Manu Sinistra

Illia Ovcharenko

MDR-SINFONIEORCHESTER · OKSANA LYNIV

Honens is proud to support this left-hand concerto album by 2022 Honens Prize Laureate Illia Ovcharenko, made possible through the generous support of Heather Edwards. Illia fully embodies the Honens *Complete Artist* philosophy. He is a pianist of extraordinary virtuosity, a thoughtful collaborator, an engaging communicator who connects deeply with audiences, and a compassionate individual attuned to the social issues of our time. This recording reflects the artistry, integrity, and humanity Illia represents, which Honens is honoured to celebrate.

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MANU SINISTRA

Concertos for the Left Hand

Sergei Bortkiewicz (1877–1952)

Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 28

1	I. Allegro dramatico	9. 24
2	II. Andante cantabile	14. 27
3	III. Allegro vivo	6. 57

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, M.82

4	I. Lento	8. 37
5	II. Allegro	4. 50
6	III. Tempo I	5. 30

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Piano Concerto No. 4, Op. 53

7	I. Vivace	4. 39
8	II. Andante	9. 52
9	III. Moderato	8. 02
10	IV. Vivace	1. 41
	Total playing time:	74. 03

Illia Ovcharenko, piano

MDR-Sinfonieorchester

Oksana Lyniv, conductor

To stand at the crossroads of history and sound is a profound privilege. This album is more than a recording, it is a dialogue across a century, a collection of musical echoes born from resilience.

The three concertos by Prokofiev, Ravel, and Bortkiewicz tell an absolutely remarkable and incredibly touching story. They were all created for the renowned pianist Paul Wittgenstein after he suffered the devastating loss of his arm during World War I. This music was an incredible act of defiance, a powerful way to transform a terrible loss into something beautiful and courageous.

Today, with war and tragedy sadly continuing to shadow our world, this music feels more relevant than ever. It's a vivid reminder that art can offer strength and ensure cultural survival even in the darkest of moments.

For me, the heart of this album is the Bortkiewicz Concerto No. 2, a work I only discovered in 2023. Bortkiewicz is a brilliant Ukrainian composer, and bringing his voice forward is deeply personal, it connects me to my own culture and the place where my heart truly belongs.

What's fascinating is how these three masterpieces were all written around the same time for the same unique purpose, yet they emerged so differently: Ravel's is a sophisticated masterpiece, Prokofiev's is a rhythmical drama, and Bortkiewicz's is beautifully poetic and powerful passion.

I genuinely hope this album offers you a sense of hope and an appreciation for the enduring strength of the human spirit.

Illia Ovcharenko

The pianist Paul Wittgenstein (1887–1961) came from a wealthy Viennese family — his father, Karl Wittgenstein, was a steel tycoon — and private musical performances were a regular feature at the Wittgenstein home (now demolished) in Vienna's 4th district, with guests including Brahms, Clara Schumann, Richard Strauss, Mahler, and Bruno Walter. Paul was the seventh of eight children born to Karl and his wife Leopoldine (Poldi), and the youngest in the familiar was the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. After studying the piano with Theodor Leschetitzky, Wittgenstein made his professional debut in 1913. Called up for military service in World War I, he was shot in the elbow at the Battle of Galicia (near Lviv) in Autumn 1914, and his right arm had to be amputated. During his recovery in a Russian prisoner-of-war camp, he began to play again with his left hand, and decided to continue his career after the war as a one-armed pianist. The first composers he approached for new repertoire included Josef Labor (his old teacher), Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Franz Schmidt.

Another was **Sergei Bortkiewicz** (1877–1952), born in Kharkiv, Ukraine. He subsequently studied the St Petersburg Conservatory where his teachers included Karel van Ark (piano) and Anatoly Lyadov (theory). He later enrolled at the Leipzig Conservatory to continue his musical studies with Alfred Reisenauer (a Liszt pupil) and Salomon Jadassohn, before settling in Berlin in 1904. With the outbreak of World War I, Bortkiewicz returned to Kharkiv, but the Russian Revolution forced him to flee again and he managed to secure a passage on a ship from Yalta to Constantinople. Though he soon secured a number of piano pupils there, Bortkiewicz longed to return to Europe; in 1922 he obtained an Austrian visa and settled in Vienna. It was here that he met Wittgenstein who commissioned Bortkiewicz to write a concerto, now known as his Piano Concerto No. 2, though first performed as a 'Concerto Fantaisie' in C minor. The premiere was given in the Musikverein in Vienna on 29 November 1923. In her review of the concert for the *Neues Wiener Journal* (3 December 1923), Elsa Bienenfeld marvelled at Wittgenstein's virtuosity:

Paul Wittgenstein performs miracles of energy with his one left arm… A musician of outstanding calibre, he masters the piano with one hand better than most of his two-armed colleagues. The Russian composer Bortkiewicz has written a Concerto-Fantasy (with orchestra) for him. This is a unique, bravura piece, not exactly original — with various ingredients from Chopin, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky — but very well suited to highlighting Wittgenstein's pianistic virtuosity.

As this review suggests, Bortkiewicz's musical language emerged squarely from the nineteenth-century Russian tradition of Tchaikovsky, something that evidently appealed to Wittgenstein's relatively conservative tastes: in 1935 Bortkiewicz composed another work for the pianist, the *Russian Rhapsody*, Op. 45. Though the Second Concerto is cast in a single movement, its expansive and rhapsodic structure falls into several sections: an impassioned *Allegro dramatico* gives way to a charming *Allegretto*, a richly expressive *Andante cantabile* and a reprise of the opening. Marked *Finale. Allegro vivace*, the closing section finds Bortkiewicz at his most flamboyant, his writing for piano left hand at its most effective.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) had a fraught relationship with Wittgenstein. When Ravel accepted Wittgenstein's commission in 1929, he evidently relished the challenge of composing a concerto for left hand alone. But when Wittgenstein saw the finished work, he judged it to be ineffective, and took it upon himself to rewrite several passages in order to give the soloist greater prominence. He gave the first performance at the Vienna Musikverein on 5 January 1932. Ravel was not present, but three weeks later he was in Vienna with Marguerite Long (to perform his two-handed Concert in G Major) and Wittgenstein arranged a dinner for his visitors from Paris. After the meal, Wittgenstein played the Concerto for the Left Hand, and Marguerite Long recalled what happened next:

Ravel's face... became increasingly sombre. As soon as the performance

was over, I attempted a 'diversion' with Ambassador Clauzel, in order to avoid an incident. Alas, Ravel walked slowly toward Wittgenstein and said to him: 'But that's not it at all!' Wittgenstein defended himself: 'I am a veteran pianist and it doesn't sound well'. That was exactly the wrong thing to say. 'I am a veteran orchestrator and it sounds well!', was Ravel's reply.

Back in Paris, Ravel wrote to Wittgenstein accusing him of 'infringement', and demanded a commitment from the pianist to play the concerto strictly as written. Wittgenstein replied that this was 'completely out of the question. No self-respecting artist could accept such a condition.' Though this situation appeared irreconcilable, Ravel and Wittgenstein evidently buried the hatchet in time for the delayed French premiere, given at the Salle Pleyel in Paris on 17 January 1933, conducted by the composer (and filmed by Pathé). However, Ravel never completely trusted Wittgenstein with the work, and the pianist himself admitted that 'only much later, after I'd studied the concerto for many months, did I become fascinated with it, and realise what a great work it was.' The earliest performance of the Concerto for the Left Hand played exactly as Ravel intended was given in Paris by Jacques Février and Charles Münch on 19 March 1937.

The Concerto is in a single movement. It opens in a mood of dark mystery, the first theme introduced by the double bassoon giving way to a mournful idea in the horns, its melodic shape hinting at Ravel's interest in Blues. These two themes work up to a climax before the first solo entry. After an initial flourish, the pianist takes up a harmonised version of the double bassoon theme and both ideas are further developed. A sudden change in tempo, to a brisk *Allegro* in 6/8 time, ushers in the second part of the work, a striking contrast dominated by Scherzo-like ideas.

But Ravel's reintroduction of material from the opening, combining it with the faster music and bringing the whole structure together, is a brilliant demonstration of his compositional ingenuity. And whether in passages with the orchestra, or in the solo cadenza near the end, his writing for the left hand — often creating the illusion of two hands playing — is yet another facet of his prodigious musical imagination demonstrated in this dark and dramatic masterpiece.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) told Nikolai Myaskovsky in a letter sent from Paris on 7 July 1931 that 'I have finished the sketches for the one-hand concerto, but instead of pleasure, I feel annoyance because of the numerous spots that still need to be smoothed over.' He added that he had seen the score of Ravel's as yet unperformed left-hand concerto (presumably at the publisher Durand) 'and agree with you that it is rather dull; of course, it is conscientiously composed, but without any spark.' It is not known whether Prokofiev changed his view of Ravel's work after hearing it performed, but his 'annoyance' with parts of his own concerto were evidently overcome without undue difficulty. On 14 September 1931, Prokofiev wrote to his friend Boris Asafiev from Ciboure (coincidentally, the town of Ravel's birth) where he was enjoying a holiday with 'the Pyrenees on one side, the warm ocean on the other', announcing that he had 'finished a piano concerto... as a commission for the one-armed pianist Wittgenstein. It's already called my Fourth Concerto, and probably in about four years, when my contract with Wittgenstein expires, it will turn into a concerto for two hands (incidentally, I'm keeping quiet about that for now, so as not to offend my customer.')

Though Prokofiev was only four years younger than Wittgenstein, when he sent the pianist his Fourth Piano Concerto, he wrote: 'You are a musician of the nineteenth century, I am of the twentieth. I have tried to compose as simply as possible; for your part, don't judge the piano part too hastily. If certain moments seem to be indigestible at first, don't pronounce judgement but wait a while.' Unfortunately, Wittgenstein was completely baffled by the piece, as he told the composer in his terse reply: 'Thank you for the concerto, but I don't understand a note of it, and I shall not play it.' Wittgenstein was as good as his word, and the work was never performed during Prokofiev's lifetime. The premiere took place in Berlin on 5 September 1956, with Siegfried Rapp as the soloist. In spite of his plans to do so, Prokofiev never made a two-handed version of the work. The American premiere was given on 28 March 1958 by Rudolf Serkin with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy and the same performers recorded the work two days later. Even with this distinguished advocacy, the concerto struggled to find a place on the permanent repertory – a bewildering state of affairs given the genial musical language of much of the score.

The concerto opens with a *Vivace* dominated by rapid semiquavers (sixteenth-notes) in the solo part. The expansive *Andante* finds Prokofiev at his most expressive, alternating orchestral and solo passages – by turns lyrical and ardent – that recall some of the composer's ballet music. The *Moderato* third movement has a rather dogged, implacable quality, but this is leavened by more capricious solo writing. The *Vivace* returns to music from the first movement, a reprise of familiar ideas for a quiet but energetic close.

Nigel Simeone

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