the Juilliard Quartet Seminar, Symphony Space, Kneisel Hall Chamber Music Festival, Greenwich House, Barge Music and in residencies and festivals throughout Europe and the United States. The iO has also recorded music of Tod Machover for Bridge Records.

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**Piano technician:** Jan Haghus

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