

VENETA NEYNSKA

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DIMITAR
NENOV
PIANO WORKS

THE ARCHITECT'S VIEW

FOREWORD

Emma Pouncefort writes...



At CRD Records, we have always been drawn to the unjustly neglected. Whether through our long-standing commitment to rediscovering overlooked composers or our championing of piano miniatures—exemplified by our recordings with Paul Crossley of Ravel, Fauré, Grieg, and most recently Mompou, all which span the lifetime of CRD—our mission is to uncover and curate music that deserves a wider audience.

Dimitar Nenov (1901–1953) is precisely such a figure. A pianist-composer of extraordinary depth, Nenov’s music remains largely unknown beyond Bulgaria—where he is still rarely programmed—despite his towering influence on 20th-century Eastern European music. His works, blending

architectural precision with boundless imagination, are at once intellectually rigorous and emotionally profound.

This album, performed by the brilliant Veneta Neynska, offers a rare opportunity to experience Nenov’s unique musical language through the artistry of his present-day champion. From the lush harmonies of his *Meditation* to the virtuosic brilliance of the *Toccata*, this collection reveals a composer who was not only a master of the piano but also a visionary in sound.

We are thrilled to present this album as part of our commitment to bringing hidden gems to light, ensuring Nenov’s remarkable legacy is heard, appreciated, and celebrated worldwide.

Emma Pouncefort
Tom Pouncefort
Directors

Veneta Neynska writes...



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Playing Dimitar Nenov's music feels like deciphering an intricate puzzle. At first glance, his works may seem deceptively

simple or impossibly difficult, but the key to unlocking their remarkable depth and beauty lies in approaching them from a different perspective—through the lens of the **Architect's View**.

Architects think in volumes, with physical space as their canvas. As a professional architect, Nenov earned his diploma from the Technische Hochschule in Dresden in 1927 and applied the same mindset to his music. With extensive experience designing public and residential buildings, Nenov composed music using building blocks of sound, inviting listeners into his unconventional auditory topographies; a quite different approach to the celebrated greats such as Beethoven, who has—as for many—played a fundamental role in my training as a pianist.

During my research on Nenov, I discov-

ered the deep interconnectedness of his life and music. This is, of course, the case for many composers. But Nenov's story is a particularly striking one.

Much of Nenov's unique approach in fact stemmed from being largely self-taught before his student years in Dresden, where he double-majored in architecture and music. Although he didn't complete his studies at the German conservatory, he eventually graduated from the Conservatory in Bologna and specialised under the legendary pianist and teacher Egon Petri. His musical journey, however, began in his hometown of Razgrad, Bulgaria, where his amateur pianist mother introduced him to the piano—what would become his lifelong passion. Due to his father's military career, Nenov frequently moved across the country, relying on his own imagination and motivation to master the instrument. His abilities were so extraordinary that

he is widely regarded as the greatest Bulgarian pianist of all time.

My only desire was to say something deeply and to say it in the most perfect way possible. Hence the desire to tear the models of form, hence my virtuosity — reaching all possible limits — simply to find the worthy form of my musical feelings.

The luscious harmonies of the early *Meditation* flow like velvet, fitting so naturally under the fingers that, to me, playing it feels like receiving a hand massage. The utterly gorgeous theme of *Theme and Variations*, and the limitless ways it transforms throughout the piece, offer a rich experience of discovery and appreciation, despite requiring a high level of expertise. The magical poetry of the *Miniatures* and the intricate web of right-hand figures in the first *Etude* provide immense pleasure and fulfilment to the pianist.

The *Toccata*, with its almost inhuman difficulty, might seem unplayable at first. However, on studying the manuscript, I discovered essential guidelines from the composer that shifted my perspective as a performer, making the piece not only manageable but thrilling to play.

Nenov's piano music offers profound insight into his mastery of the instrument, and his contemporaries left ample evidence of his artistic charisma, pianistic brilliance, and unforgettable performances. Sadly, though, no recordings of his work survive, perplexing given Nenov's contribution to Bulgarian music—he was, after all, a founding member of the Union of Bulgarian Composers, going on to influence generations of pianists and composers.

Initially trained as an architect, he later dedicated himself fully to performing, teaching, and composing. As the first

Music Director of Bulgarian National Radio, he recorded nearly every major Bulgarian musician, including himself. Yet, after his death in 1953, his recordings were mysteriously destroyed. The reasons remain unclear, with theories ranging from professional jealousy to political retaliation by the communist regime, which opposed his democratic ideals.

A creative gift does not exist for itself, it belongs to everyone, and I have no desire other than to find peace and time to fulfil this duty. Nations give birth to creative gifts – an emanation of spiritual forces, thousands of nameless people give something to create this creative gift. I owe it to everyone; I have to give back to them what they have given me – and only the feeling of this duty has prevented me from ending my life more than once.

Although his name is well-known in professional music circles in Bulgaria, his music is rarely performed. My personal interest was sparked partly by the challenge of being the first female pianist to make an official recording of his devilishly difficult *Toccata*. My curiosity was further piqued on gaining access to his manuscripts, which opened a door to Nenov's mesmerizing compositional process—tightly intertwined with his thorough understanding and complete control over the instrument.

Dimitar Nenov was born on 19th December 1901 and this album marks the 125th anniversary of his birth, celebrating the extraordinary life and talent of an exceptional artist whose legacy lives on through the work of his disciples. In 2021, I explored Nenov's life and legacy in the documentary *Dimensions of Elegance*, which I created with video producer Jassen

Haralampiev. This album represents continued defiance in the face of efforts to forget and neglect. Through presenting his remarkable piano works to an audience beyond Bulgaria's borders, I hope this project goes somehow in sparking the revival and broader interest his music so deserves.

Veneta Neynska, Bulgaria, 2025

PROGRAMME NOTES

The **Meditation** was composed in Dresden in 1923/24 whilst Nenov was balancing his architecture and music studies, leaving him with very little time to compose. The piece carries the spirit of the late Romantic style and reflects Nenov's deep attachment to the music of Chopin and Liszt. In fact, Liszt's *Consolation No. 3* and concert etude *Un Sospiro* likely influenced the *Meditation*, as all three pieces share the same key of D-flat major and utilise arpeggiated chords as a central expressive device. These two Liszt works were included in Nenov's preserved concert programmes and found in the repertoire lists that are kept in his archive. Nevertheless, the *Meditation* stands as the earliest example of the exceptional emotional intensity that would come to define Nenov's music.

There is a notion that Nenov intended to compose 24 preludes in every key, with the **Miniatures** possibly being the first pieces from this unfinished cycle. Published as a set of five pieces—*Prelude*, *Song*, *Staccato*, *Pastoral*, and *Bulgarian Bagpipe*—they were composed in 1945/46. However, as with all of Nenov's piano works, he composed them in his head and performed them multiple times before writing them down. Contemporary witnesses mention that he played the set with varying numbers of pieces, ranging from five to seven. *Fairytale* and *Dance* were published separately in 1945 as a mini cycle. Notably, only *Bulgarian Bagpipe* had a title in the manuscript, with the other names added later for publication. This recording merges the two sets by placing *Fairytale* and *Dance* between the first two pieces from the official *Miniatures* set. This arrangement works tonally, as the pieces follow a major-minor pattern, and in terms of

character, alternating between fast and slow pieces.

The **Prelude** invites the listener into a world of expansive, rich sounds, reminiscent of the vast horizons of the Bulgarian mountains Nenov often explored and deeply loved. **Fairytale** provides a sudden shift into intimate musical expression, beginning with a simple yet heartfelt melody in both voices on middle A, with one voice holding the note while the other unfolds the theme. The entire piece, though quite short, flows in a seamless musical line. In sharp contrast, **Dance** features semi-clustered chords in rhythmic motion in the left hand, with a tonal centre of C. The right-hand melody develops from a simple motif, reminiscent of the *Fairytale*.

Next is the original second piece from the published *Miniatures* set, **Song** in E minor. It starts slowly and pensively, building into a powerful arch of densely

voiced, thick chords before retreating into its simple, emotional theme, which repeats until the end. Following is the contrasting **Staccato** in F Major, with its perpetual mobile of chordal successions and a playful melody alternating between voices. Its airy sound hints at transcendence, especially in the final bars where the melody rises into silence, as if disappearing into heaven. The peaceful **Pastoral** in D minor brings a meditative stillness, with atmospheric harmonic colourations that feel almost improvisatory. Its middle section, set in a 5/4 rhythm, features an elongated second beat as if one is too lost in thought to move to the next bar on time.

The final piece, **Bulgarian Bagpipe**, emerges from the last notes of the *Pastoral*, flooding the listener with waves of light and energy. Its unusual tonality, D Mixolydian, gives the piece its unique colour, whilst the thrilling motion in the

right hand and the drone motif in the left, which spans half the keyboard, create a dynamic, captivating short form. Nenov once again succeeds in crafting a piece with a strong emotional impact, built from simple, yet effective, structuring material.

The short cycle **Two Etudes for Piano** was written in 1931/32, with the first piece started in Zakopane, Poland, where Nenov spent five months studying under the eminent pianist and teacher Egon Petri, himself a student of Ferruccio Busoni. Among other works, they studied Chopin's *24 Etudes*, which proved to be an inspiration for Nenov. Whilst Nenov marked the piece as being in C Major, this is an oversimplification; the work is harmonically complex, employing the octatonic (diminished) scale.

Nenov's approach to tonality departs from the traditional major-minor system. This reflects his pursuit of modernity and

his desire to align with the broader currents of 20th-century European music. Amongst his generation of Bulgarian composers, he comes the closest to achieving this integration.

Nenov confided in his friends that he had originally planned to create a set of four etudes, and his archives contain a draft of a third one. As for the fourth etude, it evolved over time and eventually became his most well-known piano work — his *Toccata*. Notably, the *Two Etudes* cycle was premiered in Bologna, Italy, where Nenov lived for about a year to obtain a diploma in piano performance, a requirement for teaching at the newly established Bulgarian Conservatoire. Despite his success as an extraordinary pianist, Nenov was initially not accepted due to his lack of this diploma. His time in Zakopane was immensely productive as a composer, and it was there that he also began another significant piano

work, the **Theme and Variations** in F-sharp Major.

The *Theme and Variations* received critical acclaim in each of its performances across Italy, Bulgaria, Germany, Poland, and Austria. The theme was actually conceived in Dresden a few years earlier, in 1926, and was premiered during Nenov's diploma concert in Bologna in 1932, alongside his *Two Etudes*. The theme bears certain similarities to the shape and spirit of a Bulgarian folk song, though there is no evidence or indication that it was a direct quotation. In fact, Nenov was vocal about the 'danger' of imitating folklore and believed strongly in developing a personal style by listening to his own inner voice. He noted that whilst audiences outside Bulgaria heard Bulgarian influences in his music, he attributed these to the passionate, untamed emotion and specific harmonic transitions.

The twenty variations are structured in an etude-like form, each addressing a specific technical pianistic challenge. Thus, the cycle unfolds as a series of contrasting, virtuosic short forms, concluding with a final section that seamlessly leads back to a reprise of the theme.

Nenov's other substantial and most well-known work for piano is the *Toccata*, which he worked on for nearly a decade. The initial idea and first bars were conceived in 1932 in Zakopane, Poland, but the official premiere did not take place until 1942. As with many of Nenov's compositions, the piece remained in his mind due to his extraordinary ability to remember music. It was not written down until 1950, during one of his extended hospital stays, as his health had troubled him throughout his life, particularly towards the end when he was exhausted by his incredibly demanding lifestyle.

The *Toccata* is one of the most virtuosic pieces in Bulgarian piano literature. Its demanding texture has attracted many pianists, but few have mastered it. This work is perhaps the clearest example of Nenov's architectural approach to composition, where the structure of the piece is evident through its meticulously layered sound. The impressive musical form is threaded with care, showcasing Nenov's deep understanding of the piano's capabilities and its limitless potential for sound varieties. From the subtlest, most transcendental touch to the driest, hammer-like use of the keyboard and the grandiose, volcanic eruptions, Nenov explores the full range of the instrument. His profound knowledge was fuelled by his love for the piano and countless hours spent improvising, 'searching for the new, unsaid until then'.

Be mindful of one thing—discard the concept of 'ambition', along with

everything it entails, from your practice. Ambition brings dissatisfaction, bitterness, poisons the soul, and makes you envious, among other things. When you feel the urge to aim higher, replace ambition with the word 'love' — love everything: the piano, its keys, its sound, and the act of working with it. Pour into your contact with this lifeless box all the love you are capable of. Then your work will be rewarding; it will bring you joy, and you will never feel tired, disgusted, or bored. Combine your challenges with this love, and you will see that you cannot play a single note automatically. Instead, you will linger over each one, trembling with anticipation, discovering the beauty in its nuances, its harmonies... All the great pianists who had a beautiful tone possessed this love. No one taught it to them—they each discovered it on their own, in this very way.

Veneta Neynska, Bulgaria, 2025

Pianist **Veneta Neynska** is known for her creative and emotionally engaging performances. Her fine interpretations of short pieces in her first solo album *Brevitas*, her elegant black-and-white music videos, and her performances of Franz Schubert's complete *Piano Sonatas* have captivated audiences worldwide.



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Inspired by both traditional and contemporary visual arts, literature, and poetry, her music-making has been described as 'sensational', 'graceful' and 'beyond magical'. Many of her performances are available on her YouTube channel, filmed in a signature intimate style by her longtime artistic collaborator, Jassen Haralampiev.

Veneta's adventurous spirit has led her to explore rare concerto repertoire, including Clara Schumann's *A minor Concerto* and works for piano and orchestra by C.P.E. and J.C.

Bach. She has also developed a deep appreciation for Polish composers beyond Chopin, performing works by Szymanowski, Zarębski, Friedman, and Górecki at the prestigious Piano Extravaganza festival in Sofia.

A graduate of her hometown's music school with the highest honours, Veneta pursued further studies under John Perry at the University of Southern California and Joan Havill at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. Influential mentors include Bulgarian

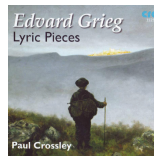
pianists Gina Tabakova and Vesko Stambolov, as well as Imogen Cooper, Jerome Lowenthal, and Dominique Merlet.

Her connection to Beethoven runs deep—her teacher John Perry traces his musical lineage back to the composer. As a laureate of the Beethoven Intercollegiate Competition and Beethoven Hradec Competition, she has performed many of his solo and chamber works, including concertos with the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra and the Shumen Philharmonic.

Beyond performance, Veneta is a passionate advocate for the Bulgarian composer Dimitar Nenov. She co-created the critically acclaimed documentary *Dimitar Nenov and the Dimensions of Elegance*, featuring the only surviving recording of Nenov's playing. Her dedication to his legacy includes a national cineconcert tour and this current album.

www.neynska.com

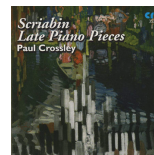
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'Every note that he draws from his piano speaks of a desire for technical and stylistic perfection that is found only amongst the masters.'

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Thanks to The Bulgarian Historical Archive for access to the Nenov archive. This recording was made possible with financial assistance from the National Culture Fund of Bulgaria.

For full details of these recordings and the complete CRD catalogue, visit www.crdrecords.com

Dimitar Nenov (1901–1953)

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1.	Meditation	5:14
2.	Miniatures: I. Prelude	1:05
3.	Fairytale	2:18
4.	Dance	0:43
5.	Miniatures: II. Song	2:26
6.	Miniatures: III. Staccato	1:05
7.	Miniatures: IV. Pastoral	3:57
8.	Miniatures: V. Bulgarian Bagpipe	1:29
9.	Etude No. 1	1:40
10-30.	Theme and Variations (I–XX)	—
31.	Toccata	8:52

Artwork Collage of archival materials

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Piano Steinway Model D

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