



SOMMCD 0142



# NIKOLAI MEDTNER

## PIANO SONATAS

### Sonata Reminiscenza

Op. 38 No. 1 in A minor (from *Forgotten Melodies*)

### Sonata Romantica

Op. 53 No. 1 in B flat minor

### Sonata Minacciosa

Op. 53 No. 2 in F minor

### Ein Idyll

from *Drei Arabesken* Op. 7, No. 1

# ALESSANDRO TAVERNA

piano

### Sonata Reminiscenza

1 Allegretto tranquillo 17:04  
(Andantino con moto)

### Sonata Romantica

(28:08)

2 I Romanza 8:46  
Andante con moto,  
ma sempre espressivo

3 II Scherzo 5:04  
Allegro

4 III Meditazione 5:25  
Andante con moto

5 IV Finale 8:51  
Allegro non troppo

### Sonata Minacciosa

6 Allegro sostenuto 18:09

### Ein Idyll

7 Allegretto tranquillo e dolce 4:13

**Total duration 67:36**

Recorded at Turner Sims Concert Hall, Southampton University, on 9th and 10th November 2013

Piano: Steinway Concert Grand, Model 'D'

Recording Producer: Siva Oke Recording Engineer: Paul Arden-Taylor

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NEW HORIZONS



# NIKOLAI MEDTNER

## PIANO SONATAS

Writing of Nicolas Medtner in 1924, the French-born critic M.D. Calvorcoressi said “He is one of the chief exponents in Russia of the traditional classical tendency, and his music owes nothing to the influence either of the Nationalist movement or of more modern tendencies, such as Scriabin’s”. Calvorcoressi also claimed that Medtner with regard to composition “is entirely self-taught”.

At that time, Medtner was 45 years old, his life already almost two-thirds lived. His output as a composer had both established his creative character and formed the bulk of what he was eventually to bequeath to later generations.

He was not alone: born in Moscow in 1879, his life – as was that of every Russian – had been turned on its head as a consequence of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, which obliged him a few years later to abandon his professorship of piano at the Moscow Conservatoire and to seek a new life abroad. His fate, in that regard, was not entirely dissimilar to that of his great friend Serge Rachmaninov (Medtner’s senior by six years), and Medtner was helped in the early years of his exile by similarly having established a name for himself as a composer and pianist (though never as famous as Rachmaninov), and by having a Piano Concerto (the first of eventually three) to offer orchestras, which he himself would play.

His offer was taken up, and his First Concerto was given in the United States in the 1924-5 season by the Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit and Philadelphia

Orchestras, and although these performances by the composer led to further similar engagements, some years later, Medtner found himself financially a victim of the consequences of the Wall Street Crash, and was thereafter chary of dealing with the United States. However, Calvorcoressi’s contemporaneous note ends with the comment that Medtner’s ‘affinities with Brahms have often been commented upon’; so a combination of influences from Rachmaninov and Brahms enables listeners, perhaps unfamiliar with Medtner’s music, to know what to expect, and to feel – correctly, in Medtner’s case – that the adoption of ‘traditional classical’ tendencies should not automatically mean a backward-looking composer, unfamiliar with the new mores of European music in the 1920s. Those tendencies indicate a rejection of unsuitable models – unsuitable, that is, for a composer of such an inherently civilised and somewhat more intimate outlook as Medtner.

And so we have music by a superbly-gifted pianist, undoubtedly a natural composer, but one who – if we accept Calvorcoressi’s claim that he was ‘entirely self-taught’ can go some little way to explain the nature of Medtner’s music: driven, as all composers are, by his inner compulsion to be accepted, it was only natural that on the one hand his music should speak the language of those to whom he wished to belong, and on the other, realising that that language came naturally to him, he was able to create his own style within it.

Perhaps that is why his music was so often admired by his contemporary pianist-composers – in the early 1920s, Rachmaninov told Medtner that he regarded him as the greatest living composer, and in his diaries for 1915, Prokofiev (twelve years Medtner’s junior), whilst not being at all uncritical of Medtner’s compositional ethos, could write that “I love playing Medtner’s Sonatas on the

piano, and generally have a great affection for his music, reserving a corner for him – perhaps not a very big one – in the pantheon of Russian music”.

How ardently does Prokofiev wish to be embraced! He could sense the qualities in Medtner, so subtly understated in comparison with his own music at that time; had he known Medtner’s first Violin Sonata of 1910, wherein the essence of the work is a study in aspects of musical pacification, he would have recognised it as a most beautiful composition, comprehensively well written for the instruments and a genuinely ‘unknown’ chamber music masterwork.

With three piano concertos, many songs and some chamber music, Medtner, like Chopin, composed exclusively for the piano, and also – like Rachmaninov and Prokofiev (and Brahms!) – his piano music ranges quite widely, from short character-studies to larger-scaled sonatas – albeit nothing in terms of length to equal the sonatas of Rachmaninov or Brahms.

Perhaps the heart of Medtner’s piano music – indeed, his music as a whole – is found in his sonatas, of which he composed no fewer than fourteen between 1895-1937. It is curious, perhaps, that although Medtner lived for another 14 years after completing his final sonata, he did not add to them. However, there may have been extra-musical reasons for this discontinuation and the fact remains that, despite Prokofiev’s youthful admonitions, Medtner’s approach to the genre was essentially one of a late-Romantic composer, perhaps even that of an Impressionist. It is within his nationality, and his allusions to extra-musical stimuli, that we can find the essence of his sonatas: often (but not exclusively) larger-scaled works, creations of mood and of feeling, outstandingly well-

written for the instrument of which he was such a master, yet rooted in the ‘traditional classical tendency’.

Such a combination – allied to Medtner’s forebears having been of German extraction – makes him virtually a unique figure in Russian music: he was not a ‘mystic’ composer, of whom Scriabin was the exemplar, neither exclusively a ‘Romantic’ figure, nor one who was in his expression almost ‘anti-Romantic’ or ‘modernist’. If anything, Medtner veered more towards what might be termed a ‘classic-Impressionist’ composer: such extra-musical stimuli as his titles admit were at all times tempered by an organic approach to the craft of composition itself that stemmed from the inherent classicism of a figure such as Brahms.

This combination is such as we find in these three Sonatas, which, broadly speaking, stem from the dozen years immediately following the end of World War I. It was a period of considerable upheaval in art, politics and nationhood, and for some Russian composers who left the country in the wake of the Revolution, such as Rachmaninov and Glazunov, the 1920s was a fallow decade. Others who stayed, including contemporaries of Medtner – Glière and Miaskovsky, especially – reached an accommodation with the new regime, but Medtner’s creativity remained aloof from outside influences, as if content to remain within the inner recesses of his mind.

The Tenth Sonata, *Sonata-reminiscenza*, in A minor, was composed in 1920, when Medtner was still living in Russia. It was first published by Julius Heinrich Zimmermann in Leipzig in 1922, as the first work in a cycle of eight pieces which constitute Medtner’s Opus 38. This single-movement sonata is not only the

largest work in the cycle, but also further provides the (occasionally hidden) thematic impetus for the remaining seven pieces, which comprise four Danzas and two Canzone – the eighth, concluding, piece is marked ‘Alla Reminiscenza’ and is in A major – being more clearly derived from the opening theme of the Sonata.

Medtner’s Tenth Sonata is a masterly composition: its mood of ‘reminiscence’ virtually self-evident from the beginning, with a flowing theme, *Allegretto tranquillo*, simply presented in the tonic minor, set in train by semiquaver motion which forms the impetus of almost the entire work. Such ‘reminiscences’ (perhaps of pre-Revolutionary Russia) as brought the work into being are clearly recollected in tranquillity, for little disturbs the emotional surface of the Sonata’s haunting exposition; a secondary, scalar descending, theme forms part of this initial thematic group, which does eventually lead to a big climax in E minor, before a restatement of the earlier material, also in that key.

But a sudden change of mood, marked ‘Svegliando’ (‘Waking up’ (!)), interrupts the reverie – a powerful, often canonic, development of that secondary theme returns to A minor (tellingly marked, in the light of the succeeding seven pieces, *poco a poco danzando*), before the coda arrives, and with it the final return of A minor and the first theme, a further reminiscence in those sixteen bars, of the Sonata’s opening ideas.

Medtner’s Eleventh Sonata also forms part of a cycle of pieces, his Opus 39, but almost ten years were to elapse before the composer’s Opus 53 was published, which comprises the broadly contemporaneous Twelfth and Thirteenth Sonatas – the *Sonata Romantica* in B flat minor and the *Sonata Minacciosa* in F minor.

The *Sonata Romantica* is dedicated to A.M. (Archibald Martin) Henderson, a Scottish-born pianist and teacher. Henderson, an exact contemporary of Medtner, was a pupil of Schwarzenka, Cortot and Widor, studying mainly in Berlin. Fluent in Russian, he translated and edited Russian church music for English choirs, and was responsible for ensuring that the premiere of this Sonata took place in Glasgow. The *Sonata Romantica* is on a far larger scale than the *Reminiscenza* yet considering the time in which it was composed, it too contains elements of reminiscence – not for Medtner the eruptive changes in musical fashion that had become all the rage in the 1920s: his new Sonata was to be ‘Romantic’ in various ways: from our perspective, more than 80 years after the work appeared, it may appear to be a statement of belief in the Romantic idiom, but the ‘romantic’ element may also be one spurred by a programmatic one, more so as Medtner was living in Paris at the time. A further clue is that the first movement is entitled ‘Romance’ – in French, of course, ‘Love song’ – but one that appears to be forever undermined by events that seek to disturb it.

Structurally, it is in four clearly delineated movements, but they play continuously, without a break, and the composer’s mastery of large-scale integration is wholly exceptional: for we have integration of pulse (predominantly triple-time), of related tonalities and of that ‘cross-thematicism’ such as we observed in the Opus 38 set (in that themes related to one another are threaded through the work’s movements). Much of the work is concerned with what one might term, despite its greater length, more intimate expression – no sudden ‘waking up’ here. But there is an underlying unease – exemplified in the remarkable Scherzo movement, which has a passage marked *piano, minaccioso* – (‘quiet, threatening’). This is to be the

named character of the work's bedfellow, Medtner's Thirteenth Sonata, the *Sonata minacciosa*, in F minor.

Running throughout Medtner's compositional life can be found an extended series of around forty short *Skazki* ('Tales'), perhaps a Russian equivalent of the series of Grieg's Lyric Pieces, but these are not 'fairy-tales', rather did Medtner take his inspiration from a variety of sources. None the less, they are of great significance in the composer's output, and occasionally appeared to inspire, or set off, a much larger work – hinted at, in the *Romantica*, by a quotation from an earlier *Skazka*, the first of his Opus 26: another self-evident 'reminiscence' in this composer's work.

The momentary 'threatening' aspect in the music of the *Romantica*'s Scherzo is taken a stage further – as we have suggested – in the Thirteenth. This is – as are the two other Sonatas in this recording – a magnificent composition, manifestly undeserving of the relative neglect into which much of Medtner's music has fallen. It is also in one movement, but less compartmentalised than its predecessor, although the individual episodes are clear enough. The opening gesture is immediately set before us: powerful, discursive, eruptive, with its 'threatening' implications both immediate and far-reaching. Here is a broad structure, the continuous-variation serving (as so often in Medtner's larger works) as being constantly-developmental as the music fearlessly explores the implications of that powerful opening idea.

Such rigour in compositional technique utterly gives the lie to Medtner being purely a 'romantic' composer. That artistic ethos may have been his starting-

point, but the masterly technique which he alone evolved is demonstrated in the remarkable fugal section – fully-worked, highly compelling, and which at its apogee triumphantly returns to the opening material – now vanquished and overcome: a threat no more. Medtner himself is reported to have described this work as 'My most contemporary composition, for it reflects the threatening atmosphere of contemporary events.' In this music, however, Medtner has triumphed.

The *Sonata minacciosa* is dedicated to Alexander Goedicke (1877-1957), Medtner's first cousin, whose father Fyodor was Medtner's first piano teacher.

Although Medtner's fourteen Piano Sonatas may be infrequently encountered, they yet constitute a major contribution to the genre by a Russian composer, comparable in significance with the ten mature Sonatas of Scriabin and the nine completed Sonatas of Prokofiev. As with the work of his older and younger contemporaries, Medtner's shorter solo piano pieces are even less often heard, which, in the case of *Ein Idyll*, the first of his *Drei Arabesken* (Three Arabesques), which dates from 1901 and was first published as part of the set (Opus 7) in 1904, has meant the unconscionable neglect of a true musical gem. Marked *Allegretto tranquillo e dolce*, the tempo indication is a perfect indicator of the mood of this study, which – perhaps more than any other self-contained miniature in Medtner's output – encapsulates the essence of his genius in refined and restrained composition, a rare creative artistry indeed.

Robert Matthew-Walker

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# ALESSANDRO TAVERNA

Born in Venice in 1983, Alessandro Taverna has already won numerous awards in international competitions, including in 2009 1st prize in the Minnesota International Piano Competition (leading to a prestigious American tour including his debut in New York City), 2nd prize in the London International Piano Competition (playing Chopin Concerto No 1 with James Judd and the London Philharmonic at the Royal Festival Hall: *The Independent* review of this performance mentioned his “magisterial account ... suffused with grave beauty. This Italian is remarkable ... 50 minutes of flawless poetry”) and Bronze Medal at the Leeds International Piano Competition (playing Chopin Concerto No 1 again with the Hallé under Sir Mark Elder). In September 2011 he won the Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli Prize awarded by the Eppan Piano Academy and he has recently received the Premio Giuseppe Sinopoli Prize.

He has performed through Europe and the US, including recitals in the Wigmore Hall, the Maggio Musicale in Florence, the Berlin Konzerthaus, the Fazioli Concert Hall, the Ottawa International Chamber Music Festival, the International Keyboard Festival in New York and the Centre d’Arts d’Orford in Quebec. He has also toured the major cities of South Africa. The prestigious Keyboard Trust has presented him in recitals in London, New York, Berlin and Hamburg and he opened the 2009/10 season of The Châteaubleau Foundation in Castleton, the Virginia estate of Lorin Maazel. As a result he was invited to perform the Third Piano Concerto by Prokofiev with Maestro Maazel and the Munich Philharmonic at the Vienna Musikverein in 2014. His success at the

Leeds Competition has led to many engagements throughout the UK including his debuts with the Royal Philharmonic, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Bournemouth Symphony and Scottish Chamber orchestras.

As well as his performances with the London Philharmonic and Hallé orchestras, he has worked with the Munich Philharmonic, Minnesota Orchestra, the Bucharest Philharmonic, the Chamber Orchestra Kremlin and the Salem Chamber Orchestra. A documentary on his life and his performances at the Leeds Piano Competition was shown on BBC-4. He has also recorded for BBC Radio 3, Radio Classica in Italy, Slovenian National Radio and Television and for Classic FM in South Africa.

He has studied with Sergio Perticaroli at the Santa Cecilia National Music Academy in Rome and with Arie Vardi at the Hochschule für Musik in Hannover. He was selected for the prestigious Lake Como Piano Academy where he had the opportunity to work with distinguished artists including Malcolm Bilson, Andreas Staier and Fou Ts’ong.

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