

From Ukraine, with love

Margaret Fingerhut talks to **Peter Quantrill** about reviving forgotten repertoire and making connections – between composers, audiences and the wider world

In darkness, we are drawn towards points of light, and Russia's war with Ukraine has had the unforeseen consequence of directing our eyes and ears towards the cultural heritage of a nation long overshadowed by its neighbour. Sergei Bortkiewicz and Mykola Lysenko have until now been names for the specialist in late-Romantic piano repertoire. Closer to the present, Borys Lyatoshinsky and his pupil Valentyn Silvestrov have likewise, until recently, been eclipsed by their better-known Soviet contemporaries: Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Schnittke.

A new album from Somm illuminates these composers in the context of each other and of even less familiar colleagues: the likes of Vasyl Barvinsky and Levko Revutsky. *Ukraine – A Piano Portrait* is the work of Margaret Fingerhut, the British pianist whose zeal on behalf of forgotten repertoire has enriched the record catalogue since the 1980s, with recordings of major works by Bax, Bainton and Berkeley, to name only some Bs in her discographic bonnet.

'When I started out,' Fingerhut recalls, 'Michel Ponti and Raymond Lewenthal were doing this sort of thing with a view to carving out a certain niche for themselves in the hyper-virtuoso repertoire. It was all ultra-complex, lots of notes. I was more interested in character.'

Tea and thimbles

We meet for tea at her flat in central London, and she is mulling over repertoire for a recital to be given at the British Library in May. A quartet of maidens has come to mind: 'Für Elise, and then *La fille aux cheveux lin*. Then a piece by Bax, *The Maiden with the Daffodil*, and at the end of the little group, *Für Alina* by Pärt.' Imaginative, original, audience-friendly: it sounds perfect, and entirely of a piece with her approach to making music.

Fingerhut likes to speak to audiences between pieces at her recitals, and her programming does not rely on a map of canonic landmarks, perhaps as comfortingly familiar for the performer as it can be for an audience. 'I think it's important in life, in your own struggles, to reach a stage of self-knowledge. Otherwise you become mired in contemplation. I know what I can do, and I know what I can't do. I wish I could do lots of things better,

but two things I know I can do. I can communicate with an audience, and I can play unusual repertoire, putting together programmes that are a little bit different.'

The story of *Ukraine – A Piano Portrait* is as personal (and compelling) as any she has told. In her booklet introduction to the album, Fingerhut traces her roots back to the Ukrainian port city of Odesa, where her paternal grandfather was born. '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.'


She tells me that her grandfather left Ukraine, like countless others around the turn of the last century, in search of a better life at a time when life itself was a fragile thing in the face of anti-semitic pogroms. 'He wanted to go to the US to make his fortune but ended up in Manchester. He wanted to go to Italy to have his voice trained, but he was still too poor. Then he tried to go to South Africa, but he caught Blackwater fever on the way. He eventually recovered, and ended up back in Manchester.'

I enquire about his trade, and she places on her finger an imaginary 'fingerhut' (German and Yiddish for thimble).

A century in an hour

The repertoire on the album covers almost a century, from *Les Rochers d'Outche-Coche* (1908) by Bortkiewicz to the Bagatelles Op 1 (2005) by Silvestrov. Bortkiewicz is the pre-eminent example of the post-Romantic miniaturist here, writing in heady, luscious harmonies reminiscent of Scriabin, and setting an example followed by the opulent *Nocturne-Fantaisie* (1919) by Viktor Kosenko.

As Fingerhut remarks, Lysenko is the father of modern Ukrainian music in the classical tradition. 'He was constantly getting into trouble with the Russian authorities for promoting Ukrainian culture, setting Ukrainian poets to music. He wrote the *Carol of the Bells*, and the anthem which has been played everywhere since the war started.' By including his *Dumka-Shumka* Op 18, Fingerhut brings weight and substance to what might otherwise become a sequence ►►



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of exquisite miniatures, and demonstrating that the *Dumka* was originally neither a Czech nor a pan-Slavic idiom but native to Ukraine.

Born in 1888, Barvinsky is a name entirely new to me, yet 'he is considered a major figure in Ukraine,' explains Fingerhut. That so little of his music survives, and is known, comes down to the tragedy of his times: he and his wife were arrested by the NKVD in 1948 and he was imprisoned in a Russian gulag. By the time he was released in 1958, most of his music had been burnt, and he lived only five more years, having attempted to reconstruct a few pieces. With her experience of performing the music of Josef Suk and recording Vítězslav Novák, Fingerhut found 'something particularly Czech' in the harmony of Barvinsky's Op 1 Preludes – and then discovered that the composer had studied with Novák.

Lyatoshynsky had his own brushes with the authorities in Moscow, who tended to patronise cities such as Kyiv when not ignoring them entirely. His pupil Sylvestrov set out as a young modernist, and suddenly changed tack in the 1970s (around the same time as Pärt in Estonia, in fact). He began composing in a post-Schubertian style of haunting stillness that has captivated audiences worldwide ever since attaining late and unexpected celebrity as the symbolic voice of resistance in classical music in the wake of the Russian invasion (Sylvestrov himself emigrated to Berlin).

'I've played the Sylvestrov Bagatelles in recital,' says Fingerhut, 'and people have come up to me afterwards to say that these pieces struck a chord with them, more than anything else in the recital. But you'd never guess from listening to his music how it's almost impossibly over-notated. I've never come across a more detailed score. Almost every note has its own marking. The tempi and rubati are all indicated with incredible precision. The sound world is so muted, and the notes seem incredibly simple, and yet there's such a range of interpretation.'

Fingerhut is touring the album in concert around the UK during 2025, with the profits of several concerts going to Ukrainian charitable causes. She will also take the opportunity to link its theme with her long-standing commitment to British composers, by including the *Variations on a Ukrainian Folksong* by Malcolm Arnold. Like so much of Arnold's music, the piece faces in several directions at once, drawing on folk material with almost jazzy invention at times while venturing into dark and troubled expressive territory.

Down among the dead men

When it comes to sifting through reams of potential repertoire for such passion projects, says Fingerhut, 'my bottom line is, is it worth doing? Does it interest me? Because I'm the one that has to sit and practise these things. I've turned down things in the past, attractive concert dates or recordings, because I couldn't imagine sitting there for hundreds of hours practising music that didn't touch me or grip me in some way.'

The problem of time commitment to rare repertoire is more acute with concertos than with solo pieces which don't require the expensive commitment of an orchestra. Fingerhut would love to revive the *Variations* by Stanford on 'Down among the Dead Men' – 'a terrible title, but the piece itself is a real audience pleaser.' She never got to play the *Winter Legends* of Bax which helped to bring her name to an international public through her 1986 Chandos recording, as part of the Bax series conducted by Bryden Thomson.



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'I'm just happy I was there at the right time,' says Fingerhut. 'Most repertoire recedes with time, doesn't it? So inevitably you'll find that you're pushing against the tide. Conversely, there are pieces where I may find myself thinking that this isn't the best thing I've ever played, but it answers a need right now. Does one always have to be playing Beethoven's Op 110? There's so much out there.'

With the foundation of a new society dedicated to the promotion of Bax's music, Fingerhut was recently invited to supply fingerings for a new edition of the *Symphonic Variations* which stand alongside *Winter Legends* as a huge concerto in all but name, demanding and rewarding the talents of a musician who can grapple with the Rachmaninovs. Somewhat reluctantly, she sent in her old score from 30 years ago: she believes that fingering is a personal and essential part of getting to grips with any piece.

'A fingering helps define interpretation,' she says. 'It's a very deliberate act. After playing a new piece straight through to get a feel for it, I will always take it apart and work out fingering. If you work out fingerings at the very beginning, you have to see what the music is about. You have to look at the articulation, the tempi, the balance, all these sorts of things. Later on, particularly if it's a technically very difficult passage, I might reach a certain level and then think to myself, why is this not working? Why is it bumpy? Or why can't I get this faster? What's not comfortable about it? And often the problem can be fingering.'

'When you revive a piece,' she continues, 'it's very interesting to see the fingering. The chances are you'll change them, and

think to yourself “What on earth was I doing?” That’s the advantage of playing from a score on a tablet, because in the past I have literally rubbed through the paper copy when changing the fingering several times. But if you’re always putting the same finger on the same note, if it’s always absolutely clear in your mind, you’re teaching yourself much better memory than if you are effectively sight-reading till ready.’

Voice of authority

She credits Cyril Smith, her teacher from her student days at the Royal College of Music, with instilling such technical discipline. ‘I hadn’t really fingered pieces before. He would tell me – I can still hear his voice now – that you have to memorise your left hand, so that if your right hand was indisposed, your left hand could still give the concert. It makes a lot of sense, because the left-hand part is where the harmony and the structure of a piece come from.’

In any case, as she points out, at least half the population of pianists is often disadvantaged by editorial fingerings written by and for men, ‘big men with big stretches. If you’re playing at an advanced or professional level, you know what you can ignore. But a lot of pianists will see an editorial fingering and think that’s the voice of authority.’ Fingerhut is ‘forever looking at ways to make life easier for stretchy passages. How can I make the shape of the phrase more beautiful with weight distribution?’

She goes over to the piano and shows me her score of Barvinsky’s *Loneliness, the Sorrow of Love*. ‘In any given four-bar or eight-bar phrase, roughly three-quarters of the notes are going to be self-explanatory. Where does the thumb go? That’s the clue to everything else. But there are some incredibly complicated scales here, going right up the piano, where I wrote out the fingering for every single note. A few bars later, I’ve made a little redistribution between the hands – and so on!’

Perhaps one day Fingerhut may find the opportunity to play the entirety of Barvinsky’s marvellous cycle of pieces on *Love* in its various forms. ‘Far from the home I love’ was the title of a touring project in 2019 through which Fingerhut raised over £90,000 for refugee charities. She commissioned Moutaz Arian, a Kurdish refugee composer, to write *Memories from My Land* for the project, and now she has designs on a much more ambitious theatrical collaboration with the Iranian composer Farhad Poupel.

‘We have come up with a project called “Daughters of Persia”,’ she tells me. ‘It involves a piano trio and a narrator. The screenwriter William Nicholson has written us a script to tell the story of Persian women through history, hopefully up to the present day without making it too overtly political. It will feature pieces of Farhad’s as well as other Iranian composers, and some mainstream repertoire such as Rimsky-Korsakov and Ravel.’ They have lined up the Hampstead Theatre for a premiere.

Pinning down funding and venues for a full-scale touring show is a long-term commitment: ‘I don’t know if I’ve bitten off more than I can chew!’ Whether she is raising funds for asylum seekers or raising the profile of neglected composers, Fingerhut views the musician’s life as about so much more than playing the notes. ■

Ukraine – A Piano Portrait is available on CD and streaming from Somm Recordings from 18 April. Prior to the release, Margaret Fingerhut plays works from the album in her recital at Wigmore Hall on 25 March, touring the UK thereafter. Further details at margaretfingerhut.co.uk.

ON PLAYING BORTKIEWICZ

Margaret Fingerhut’s learning tips for the Consolation Op 17 No 4

This touching piece comes from the first set of *Lamentations et Consolations*, published in 1914. As the title suggests, a ‘Consolation’ offers us solace and comfort. It is the sweetest of lullabies, but it also has moments of intense longing and yearning. I think you would have to have a heart of stone not to fall in love with it!

The piece requires warmth, delicacy, control, and above all a beautiful singing tone. Note that the tempo is *Andante un poco moto*, in other words it should be just a little flowing. The trick is to get it right: too much and the piece won’t sound dreamy enough, too little and it will be too static. This is ultra-romantic music, so it also needs a sense of freedom and an imaginative use of rubato.

The opening bars, marked *Sostenuto e pensieroso*, should sound contemplative and improvisatory. The music travels through some very remote keys, only reaching the home key of D flat in bar 10. You can emphasise the pauses to capture this feeling of searching.

The main theme has a gently rocking accompaniment, like a berceuse. In fact, Bortkiewicz uses the word *cullando* (‘cradling’) a few bars later. It needs careful voicing to bring out the melody, especially where the LH accompaniment wraps itself around the RH, so try to keep your LH light and floating. Bars 10-13 might be tricky to pedal: it should work if you change on each barline, but only if the LH accompaniment is soft enough. Be prepared to do some subtle half-peddalling if the sound gets too muddy.

It is a lovely effect if you can make the RH sound like gently-chiming bells in bars 27-31 and 35-39, and in the corresponding passage later on. Think of your fingertips pressing and then releasing – the pedal will sustain the sound. A small upward movement of the wrist might help as you play each ‘bell’. The mood becomes more intense in bars 31-35, so make sure that the LH also crescendos to provide greater sonority and richness.

There is no need to worry about playing strictly legato when the opening motif returns in octaves at bar 42. It is more important to keep your wrists and arms moving freely. As with the opening, this section should again feel quite improvisational, with the end of bar 55 hanging in the air like a question mark. The touch in the RH from bar 56 to 73 is *portato* (‘speaking’) but it should sound as distant as you can manage. Flat fingers might help to achieve a softer, more cushioned sound. You can take a little time over bar 69 to ensure that the *pp dolcissimo* is really magical. The only other challenge comes in the final bar of the piece: how to spread that chord? Whichever way you choose, you need to hear the last little echo of the melody in the LH while the surrounding chord drifts into a blissful silence.

Bortkiewicz’s Consolation Op 17 No 4 appears inside this issue’s Scores.