

CD REVIEW 131

Russian Piano Music Volume 12

The music of Sergei Bortkiewicz

Alfonso Soldano (piano)

Divine Art dda 25142 (DDD) (69.39)

Lyrice Nova Op 59

Etude in D flat Op 15 no 8

Nocturne from Trois Morceaux Op 24

Esquisses de Crimee Op 8

Prelude Op 13 no 5

Prelude Op 40 no 4

Prelude Op 56 no 3

Sonata no 2 in C sharp minor Op 60



Bortkiewicz was born in the Ukraine on 18 February 1877 on the family estate. He studied music with Liadov, Karel van Arke in St Petersburg, and later became a student of Judasson, Plutti and Reisenauer who had been a pupil of Liszt .

Bortkiewicz married Elisabeth Geralditown in 1904 and they settled in Berlin. But they made many trips to Moscow The Russian revolution and the rise of Communism forced them back to the family estate in Antiomowska. In 1920, he was in Constantinople organising musical events , but he longed to be back in Europe and returned to Berlin in 1929. He composed, conducted, taught piano and translated the letters of Tchaikovsky and Nadezha von Meck.

The Second World War brought him despair and almost ruin. He lost the revenue from the sale of his music. He retired in 1947 and died in Vienna of 25 October 1952.

He composed one opera and one ballet, three piano concertos, a cello concerto and a violin concerto, violin sonata, cello sonata, piano trios, much piano music and lieder.

His piano music, ably played here by Alfonso Soldano, is not very original and lacks an individual voice. It is pleasant enough and will win friends but has little energy and sparkle until we arrive at the Piano Sonata in C sharp minor which was premiered by the composer in 1942. Some of the preludes are worthy. "Big" works call for more focus and ability than little pieces and suites. There are some composers for the piano who could only write trifles. This sonata is romantic and melodious and has character.

Lyrice Nova Op 59 dates from 1940 and are four short pieces with only atmosphere to enhance it. the third piece recalls Scriabin who stole the inventiveness of Rebikov and said it was his own. See volume 2 of Divine arts Russian music series with the excellent Anthony Goldstone.

The Etude in D flat owes something to Chopin, Liadov and Scriabin.

The Nocturne from Op 24 is sometimes entitled Diana and again is indebted to Scriabin.

Sadly, there are people who do not like comparisons particularly when it compares a composer with other composers whose work is flawed. I have heard someone say that Bortkiewicz is as good as Rachmaninov ! Some people make the most inane comparisons ! Others when faced with irrefutable evidence that a composer is not good at composing put up the ridiculous defence of " I don't care what the experts say. Their truth is not my truth. "

The Esquisses de Crimee Op 8 dates from 1908 and has a recurring theme in all the four movements and is a portrait of the composer's visit of the area. The second piece is relatively successful as it recalls Liszt.

The chamber music is often admirable.

His orchestral works are far better because they have colour and variety.

In the mid 1960s, I conducted his Olympic Festival Overture ,later called the Olympic Scherzo ,and one of the symphonies. They were well received.

Do not let me put you off buying this CD. Some of the music shows the weakness of Chopin and the eccentricity of Scriabin, but the better works on this CD will generate genuine interest and discerning pianists may very well want to play these pieces.

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