

SERGEI BORTKIEWICZ

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If you love Rachmaninov, you will certainly enjoy the music of Sergei Bortkiewicz. I am at a loss to understand why his music is not performed and known. If you like a marvellous tune, then you must listen to the finale of his Piano Concerto no 1 and other works by this composer.

He was born in the Ukraine on 28 February 1877 and was of Polish origin and became a Russian composer of unashamed romantic music. His birth place was Kharkiv and his parents were of Polish nobility. As a child, he lived with his parents on their estate at Artenivka.

He went to study in St Petersburg with Liadov and Karl von Arek but he was always drawn to Germany and, in 1900, he went to study at the Leipzig Conservatory with Alfred Reisenauer and Salomon Judasson who had both been pupils of Liszt. Bortkiewicz graduated with the Schuman prize.

He was back in Russia in 1904 when he married Elisabeth Geraklitowas. But the pull of Germany was irresistible and he settled in Berlin. Over the next ten years he taught at the Klindworth-Scharwenka Conservatory and toured giving piano recitals.

In Berlin he met Hugo van Dalen (1888-1967) who was to remain a lifelong friend. The Dutchman often helped Bortkiewicz financially and also premiered his Piano Concerto no 1, Op 16 in November 1913 with the composer on the podium.

World War 1 created massive problems for the Russian composer because he was Russian. He was under house arrest and then forced to leave Germany. Back at Kharkiv he established himself as a teacher as well as giving recitals.

Politics should have no place in music. But, in 1917, there came the Russian revolution which forced Bortkiewicz to flee from his estate. The Red Army, the Communists, who hated people having money and property, surrounded the estate in 1919 where his mother and brother-in-law both died of typhus.

Under threat and in political danger, Bortkiewicz escaped by steamer to Constantinople in November 1919.

He gave concerts in Turkey and became widely admired especially by the nobility, local and foreign ambassadors in the various embassies.

Eventually, he obtained a visa to Yugoslavia to where he journeyed, and then obtained a visa for Austria arriving in Baden in July 1922. While there, he composed his Three Pieces for piano including the Nocturne which he named Diana. It was apparently composed on a moonlight night. We do not know who Diana was. Was she Diana the goddess of the Ephesians? Ephesus is in Turkey. The other pieces are Valse grotesque (Satyre) and Impromptu (Eros), the most difficult piece of the three whereas the first two are playable.

Diana is also the Roman goddess of the moon and the hunt and, as this work was inspired by moonlight, this may be the Diana.

In effect, he had five momentous years of persecution and problems generated by politics.

He obtained Austrian citizenship in 1925.

By now he had completed two piano concertos. Op 16 and Op 28, a Cello Concerto Op 20, a Violin

Concerto Op 22. The Piano Concerto no 2 is for left hand only. He had also written much piano music including the Sonata no 1 in B Op 9, Six Preludes Op 13 and The Little Wanderer Op 21. There were the Three Pieces for cello and piano and a Violin Sonata Op 26. His first orchestral work seems to be the Russian Dance Op 18 followed by the Symphonic Poem: Othello Op 19 of 1924. Up to 1925, there were two sets of songs namely Op 2 and Op 23

There are always people who will make comparisons between composers and their music. It is said the Bortkiewicz was influenced by Chopin and Tchaikovsky. Sadly, there is some influence of Chopin as in the finale of the Piano Sonata no 1 and in parts of the Piano Concerto no 1 with tinkling at the top of the piano. As someone has said, This is music box music.

The Piano Concerto no 1 was dedicated to his wife. The opening movement starts *lento* and proceeds to an *allegro deciso*. It is basically in B flat but with many changes of key to encourage the interest. The slow movement is an *andante sostenuto* primarily in D flat but, again, with many key changes. The finale is marked *molto vivace* and is based on a Russian theme, the song God save the Tsar which Tchaikovsky also used in the 1812 Overture. Bortkiewicz's music is simply gorgeous. There is lyricism and virtuosity and glorious melodies.

The Piano Concerto no. 2 is scored for left hand alone. It is in one continuous movement with many key and tempo changes but, remarkably, it hangs together. The melodies are delicious and mouth-watering, the orchestration is flawless and the piano writing, often very demanding, is quite magnificent.

From 1925, Bortkiewicz was in Vienna where he stayed for five years... then he had six months in Paris before returning to Berlin.

By Op 29 and his Etudes for piano, written for van Dalen, the composer was perhaps attempting a new style and trying to incorporate something modern but he was unsuccessful. Perhaps Debussy was on his mind since the last three pieces are called Don Quixote, Hamlet and Falstaff respectively but there is absolutely nothing in the music which suggests any of these figures. It is true that conventional composers have little, if any, success in trying to be modern and yet 'modern' composers can write in a conventional style. The Op 29 etudes have titles and the Op 30 pieces do as well, such as The Princess and the Pea.

The Piano Concerto no 3 op 32 is a fine work and is the most mature of the concertos. The use of bells in the finale is impressive and eerie.

It is not always easy to date Bortkiewicz works, as often some works sat with publishers for a while. But two piano works of both great imagination and soul satisfaction are the Ballade Op 42 and the Elegie Op 46, piano works of the highest standard and without affectation. The Ballade will recall Rachmaninov but it should be assessed for itself. The Chopin influence has gone, thankfully, and we are left with a towering masterpiece of luscious melodies and sumptuous harmonies.

The Elegie is written in C sharp major with seven sharps. It would have been easier to read in D flat and so why did the composer decide on seven sharps? However, it is a profound but not mawkish piece, a work that is not a piece of music but an experience.

But history was to repeat itself. In 1933, he was expelled from Germany as he was facing persecution from the Nazis and all potential performances of his works in Germany were cancelled. This German socialism was the one of the most evil thing that has stalked the world.

In the 1930s he wrote his two symphonies. The Symphony no 1 Op 52 dates from 1935 and is subtitled From My Homeland and, as the title suggests, it is very nationalistic. It is well-written and the orchestration is impeccable but some will find the music too derivative with Russian themes including

the Imperial National Anthem written by Lvov. The Tchaikovsky influence is very evident. I conducted this symphony and the Olympic Overture.

The Symphony no 2 Op 55 of 1937 is a fine work. In fact it is an extremely satisfying piece, brilliantly scored, with gorgeous melodies and more original than its predecessor. The second movement is a delight. A few years ago in 1971 it was voted in the top ten of Russian symphonies higher than Tchaikovsky!

I conducted the First Symphony and the Olympic Overture some years ago.

During the World War II, Bortkiewicz premiered his Piano Sonata no 2 in Vienna.

After World War II, Bortkiewicz returned to Vienna where he made his home for the rest of his life. He had pressing financial needs and appealed to van Dalen who gladly helped. Only two of his six preludes Op 66 have been found and they are dedicated to H el ene Mulholland who had kindly sent food and clothes to the composer and his wife.

In 1947 a Bortkiewicz Society was formed which survived until 1973 but the composer was more deeply concerned about his wife who had manic depression and was very ill. The war had made a profound impression on her.

For some time Bortkiewicz had a stomach disorder and reluctantly undertook an operation in October 1952 from which he did not recover. He died in Vienna on 25 October 1952. His wife died on 9 March 1960 in Vienna.

They had no children.

While it would be true to say that Bortkiewicz has been overshadowed by Rachmaninov, nonetheless, his music is often of equal worth and its neglect is unjustified.

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