

SURRENDER TO MADNESS

A YSTCM PIANO JUNIOR RECITAL

Seth Tan

Performing works by
Beethoven, Copland and
Bortkiewicz

26 NOVEMBER

8:30PM

**YONG SIEW TOH CONSERVATORY
CONCERT HALL**

26 November 2019 | TUESDAY

Seth Tan Xun Yu

Piano Recital

Programme

BEETHOVEN

Sonata No. 22 in F major, Op. 54

- I. Un Tempo d'un Menuetto
- II. Allegretto

COPLAND

Passacaglia

BORTKIEWICZ

Ballade, Op. 42

“SURRENDER TO MADNESS”

A YST Junior Recital (Piano) presented by Seth Tan

For me, a music artist should not merely live with and own the music they are to perform – that is the least to be expected. A performance should be a reflection of the soul of the artist; who they are, what they stand for, what they’ve overcome – Everything. Or perhaps how well they prevail as a wearer of a mask.

For me, to wear the mask of confidence in order to represent all of me on stage, I surrender to madness, the madness within.

PROGRAMME:

Beethoven – Sonata no.22 in F Major, Op.54 (10')

Copland – Passacaglia (7' 10")

Bortkiewicz – Ballade, Op.42 (8' 30")

Welcome to my recital and I sincerely appreciate every one of you here today watching me deliver this performance and reading this! Tonight’s recital will be a relatively short one but nonetheless a sincere combination of works which are to differing extents more obscure in the musical canon – in the shadows of the composer’s works or the composer being in the shadows altogether. In Singaporean terms you could say that they are “same same but different” stylistically speaking. Very exciting for me as well is how all three works have very over-the-top and explosive codas in their own right, truly reflecting how the composers surrendered to their own madness, writing their hearts out and how me as performer shall carry on that will. I recommend reading my Performer’s Insight for each work below as each work unfolds, as they contain not just historical background but also my personal thoughts and how I relate to them.

BEETHOVEN

PIANO SONATA NO.22 IN F MAJOR

For a work oozing with so much sincerity, elegance and charm, it is a pity for poor sonata no.22, a gem smacked in between two giants, No.21 “Waldstein” and No.23 “Appassionata”.

When I was first recommended to listen to this two-movement sonata by my teacher, my first impression of the sonata was that it was meant to be a complete “troll”. After all, ensuing abruptly from the charming exposition is a full page’s worth of continuous staccato quarter notes written in the most ironic, “meme”-iest fashion imaginable. As if that were not enough, the second movement is literally seven pages of continuous semiquavers! It was this fun eccentric charm however which made me instantly want to take on the work.

However upon befriending the work, I realised it was more than just the theatrical charm. The first movement was written in a sort of minuet with variations, whereby the opening theme comes back in full several times, getting more and more elaborate each time. There is beauty and purity behind each time Beethoven adds something, eventually spinning up a mass of sound (my favourite part of the work) into a mini cadenza. Then comes [Coda no.1](#) for tonight, one of pastoral quality though giving a glimpse of the madness that is to come with one last dramatic surprise towards the end.

If the first movement is a calm buggy ride through nature, the second movement is an amusement park ride; a one-way roller coaster ride to [Coda no.2](#) for tonight, one of over-the-top-Beethoven-heroic-nature celebration. For me, these seven pages of continuous semiquavers is where [Beethoven surrenders to madness](#), testing how long he can prolong an opening theme of ascending alternating sixths!



COPLAND PASSACAGLIA

**G#.. D# D# A.. G#.. D.. A# A# C#.....
B.. D# D# A# G#.. F#.. F F E...**

The first four variations form the first section of the work and is my favourite. The sonority and writing suggests Copland had the organ in mind. Music critics in the past have described the dissonant harmonic language of Copland's to be "ugly", one even saying "It never touches the hem of beauty's dress". But I vehemently disagree. There is this beauty in the quiet suspense here that tugs at a sort of restrained madness within me, like a giant dying to wake from its slumber. The tension and the dissonances that arise from the independently moving lines absolutely depresses me every step of the way, each variation resolving in bittersweet longing.

The next three variations form the second section of the work and is my favourite. The giant abruptly bursts awake here, raining a thunder of havoc and cacophony in its wake. Subsequently, my mind dances along with the fast-paced changes of mood in these variations. For me, from here on Copland had a full orchestra in mind. I imagine an array of timbres, from a winds section passing a melody top down to a full brass section brashly playing a chord in unison. To even an electric guitar in a section Copland marks "*rude*".

The final two variations form the final section of the work and is my favourite. The first variation starts from nothing, slowly but incessantly marching the passacaglia theme inevitably towards **Coda No. 3** of tonight. This time, it is a triple-forte climax in three staves, literally unplayable as written. The madness within me finally tips over the brim here, but it does not end here. The soul begs for release, ascending with fragments of the passacaglia theme rising in intensity like a thorn in the mind, before finally exploding in the loudest and harshest dissonance.

Copland actually wrote this in his student years as a homework assignment when his teacher, Mademoiselle Nadia Boulanger, asked for a work exhibiting the use of traditional forms. Copland would also laconically remark "I am told that it is not an easy piece to play". **Copland surrendered to madness**. And yes, indeed, I have written that every part is my favourite, for I have acquainted my own madness to every thread of this intense masterpiece.

Yes, remember every trudge of this ominous opening theme, for it is this grudging theme that serves as the soul of the music, coming back haunting from all directions in the subsequent variations. Spot where the theme is at during every moment of the music!



BORTKIEWICZ

BALLADE

Now, as if that G# minor ending was not enough, we descend perfectly into C# minor for the final work of tonight, Bortkiewicz's Ballade.

Introducing Sergei Bortkiewicz. A Russian having lived between 1877-1952, he was contemporary to the two currently revered Russian late romantic pianist-composers, Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. Bortkiewicz, much like his contemporaries, has an extensive catalogue of published compositions and among which is an array of piano compositions of very personalised style. In terms of quantity Bortkiewicz boasts great prolificity, having over two hundred solo piano compositions ranging from miniatures to larger forms. They were all in traditional Romantic forms, as Bortkiewicz in his own autobiography *Künstlerisches Glaubensbekenntnis* (1923) had stated his rejection of "Modernist" styles.

The result is a soundscape that is canonically Russian postromantic. As a result, his piano works are often associated as having stemmed from Chopin and Liszt, containing echoes of other Russian giants and even operatic greats like Wagner. Even in the Ballade, there is a section that just about resembles an iconic moment in Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, which I am sure will be immediately picked up for those who are familiar with the concerto. Yet, beyond the accusable imitations is meticulous piano writing filled with lushness, sensitivity and sincerity. This can be attributed to his humble life as a Russian musician caught within a war-torn era, resulting in a uniquely Bortkiewicz tone – nostalgically lyrical and brooding.

The Ballade is very much in the form of a Chopin Ballade, especially with the intense stretto coda. Bortkiewicz amasses a huge buildup with distinct modal motifs in the middle section, bringing us to **coda no.4**, one that is larger than life. And once again as expected by now I will say that Bortkiewicz surrenders to madness because this coda is truly a daring one. It is inevitable to associate it with Brahms' Op.79 no.1 however, given the motif, but is now made more epic tenfold with a tremolando and more explosions in triple forte. Bortkiewicz wrote the Ballade in 1931, after the First World War in his times of instability seeking shelter in Berlin, and to me this ending is him going all out, embodying the very rage of humanity.

