

# NIKOLAI MEDTNER (1880-1951)

*I repeat what I said to you back in Russia:  
you are, in my opinion, the greatest composer of our time.*  
Sergei Rachmaninov (1921)

*One of those composers who are classics in their lifetime.*  
Ernest Newman (1928)

In the history of Russian music Medtner is a forlorn figure. Despite the plaudits of eminent musicians and critics, and the sometimes fanatical enthusiasm of his devotees, it was Medtner's fate to remain undiscovered by the musical public at large and forgotten or ignored by all but a small band of enterprising performers. In recent years, however, his star seems at last to have begun to rise, and the present collection of works, built around one of his most substantial achievements- the cycle of fourteen piano sonatas, recorded here as an integral set for the first time-, eloquently demonstrates the particular strengths of a composer whose genius, in a more just world, would surely have long since been generally recognized.

Medtner's personality, the circumstances of a difficult life, the spirit of the times in which he lived and the particular nature of his art all contributed to the eclipse of a career which began with the greatest promise. One of the most brilliant piano pupils of the legendary Vasily Safonov at the Moscow Conservatoire (Alexander Scriabin and Josef Lhévinne were two others), Medtner graduated in 1900 with the institution's Gold Medal and in the same year won a honourable mention in the Anton Rubinstein Competition in Vienna. At this point, on the threshold of a potentially brilliant future as a concert pianist, he peremptorily renounced the career for which his upbringing had prepared him and instead, with the support of his mentor Taneyev, decided to devote himself to composition, an occupation he had practised since infancy but for which he had little formal training. Henceforth his occasional appearances on the concert platform would essentially be showcases for his own works.

Medtner readily found a publisher for his first compositions and in Russia, particularly in Moscow, began to build up a considerable following, his status confirmed by the award of the Glinka Prize in 1909 for three groups of Goethe songs and in 1916 for two of the piano sonatas (Op25 No2 and Op27). In the same period, before the outbreak of the First World War, two other great Moscow composer-pianists, who had graduated from the Conservatoire in the very year in which Medtner had enrolled there and who had already made reputations for themselves abroad, were reaching the peak of their popularity: Scriabin and Rachmaninov. Lacking the mystique of the one and popular appeal of the other, Medtner was from the first overshadowed; outside of Russia his music was virtually unknown.

Then came war and revolution. Unable to reconcile himself to the Bolshevik regime, in 1921 Medtner left Russia, returning only briefly six years later for a triumphant series of concerts. He settled first in Berlin and later in Paris, but made little impression in either capital. Although concert tours of North America in 1924/5 and 1929/30 aroused greater public interest, it was in Britain, which Medtner first visited in 1928, that he found the most responsive audiences outside his homeland and where, in 1935, he was to settle permanently. Throughout, undaunted by difficult, sometimes desperate, circumstances, he continued to pursue his mission as a composer with an almost religious dedication.

Just when Medtner was beginning to establish himself in his new surroundings, the outbreak of the Second World War brought fresh problems, for income from concerts and lessons and royalties from his German publisher both suddenly ceased. In 1940, with the blitz on London, he found sanctuary with friends in Warwickshire, but two years later he was struck down by

the first of a series of debilitating heart attacks, which all but brought to an end his concert career, though fortunately not his activity in the recording studio. His final years were brightened by the munificence of the Maharajah of Mysore, under whose patronage he was able to record many of his works for HMV- though even this enterprise proved in some respects to be ill-starred, for the recordings appeared in the dying years of 78s and, with the arrival of long-playing records, soon ceased to be available. None of them was reinstated in the domestic catalogue until recently, and the wider dissemination of his work was further hindered by the notorious elusiveness of copies of the sheet music.

The Medtner cause was not advanced by the composer's reputation as a prickly musical reactionary. As he made plain in his book *The Muse and the Fashion* (1935), an expression of his musical creed, he believed in eternal, God-given laws of art enshrined in the music of the masters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and above all in the immutable sovereignty of tonality and consonance. The works of his close contemporaries Schoenberg and Stravinsky, even of Reger and Strauss, he viewed as heretical perversions. Yet ironically, though not straying outside its bounds, Medtner employed traditional musical language in a recognizably personal and sometimes forward-looking way (as in his use of unusual metres and cross-rhythms) and his early compositions were stylistically fully abreast of the times. However, he came into the world fully-armed as a composer and, as this chronological selection of his works demonstrates, his style developed remarkably little throughout his career. Thus it became his fate, as time passed, to be marooned in a backwater by the maelstrom of twentieth-century musical history.

Medtner's musical personality was the product of two cultures: his profoundly Russian character and Moscow musical upbringing were tempered by the Teutonic intellectual inheritance of his family, immigrants from northern Europe several generations before him. Medtner admired Goethe no less than Pushkin; he loved Tchaikovsky but revered Beethoven and Wagner. If in spirit and not infrequently in idiom his music proclaims his Russian nationality, in matters of craftsmanship and musical design his roots can be traced back to the Austro-German classical masters.

As with Chopin and Alkan, the piano was the focus of Medtner's musical activity. All of his compositions not for piano solo- three concertos, a quintet, works for violin, and 106 published songs- nonetheless contain a part for the instrument. The fourteen piano sonatas, notwithstanding the claims of the better-known cycles by Scriabin (eight years Medtner's senior) and Prokofiev (eleven years his junior), are certainly numerically the largest and arguably the most interesting and musically satisfying contribution to the genre by any Russian. Extraordinarily varied in scale and mood, they reveal in their remarkable structural integrity a grasp of large-scale musical architecture possessed by few of the composer's compatriots. In this connection, a characteristically Medtnerian device is to demonstrate at the end of a sonata that all its themes, though apparently widely different, have a common origin.

Taneyev was astonished by Medtner's intuitive grasp of counterpoint and famously described him as being 'born with sonata form'. Both of these talents naturally find their fullest expression in the sonatas. The inexhaustible ingenuity with which the composer reveals different facets of his themes through their interplay has, to some, made his music seem unnecessarily complex or 'academic', but then Medtner is not for casual listening; his music has a density of thought that demands, and abundantly repays, the familiarity that comes from repeated hearing- the very privilege a recording confers.

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