

SOMM
RECORDINGS



UKRAINE

A PIANO PORTRAIT

MARGARET FINGERHUT

Photo © Andy Tyler



I have long cherished the fact that my paternal grandfather was born in Odessa. Who would not be proud of being connected to the incredible musical heritage of Jews from that city? Benno Moiseiwitsch, Shura Cherkassky, Emil Gilels, David Oistrakh, Nathan Milstein all came from that city, as indeed did George Gershwin's parents and Bob Dylan's grandparents. Like other Jews at the turn of the 20th century, my grandfather left to find a better life, one without the constant threat of pogroms. He intended to go to America but could not afford the passage and ended up in Manchester instead.

When the Russians invaded Ukraine in February 2022 I felt, as did so many, an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and despair. So, I channelled my emotions into the only thing I knew: music. I had numerous scores by Sergei Bortkiewicz in my library as he had been on my radar for some time. I had always loved his idiomatic piano writing and his consummate, endless gift for melody. Yes, one can argue that he was a conservative composer who wrote out of his time. But if, as Leo Tolstoy maintained, the most important function of art is the transmission of feeling, then I found it in spades in Bortkiewicz's music. Back in the first dark days of the war, his music spoke to me in a powerful way, and no piece more so than *Les Rochers d'Outche-Coche*.

I teamed up with a young displaced Ukrainian filmmaker, Viktoriia Levchenko, who set some extraordinary images to accompany my performance of it. The resulting video on YouTube raised money for several emergency vehicles to be sent to Ukraine. Spurred on by the reaction to the video, I began to explore other composers. At that point I knew almost nothing about "Ukrainian" music. I did not know which composers could even be considered Ukrainian as opposed to Russian. This is hardly surprising given the historical geopolitical complexities of the two nations. The thorny cultural debate continues to this day: should Sergei Prokofiev be re-classified as Ukrainian? For that matter, is Nikolai Gogol Ukrainian or Russian?

Ultimately, my choice of pieces for this recording is a very personal one – they are all pieces that speak to me in different ways. Collectively my aim is to take the listener into the heart of Ukraine, to reflect its many moods: dark, sad and tragic of course, but also richly romantic, heroic, triumphant, joyous, even humorous. Any listener searching for “newness” will not find it here. But I humbly hope that they will find sincerity and authenticity of feeling. As Martin Puchner wrote in his thought-provoking book *Culture*: “everyone is influenced by someone. What is important is not what we borrowed but how we borrowed.”

A few words about the pieces I have chosen: I opted to follow the drama of **Les Rochers d'Outche-Coche** with two early preludes by Vasyl Barvinsky, written in the same year: 1908. The first is a lyrical outpouring, the second is more whimsical, in the style of a pastorale. It is then fascinating to hear how much more complex his harmonies had become seven years later in **Loneliness, the Sorrow of Love**, from his cycle of three pieces about love. The voices constantly weave and wind around each other in a highly intricate and beguiling manner.

I very much wanted to include something by Mykola Lysenko as he was such a seminal figure in the history of Ukrainian music – indeed, his patriotic *Prayer for Ukraine* has become the spiritual anthem of Ukraine. He is often referred to as the father of the *dumka*¹, so it seemed appropriate to include his **Rhapsody on Ukrainian Themes No.2, “Dumka-Shumka”** – besides, the piece is great fun and injects some lightheartedness into the programme.

After Dumka-Shumka we return to heady romanticism with a selection of short pieces by Levko Revutsky. He brings a wide range of moods to this early set of **Three Preludes**. The first is filled with an aching longing, the second has an air of ghostly mysteriousness, while the third is a brief study in leaping octaves with a nervous, restless energy. His **Improvisation** takes a simple folk-like theme and transforms it in a remarkable variety of ways in the space of just a few short pages.

1 an Eastern European folk ballad or lament recited in an almost chant-like style, over the accompaniment of a plucked string instrument

I felt impelled to include Viktor Kosenko's **Nocturne-Fantaisie** because its hypnotic, feverish repetitions came to haunt me in my dreams. Composed in 1919 shortly after he had graduated from the St Petersburg Conservatory, its intoxicating intensity conjures up a Scriabinesque world. It builds to a monumental climax followed by an arc of a golden sunset. However, the piece does not end there – instead, Kosenko returns us to the opening obsessive figure, only gradually winding down into a dark emptiness.

The **Bagatelles** of Valentin Silvestrov may appear to offer us a refreshing, almost childlike simplicity, but this is deceptive as there is a visceral intensity to their delicate intimacy. The ghostly *pianissimo* melodies, rarely rising even above *mezzo piano*, draw us into a world of nostalgic, fading memories. There is a pervading sense of resignation and wistfulness. Silvestrov has said that the music he writes is a response to and an echo of what already exists, but yet it is still somehow compellingly unique.

The **Two Preludes on the Melodies of Ukrainian Folk Songs** by Boris Lyatoshinsky give us a Ukraine in full battle cry. The fact that they were written at the height of the Second World War is immediately apparent in the music. It is acerbic, angry, defiant, triumphant. But after the battles comes the mourning. His **Elegy-Prelude** is the darkest of pieces. Dating from 1920, its unmistakable funereal tread and bleak harmonies were evidently inspired by Chopin's C minor Prelude.

I was originally going to end the recording with the Elegy-Prelude, but I felt I simply could not leave the listener with such despair even if, at the time of writing, this is what the mood must feel like in Ukraine. So, I decided instead to end with the composer who began this album, Sergei Bortkiewicz. His **Consolation** Op.17 No.4 might be sugar-coated, but if you are going to have such sweetness, then let it be as gorgeous as this lullaby. Let it be a hope for peace.

Margaret Fingerhut © 2025

Until the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Ukraine comprised the westernmost region of the Soviet Union, being one of various countries brought together in 1922 to form a vast monolithic state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (or USSR). The overriding power of the transcontinental Communist Party, directed from Moscow by a succession of dictatorial leaders, imposed a universal set of political, social and aesthetic mores throughout the USSR. Its authority expanded further in the immediate aftermath of World War II with the Communist takeover of almost all the previously independent countries in Eastern Europe.

For musically gifted Ukrainians, their art and culture – their creative individuality – was thereby effectively subsumed within the Communist ethos, and it is only since 1991 that the ethnicity of many greatly admired performing artists – often erroneously described as “Russian” – has started to be recognised by Western music lovers. In the era of the Soviet Union, internationally admired musicians such as Sergei Prokofiev, Benno Moiseiwitsch, Shura Cherkassky, Emil Gilels, Vladimir Horowitz, David Oistrakh, Nathan Milstein, Nikolai Malko and Jascha Horenstein may have often been regarded in the West as “Russian”, but they were in fact Ukrainian.

Those great 20th-century musicians did not spring fully formed; if their adult training and repute was nurtured in the Conservatoires of Moscow and St Petersburg, their initial upbringing was predicated on the fertile musical grounds of their predecessors, including those composers who bequeathed a rich body of music that was too often overlooked, or simply considered to belong to earlier, discarded artistic and social aesthetics – but which, as we may hear, contains unique strains of nationalism that all composers possess and which are virtually impossible to eradicate. During the era of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was arguably the most musically rich of all such conjoined Republics, so that today – albeit with a contemporaneous new war being waged for spurious reasons – we may appreciate the musical legacy of this magnificent country as exemplified by the work of composers hitherto largely unknown in the Western world.

In her recital, Margaret Fingerhut has selected music written between 1877 and 2005 by composers from Ukraine – the country of her grandfather's birth – almost all of whom saw their homeland forcibly brought under the vast Soviet umbrella, but whose music continues to speak today with their home nation's individuality and inner strength.

The opening and closing pieces in this collection are by the greatly significant Sergei Bortkiewicz. He composed **Les Rochers d'Outche-Coche** in 1908 – the first of four *Sketches of Crimea* – inspired by the mountainous scenery and history of the famous peninsula. The music is a remarkably successful conjugation of early Impressionism, arising from concentration upon the initial, slowly unfolding chordal panorama, which undoubtedly reflects – in the deep key of D flat minor – the awesome nature of the landscape. Upon those textual layers the inherent strength of the music expresses, at its own pace, a unique and solemn image of inner power: always there, if never unleashed.

Bortkiewicz's **Consolation** Op.17 No.4 is from a group of eight *Lamentations et consolations* published in Leipzig in 1914. The first four pieces in this group are dedicated to the great pianist Moriz Rosenthal – an indication of the esteem in which Bortkiewicz's music was held at the time – and the Consolation in D flat major, marked *Sostenuto e pensieroso*, is a refraction of the preceding Lamentation in C sharp minor – through enharmonically conjoined tonalities. It is a most beautiful piece, which gained wide acceptance at the time not least because of its fine layout for the keyboard, reflecting the composer's personal mastery of the instrument: though a fine pianist, Bortkiewicz suffered greatly under both Soviet and Nazi tyranny (the latter following his move to Austria in the 1920s), and his art was only rehabilitated in post-war Vienna shortly before his death in 1952. The music, doubtless influenced by Rachmaninoff – and perhaps also by Scriabin (who was much admired at the time) – contains strains of pure melodic inspiration with fully absorbed Impressionistic harmonies and modulatory writing that produce quite an original textural language.

Vasyl Barvinsky was a slightly younger contemporary of Bortkiewicz but shared the older man's natural adoption of late-Romantic Impressionism as an expressive language. This is apparent in his early compositions, including the **Preludes** (from a set of five he composed in 1908 at the age of 20) presented here. Barvinsky went on to play a leading role in Ukrainian art music – as a composer, pianist, conductor, teacher and musicologist. The set's first two preludes were clearly meant for performance as a single concert item, related as they are in terms of evolving adjacent tonalities (G major followed by F sharp major), varied pulses likely influenced by Rachmaninoff's Opus 32 Preludes (starting from an overall 6/4 – two, three and twelve – in the first and becoming 6/8 in the second) and the *Lento* coda, approached via high filigree keyboard writing. The Preludes are followed by **Loneliness, the Sorrow of Love**, a finely sculptured study (ultimately) in F sharp major from Barvinsky's three-movement *Piano Cycle on Love*, first published by Universal Edition in 1925. Although having the same title as Yeats's 1891 poem, it is doubtful that Barvinsky was inspired by the Irishman – the expressions in each creation do not “reflect” sequentially, even if the overall emotions are shared. Barvinsky's later life under Soviet Communism was particularly brutal: he was arrested in spurious circumstances in January 1948 and imprisoned for ten years. On release, he found many of his manuscripts and published works had been destroyed – we should be thankful that some of his pieces such as the three included here have survived.

Mykola Lysenko is the oldest Ukrainian composer in our collection; he was born in 1842 and therefore belongs to that Continent-wide generation of artists who first strove for national artistic identity. Lysenko is often considered the father of the *dumka*, his seven-volume survey on the dance widely held to be definitive. The opening pages of his **Rhapsody on Ukrainian Themes No.2**, dating from 1877 and subtitled “*Dumka-Shumka*”, is a remarkably effective keyboard portrayal of a cimbalom, brilliantly contrasting with a more powerful dance section. Here is an aesthetic claim for national independence – such as Liszt would undoubtedly have admired.

We owe our knowledge of Mykola Lysenko's music to the efforts of the next composer in Margaret Fingerhut's programme, Levko Revutsky, who both studied with him and later edited almost all of his works for publication. Revutsky was born in Pryluky county in 1889 and died in Kyiv in 1977; throughout his life he played a significant role in Ukrainian music, although not entirely without criticism. He attracted attention for his earlier compositions in the 1920s, but in the following decade he was severely criticised for his Second Piano Concerto, the language of which fell foul of new Stalinist cultural demands.

Revutsky thereafter concentrated on teaching, possessing genuine abilities as a communicator, through which he came to exert a strong influence on younger composers. He later returned to his own compositions, slightly revising them for publication whilst retaining their essential expressive content. Into this category fall his **Three Preludes** Op.4 from 1914 and the later **Improvisation**, composed between 1920 and 1930, the music throughout revealing Scriabinesque influences refracted through early folk-like phraseology and tonal fundamentals – the results producing music from a subtly intriguing composer.

Viktor Kosenko was only seven years older than Revutsky but died almost four decades before him, in 1938. He was born in 1896 in St Petersburg, where his father served as an officer. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to Warsaw, where his early education took place; he was seen to be very musical as a child and in 1914, aged 18, Kosenko entered the St Petersburg Conservatory, from which he graduated four years later in piano performance and in composition.

After his graduation Kosenko returned to Ukraine, settling in the north-western city of Zhytomyr, which had a large Polish minority and cemetery and where he established himself as a piano teacher at a local music school. Here he also pursued his early composing career, from which comes his deeply expressive **Nocturne-Fantaisie** for solo piano, a notable set of Eleven Études in the Form of Old Dances, Op.19, a Piano Concerto and a Sonata for violin and piano.

Kosenko spent most of his life in Zhytomyr, determined to earn a living from music, but both he and his wife were to suffer extreme poverty during the period of the 1932/33 Great Famine and he would die aged just 42. His 24 Piano Pieces for Children, in part based on Polish and Ukrainian folk music, were widely performed in Ukraine prior to the 1922 war.

Valentin Silvestrov is the most recent Ukrainian composer in this recital. He was born in Kyiv in 1937 where, as a young teenager, he began teaching himself the piano and the rudiments of composition, before eventually taking private music lessons. His musicianship was soon recognised, and he attended the Kyiv Conservatory from 1958 to 1964, where he studied under Boris Lyatoshinsky and Levko Revutsky before establishing himself as a teacher and freelance composer.

Following the Russian invasion in February 2022, Silvestrov fled from Ukraine to Berlin, where he has begun to re-establish his career, in one sense for the second time. In 1974, following his public protest at the Soviet Union invasion of Czechoslovakia, he stopped public performances of his music and rejected his hitherto modernist musical language. His subsequent music, including the **Three Bagatelles**, Op.1, was quite different, marking the beginning of a new creative concept, although the immediacy of emotional expression which characterised all of his music up to then remains a fundamental creative tool.

The neo-classical, post-modernist tapestries to which these Bagatelles attest have produced in Silvestrov's hands music of singular beauty. Often linear, rarely chordal, the music is nonetheless enhanced by the various colourisations that the modern piano keyboard (and, of course, the pianist) can offer. Each of the pieces is marked at the start with a variation of *con moto (rubato)*, *dolce*, *leggero e trasparente*, instructing the pianist to strive for a sweet, light, limpid tone in flowing, flexible time. Silvestrov's intimate, yet always singularly expressive music is that of a uniquely moving creator, whose original approach to linear keyboard writing remains compelling.

Born in 1895, Boris Lyatoshinsky, like Kosenko, was brought up in a home where Polish art and history were highly valued. Although his father's work as a teacher meant that the family moved frequently throughout Ukraine, this did not interfere with the boy's schooling, nor did it discourage his undoubted gifts for music, which were fostered by his pianist mother. Those gifts included original composition – begun at the age of 15 – which led to Reinhold Glière accepting the young man as a pupil.

In pre-Revolutionary Russia, the main influences for aspiring composers were the works of Tchaikovsky, Glazunov and Scriabin, and it was the piano music of those composers that formed the main initial inspiration for many youthful creators. Yet the earlier music of Boris Lyatoshinsky was no mere “reflection” of such masters' music. The young composer's main outlook for expression may have been the piano – as, indeed, it was for all of the composers in this recital – but Lyatoshinsky was to cast his creative net more widely, writing orchestral music, chamber music, symphonies and operatic works, alongside music for solo piano.

Sadly though, Lyatoshinsky would not escape the post-World War II public humiliation brought about by the Stalin-directed Zhdanov Decree of early 1948, whose ramifications were felt throughout the USSR. After 1953, however, the freer post-Stalin era of Nikita Khrushchev followed, and during the 1960s Lyatoshinsky, by then a member of the Composers' Union of the USSR, was permitted to travel abroad. He visited Austria, Switzerland and other countries; his notably fine personal piano technique saw him appointed to the international competition juries of Moscow's Tchaikovsky Competition – for the first edition in 1958 and again in 1962. He died in Kyiv in 1968. At the time of his death Lyatoshinsky was a much admired figure across the USSR, and the genuinely creative nature of his earlier music – as exemplified by the pieces on this album – attests to the individual character of his compositions.

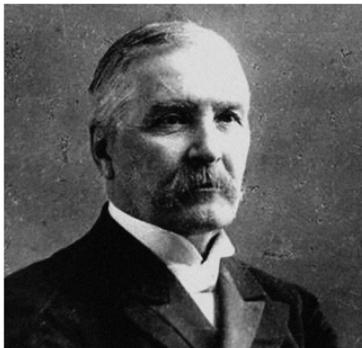
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Sergei Bortkiewicz (1877–1952)



Vasyl Barvinsky (1888–1963)



Mykola Lysenko (1842–1912)



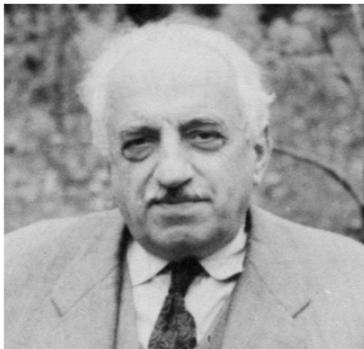
Levko Revutsky (1889–1977)



Viktor Kosenko (1896–1938)



Valentin Silvestrov (b.1937)



Boris Lyatoshinsky (1895–1968)

Margaret Fingerhut was born in London of Ukrainian and Polish heritage. Described by *Gramophone* as a pianist of “consummate skill and thrilling conviction”, her distinguished career has taken her to many countries. She is particularly known for her innovative recital programmes in which she explores the highways and byways of the piano repertoire. As a concerto soloist she has appeared with all the major orchestras in the UK, collaborating with eminent conductors such as Rudolf Barshai, Paul Daniel, Sir Edward Downes, Sir Charles Groves, Vernon Handley, Leonard Slatkin and John Williams in major venues such as the Royal Festival Hall, Royal Albert Hall and the Barbican. She is often heard on BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM and many radio stations worldwide.

Her extensive discography has received much critical acclaim and won many accolades. Her recordings reflect her long-standing fascination with exploring lesser-known repertoire, including works by Bax, Berkeley, Bloch, Dukas, Falla, Finzi, Grieg, Howells, Leighton, Novák, Stanford and Suk as well as several pioneering collections of 19th-century Russian and early 20th-century French piano music. Two of her Bax recordings were short-listed for *Gramophone* awards, and her album of solo piano music by the Polish/French composer Alexandre Tansman was awarded the accolade of “Diapason d’Or” in France. Her collection of encores *Endless Song* was Featured Album of the Week on Classic FM and was selected as “Editor’s Choice” in *Pianist* magazine. She made the first recording of a rediscovered student piece by Rachmaninoff, as well as two solo piano pieces by Sergey Taneyev. Other notable premiere recordings include Elgar’s sketches for his Piano Concerto slow movement and Edgar Bainton’s *Concerto fantasia*.

Margaret has become increasingly involved in using the power of music to raise money for charitable causes. In 2019 she undertook a major recital tour, devising and performing a special programme of words and music called *Far from the Home I Love* across the UK to raise money for refugees and asylum seekers. She recently collaborated with a young Ukrainian filmmaker to produce a powerful video which raised money for emergency vehicles in Ukraine. Margaret was awarded an MBE in the 2024 New Year Honours in recognition of her services to music and charitable fundraising.

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UKRAINE

A PIANO PORTRAIT

MARGARET FINGERHUT

Sergei Bortkiewicz (1877–1952)

Esquisses de Crimée, Op.8 (1908)

- ① I. Les Rochers d'Outche-Coche 7:31

Vasyl Barvinsky (1888–1963)

5 Preludes (1908)

- ② No.1 in G major 5:39

- ③ No.2 in F sharp major 3:03

Piano Cycle on Love (1915)

- ④ I. Loneliness, the Sorrow of Love 6:27

Mykola Lysenko (1842–1912)

- ⑤ *Rhapsody on Ukrainian Themes No.2 "Dumka-Shumka", Op.18 (1877)* 8:48

Levko Revutsky (1889–1977)

3 Preludes, Op.4 (1914)

- ⑥ No.1 in D flat major: Lento 2:40

- ⑦ No.2 in F sharp minor: Andantino 2:24

- ⑧ No.3 in C sharp minor: Presto 1:02

- ⑨ *Improvisation (1920–30)* 3:55

- ⑩ **Viktor Kosenko** (1896–1938)
Nocturne-Fantaisie, Op.4 (1919) 8:25

Valentin Silvestrov (b.1937)

3 Bagatelles, Op.1 (2005)

- ⑪ I. Allegretto 2:53

- ⑫ II. Moderato 3:23

- ⑬ III. Moderato 4:38

Boris Lyatoshinsky (1895–1968)

2 Preludes on the Melodies

of Ukrainian Folk Songs, Op.38b (1942)

- ⑭ No.1 in D minor: Allegro tumultuoso 2:38

- ⑮ No.2 in E flat major: Allegro risoluto 2:36

- ⑯ *Elegy-Prelude "Mourning" (1920)* 5:10

Sergei Bortkiewicz

- ⑰ *Consolation, Op.17 No.4 (1914)* 6:17

Total duration: **77:35**

Recording: The Menuhin Hall, Stoke d'Abernon, 20 & 21 December 2024

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UACRR (Lyatoshinsky)

Recording Producer: Siva Oke

Recording Engineer: Paul Arden-Taylor

Piano: Steinway Model "D"

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