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GAVRYLYUK, ALEXANDER: UKRAINIAN PIANO PRODIGY BACK ON TRACK AND AGAIN ATTRACTING INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM Sasha's Homeland is Ukraine, Now Lives in Australia

Reporter: Rebecca Baillie

The 7:30 Report with Kerry O'Brien, ABC Online

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KERRY O'BRIEN: When Alexander Gavrylyuk, was 16, he was declared by critics to be the best pianist for his age the world had produced for half a century.



By 18, he had won prestigious international piano competitions and recorded two CD's. But 12 months ago, the piano world was in mourning after the young star was in a near-fatal accident. Now Alexander Gavrylyuk is back on track and, again, attracting international acclaim.

Rebecca Baillie reports.

REBECCA BAILLIE: The Piano Showroom on Sydney's North Shore is closed for business. But for Alexander Gavrylyuk, his night's work has just begun. Every evening he comes here to practice on the Steinway.

ALEXANDER 'SASHA' GAVRYLYUK: Nothing can be gained without practice because if I don't, I cannot do my best.

REBECCA BAILLIE: For the 18-year-old, who's known as Sasha, the practice has paid off.

PETER CALVO, AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF MUSIC: I believe that he could become one of the great exponents of pianism in the world, and he could reintroduce the

golden age of great players.

REBECCA BAILLIE: This video was filmed in Sasha's homeland, the Ukraine, when he was just 7 years old and under the instruction of Professor Victor Makarov, who remains his music teacher today.

PROFESSOR MARK MAKAROV, PIANO TEACHER: He was 7 years old and his parents brought him to the centre exam school and they wanted him to study as a choir conductor. I asked the parents -- he has to be pianist.

SASHA GAVRYLYUK: My mother said to my father, "Please just not piano because he's very lazy and he's not going to practice."

REBECCA BAILLIE: Professor Makarov had his way, and Sasha Gavrylyuk blossomed into a fine pianist. But times were tough in the Ukraine.

SASHA GAVRYLYUK: Not actually the musical life was hard, but ordinary life, as in everyday life, and it was very hard to get through with your career.

REBECCA BAILLIE: The career Sasha Gavrylyuk sought was not to be in the Ukraine, but on the other side of the world. Europe's loss would become Australia's gain.

And five years ago, both Sasha Gavrylyuk and Professor Makarov moved here at the invitation of Peter Calvo and the Australian Institute of Music.

PETER CALVO: Victor Makarov has brought in what is known as Russian technique, the Russian way of exploring the centre of sound. Internationally, people were sitting up and taking note of Australia as a place to go to study the piano.

REBECCA BAILLIE: Sasha Gavrylyuk was 13 when he came to Australia. And the exuberant Victor Makarov became not only his teacher and mentor, but his father too.

SASHA GAVRYLYUK: Of course I lived in his house for four years and the things that I've learned from him, not only in music but in life as well, you know, it's so much and it's helped me every day.

PROFESSOR VICTOR MAKAROV: I think its main component of his talent is energy, because any audience, you can play the right way, you can play with the right style, but if it's boring, because it's without energy, it's boring.

PETER CALVO: He was described in Japan after winning the first prize of Hamamatsu international competition as the most significant 16-year-old in the second half of the 20th century, and praises like that don't come too easily.

REBECCA BAILLIE: At 16, Sasha Gavrylyuk had the world at his fingertips,, but just a few months later, something happened which nearly robbed the piano world of its newest star.

SASHA GAVRYLYUK: We were going in the car with my friends and someone, I think, hit us from the back and the car started spinning and went into a telegraph pole, from my side.

REBECCA BAILLIE: When Sasha Gavrylyuk reached the hospital's accident and emergency, few held out hope for his survival.

DR ERICA JACOBSON, NEUROSURGEON, ST GEORGE HOSPITAL: Pretty much he'd fractured the whole corner of the left side of his head, down into his forehead, down the side of his head, and had pushed the skull back into his head about a centimetre and a half.

PROFESSOR VICTOR MAKAROV: They didn't know whether he would live or not. And even with Sasha's will, he would spend a lot of time in hospital. And he could be paralysed. So it was terrible, what I thought.

DR ERICA JACOBSON: The first question was will he ever be able to play the piano again and I couldn't say whether he could or not. I had a Professor here saying to me, "Do you know what this boy does and do you know how talented he truly is?"

You certainly feel like if the person doesn't live or if they aren't able to do what they do, you've not only lost the person but you've lost an incredible cultural icon.

REBECCA BAILLIE: Dr Erica Jacobson and her team eased the pressure on Sasha Gavrylyuk's brain and reconstructed his skull. Against all the odds, he survived.

PETER CALVO: And he made sure that when I held his hand, he gave it an especially hard squeeze, although he could not speak. It was to tell me that he was alright, as if we had a case of resurrection.

REBECCA BAILLIE: The significance of his miraculous recovery hasn't been lost on Sasha Gavrylyuk. He's now using his near-death experience to play even better than he ever did.

SASHA GAVRYLYUK: I think I became better in understanding music. Sometimes you can express in piano something that you can't say just by words.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Incidentally, Alexander Gavrylyuk became a naturalised Australian three months ago. Rebecca Baille with that report. And that's the program for tonight. We'll be back tomorrow at the same time, but for now, goodnight.