


A Letter | *Une Lettre* | *Ein Brief*

Sergei Bortkiewicz Solo Piano Works

Zhenni Li-Cohen



STEINWAY & SONS



“Through Bortkiewicz’s music I found yearning, nostalgia, and the ineffable; I found tears, joy, sweeping love and passion, and humor, expressing the whole spectrum of emotion that make us human. I became determined to share this discovery, and from this moment *A Letter* was born.”

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Sergei Bortkiewicz: Solo Piano Works

Zhenni Li-Cohen, piano

Sergei Bortkiewicz (1877-1952)

- 1 Lyrica Nova, Op. 59: No. 4, Con slancio 1:32
- 2 Trois Morceaux, Op. 24: No. 1, Nocturne "Diana" 6:50
- 3 Lamentations and Consolations, Op. 17: No. 2, Consolation 3:23
- 4 Ten Preludes, Op. 33: No. 8, Andante sostenuto e cantabile 5:10
- 5 Four Pieces, Op. 3: No. 3, Gavotte-Caprice 4:49
- 6 Ten Preludes, Op. 33: No 7, Andantino 3:47
- 7 Six Preludes, Op. 13: No. 4 in C, Appassionato 2:08
- 8 Ein Roman, Op. 35: No. 7, Ein Brief 4:21
- 9 Six Pensées Lyriques, Op. 11: No. 5 2:00
- 10 Ein Roman, Op. 35: No. 3, Erwachende Liebe 4:25
- 11 Lyrica Nova, Op. 59: No. 3, Andantino 3:29
- 12 Lyrica Nova, Op. 59: No. 1, Con moto affettuoso 4:06
- 13 Fantasiestücke, Op. 61: No. 2, Ein Traum 2:26

Introduction

Making this album is very personal to me because one of my most memorable teachers was Ukrainian - Sergei Mikulic, a teaching assistant of the legendary pianist Tatiana Nicolayeva. Our lessons usually lasted over three hours; the translator would stay for one hour and the rest of the lesson would then be conducted 95 percent in Russian and 5 percent in English. I spoke very little English at the time, so I would say the real language that we communicated with was music. He was the first teacher that made me realize that maybe one day I could become a pianist and through him, I found the freedom to express myself musically for the first time.

Discovering the music of **Sergei Bortkiewicz** (also spelled Serhiy Bortkevych) has been a rather unexpected journey for me. After a concert in New York, I was speaking with an audience member named Neil McKelvie (who was 84 at the time) who recommended that I check out Bortkiewicz's music, to which I agreed thanks in part to his enthusiasm and partly out of curiosity as I had never heard of the composer before. When I opened the two audio files attached to his email, my reaction was immediate and profound: I felt like I had found my calling to play his music, and to give the world an opportunity to discover his works just as I was fortunate enough to receive. Through Bortkiewicz's music I found yearning, nostalgia, and the ineffable, expressing the whole spectrum of emotion that makes us human; I found tears, joy, sweeping love, passion, and humor—and just like that, this project was born.

— Zhenni Li-Cohen

Born in the Ukrainian city of Kharkov on February 28th, 1877, Sergei Eduardovich Bortkiewicz's life was filled with misfortune. He was constantly fleeing unrest and turmoil due to war; he was deported from his home in Berlin at the onset of World War I, then forced to flee his family estate first at the start of the Russian Revolution, then again in 1920 after his home of Kharkov was taken for a second time by the Red Army, arriving safe but penniless in Constantinople. His final exodus came in 1933, when he was again deported from Berlin during the rise of the Nazis. His misfortunes did not end here; after the war, his wife was diagnosed with manic depression in 1949 due to the traumatic ordeals they were subjected to. It is thus rather remarkable that he managed to concertize extensively and composed a very large body of works including symphonies, concerti, chamber music, an opera, and quite a number of works for solo piano. Perhaps even more surprising is that his music displays very little trace of the *sturm und drang* that characterized much of his life, but is rather warm, generous, and overflowing with sentimentality and sweeping, romantic lyricism.

The present album represents a survey of Bortkiewicz's compositions for solo piano, including a selection from his first such surviving work, the *4 Pieces, Op. 3*, and a movement from his *Fantasiestücke, Op. 61*—one of his last works for solo piano. Bortkiewicz began composing seriously when he moved to Berlin in 1904, following his graduation from the Leipzig Conservatory in 1902 and marriage to Elisabeth Geraklitowa during a trip home to Kharkov. His earliest remaining composition, the **4 Pieces, Op. 3** were composed in 1906 and first performed in 1907; they bear a dedication to four individuals: Alfred Riesenauer, with whom Bortkiewicz studied piano at the Leipzig Conservatory; Madame la Comtesse d'Osten-Sacken, the wife of the Russian ambassador in Berlin; his mother Madame Sophie Bortkiewicz; and Julie Charine (whose personal connection to Bortkiewicz

is unclear). The *Gavotte-Caprice* performed here, the third of the set, is light and whimsical, with a more melodic and expressive middle section. A short work in ternary form, it is quintessential Bortkiewicz, displaying elegance, humor, and a mastery of character not unlike certain works of his more famous contemporary Fritz Kreisler.

In 1909, Bortkiewicz's **6 Pensées lyriques, Op. 11** was published; it bears a dedication to Emmy Destinn, an opera diva whom Bortkiewicz befriended and toured with throughout Germany. This work was composed in the middle of Bortkiewicz's first Berlin period, which lasted from 1904-1914; during this time he taught privately and appeared in recitals in Berlin, Leipzig, Munich and Vienna, as well as Italy, Russia and Paris. With a tempo marking of "Poco moto, con amabilita", or "small motion, with amiability", it is in the style of a gentle waltz, with a rocking lilt and a slightly wistful character to its flowing melodic lines.

While likely familiar with the *Preludes* of Chopin and the *Well-Tempered Clavier* of Bach, Bortkiewicz never elected to compose a set of preludes in all keys, opting rather for several shorter sets throughout his life. His first such foray into the form, the **6 Preludes, Op. 13** of 1910, consist of six preludes in different keys. The *Prelude No. 4 in C-sharp minor (Appassionato)* presented here is indeed passionate; the dotted-rhythm main theme gives a feeling of agitated unrest, with yearning lines reaching for the heights only to fall short and renew their efforts yet again.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 marked the end of Bortkiewicz's first Berlin period; he and his wife were put under house arrest and later deported to his home of Kharkov via Scandinavia. This turmoil did not inhibit his creative spirit, and the **Lamentations et Consolations, Op. 17** were written this year—an

interesting work consisting of two books of four pieces each. Given that every two movements are in parallel key signatures, such as the first two of the set in D minor and D major, respectively, it seems likely that they were conceived in pairs; indeed, the final chord of the second *Lamentation* has a slur leading into the first chord of the following *Consolation*, implying that the two are intended to be played continuously without pause. The *Consolation* included here opens nebulously; Bortkiewicz employs chromaticism to create dissonance and an ambiguity of key. This soon leads to a barcarolle-like theme with sweeping, lilting lines, sublime beauty, and generosity of spirit. A whole-tone scale is cleverly employed to bring about a reprise of the introductory material before the barcarolle theme returns.

Bortkiewicz's return home granted only a short reprieve, as the Russian revolution began in 1917, and his family home was destroyed, retaken and rebuilt, and then lost again as the White and Red Armies clashed back and forth. In 1919, he fled to Istanbul, where he made the acquaintance of Natalie Chaponitsch, the wife of the Yugoslavian ambassador, who organized musical gatherings within the embassy for him and, together with her husband, helped to procure Yugoslavian visas for Bortkiewicz and his wife. In gratitude, he dedicated his **Trois Morceaux, Op. 24** to her in 1922. With movements titled *Diana*, *Satyre* and *Eros*, it is very likely that the movement featured here, *Diana*, is so named after the Roman goddess of the moon. Lyrical and flowing with a gentle romanticism, the work could certainly be seen to evoke moonlight and melancholy—perhaps some traces of Bortkiewicz's yearning for his lost home can be found here.

Later the same year, Bortkiewicz and his family arrived in Austria. In 1926, the same year he achieved Austrian citizenship, Bortkiewicz composed his **10**

Preludes, Op. 33, the largest set of preludes he composed under one opus. The *Prelude No. 8* featured on this album is nostalgic and autumnal; perhaps Bortkiewicz was thinking back fondly of happier times. In any event, he did not stay settled in Austria for long; in 1928 he went to Paris for six months before returning to Berlin. During this period, he composed another substantial work—**Ein Roman, Op. 35**. Translated as “A Story”, the work is highly programmatic as the movement titles outline the plot of a romance: “Meeting - Conversation - Dawning Love - In the Ballroom - Depression - Reproaches - A Letter - Supreme Happiness”. The penultimate movement of the suite recorded here and the titular work of the album, *Une Lettre*, is full of romantic lyricism, with sweepingly passionate climaxes and evoking emotions alternately longing and richly content. Bortkiewicz’s second stint in Berlin was short-lived; just five years later in 1933, the rise of the Nazis led to persecution and the removal of his name from concert programs, and he returned to Vienna, where he remained until the end of his life. His **Lyrical Nova, Op. 59** was composed in 1941 and consists of four movements. This was written during a particularly difficult time in the composer’s life when to make ends meet, he translated Tchaikovsky’s letters to the countess Nadezhda von Meck from Russian into German and was forced to ask his friend, the pianist Hugo van Dalen, for financial assistance multiple times. *Lyrical Nova* betrays little of the composer’s bleak personal circumstances; the first movement is soaring and rhapsodic; the third, dreamily peppered with romantic leaps and sighs, and the fourth, dazzlingly grand; only the second, melancholic and introspective, gives any hint of Bortkiewicz’s struggles. Despite this musical optimism, his troubles were hardly in short supply. A letter he sent in 1945 states that “I’m writing to you from my bathroom where we have crawled in because it is small and can be warmed on and off with a gas light. The other rooms cannot

be used and I cannot touch my piano. This is now! What awaits us further? Life is becoming more and more unpleasant, merciless. I teach at the Conservatory with the heat at 4 degrees, soon even less!"

The latest chronological work on the album, the **Fantasiestücke, Op. 61** of 1942, has something of a programmatic tilt to it, like many of Bortkiewicz's works. With movements titled "Why? - A dream - ...and the awakening - Humoresque - She dances - Serenade", it is possible that there is an overarching story, or at least some connection between individual movements. The second movement of the work, *Ein Traum* (a dream), is rife with delicate, ethereal textures, gently flowing lyricism, and a warm yet slightly bittersweet nostalgia.

— Matthew Cohen

Zhenni Li-Cohen's riveting presence and passionate performances have brought audiences to their feet around the world. Hailed for her "torrents of voluptuous sound...Li impresses as an artist of tremendous conviction, who fascinates even as she provokes" by *Gramophone Magazine*, "a thrillingly good pianist" by *The New Yorker* and for her "...big, gorgeous tone and a mesmerizing touch" by *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Ms. Li-Cohen has performed in such notable venues as Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, Merkin Concert Hall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and WQXR's Greene Space in New York, Philadelphia's Kimmel Performing Arts Center, Washington D.C.'s Smithsonian Museum, San Jose's California Theater, the Helsinki Music Center in Finland, the Grieghallen in Norway and the Berliner Philharmonie in Germany. Highly in demand as an orchestral soloist, she has

recently appeared with the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, the National Orchestra of the Dominican Republic, Norway's Bergen Philharmonic, the Shengyun Symphony Orchestra in China, and the Johns Hopkins, Bucks County, Waterloo-Cedar Falls, and Knoxville Symphony Orchestras, among others.

Deeply committed to the art of recording, Ms. Li-Cohen is passionate about memorializing lesser-known works and sharing them with a greater audience as well as traversing the heights of the familiar giants of the repertoire. Fresh off the heels of her critically acclaimed debut album *Mélancholie* and the present album, *A Letter/Une Lettre /Ein Brief*, she is currently working on two more recording projects with the Steinway & Sons label. *Legends of the Phoenix Queen* came about from Ms. Li-Cohen's desire to reconnect with her musical heritage, exploring traditional and contemporary Chinese works inspired by folk songs, stories, and historic instruments. In *Beethoven's Apotheosis*, the great master's final piano sonata is juxtaposed with the iconic "Hammerklavier" sonata and 32 Variations.

Her difficult early years did not portend a remarkable career. After a year of study with her childhood teacher, she was rejected for lack of talent at the ripe old age of seven years. Intuiting her passion and promise, her father took charge of her music education, learning the piano himself in the process. Eventually, at age eleven, she moved away from home to continue her piano studies while her parents remained behind, working to support her education. Alone in her rental apartment, she spent her free time expressing her emotions through the piano and reading books endlessly. Music was her only refuge, and her prowess soared, until at age sixteen, she emigrated to the United States and was accepted to study at the Juilliard School shortly thereafter, earning Bachelors and Masters

degrees in piano performance. She spent her summers in France, leading to a great love and appreciation for French music, particularly that of Claude Debussy, whose *Préludes* were eventually the subject of her dissertation. After further studies at Yale University, she pursued her Doctoral degree at McGill University in Montréal and began concertizing in earnest, earning worldwide recognition as the winner of the 2017 New York Concert Artists Worldwide Debut Audition, Astral Artist's 2016 National Auditions, the Grieg International Competition in Norway, and the unanimous 1st Prize at the Concours Musical de France. Her performances have been broadcast internationally on Canada National CBC Radio, Chicago's WFMT Public Radio, Iowa Public Radio, New York's WQXR, Norwegian National Radio: NPK P2/ NPK Klassisk, Philadelphia's WWFM and WRTI, Texas Public Radio, and West Virginia's WVTF.

In addition to her solo career, Ms. Li-Cohen is a deeply devoted chamber musician who has collaborated with members of the Aeolus, Borromeo, Formosa, Jasper, Hugo Wolf, and New Orford quartets. She is a founding member of Ensemble Elatós and appears regularly in recital as pianist of the Li-Cohen Duo with her husband, violist Matthew Cohen. Her passion for chamber music led her to co-found "Fishin' in C Chamber Music Series", a diverse chamber concert series in Philadelphia with the aim of bringing music to underserved areas and "Opus 71 Concerts", a multimedia concert series near New York's Lincoln Center.

She is immensely grateful to be able to count among her artistic influences many incredible teachers and mentors, including Peter Frankl, Richard Goode, Joseph Kalichstein, Stéphane Lemelin, Seymour Lipkin, Robert McDonald, Mark Salman, Craig Sheppard, and Vera Wilson. In her spare time, she enjoys learning jazz and

new languages, looking forward to becoming pentalingual, traveling and meeting people of different cultures. Zhenni Li-Cohen is a Steinway Artist.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my childhood teacher, Sergei Mikulic; you inspired me and believed in me and helped me find my own path at a pivotal time in my artistic growth—because of you, this album in support of Ukraine is even more meaningful to me. I'm eternally grateful to Neil McKelvie for helping me discover this music that resonates so deeply with me. Thank you to Vera Wilson for sharing my passion for Bortkiewicz's music and for genuinely believing in me, and thank you to Jon Feidner for being willing to put up with me and for trusting me musically and for seeing what I'm capable of before I can see it myself. I want to dedicate this album to everyone mentioned, to my husband, Matthew Cohen, and to everyone who showed mutual passion and support for this project.

- Zhenni Li-Cohen

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Engineers: Joshua Frey,

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Mixing and Mastering: Daniel Shores

Executive Producer: Jon Feidner

Art Direction: Jackie Fugere

Design: Cover to Cover Design,

Anilda Carrasquillo

Photos of Zhenni Li-Cohen: Brent Calis

Production Assistant: Renée Oakford

Piano Technician: John Veitch


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