Medtner

The Complete *Skazki* opp. 8, 9, 14, 20, 26, 31, no. 3, 34, 35, 42, 48, 51, 54 and *Skazka* '1915'

Hamish Milne *pf*

Hyperion CDA67491/2 (2 CDs, 157 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

The last 15 years or so have seen a notable upsurge of interest in the music of Nikolai Medtner (1880–1951), resulting in a steady stream of new recordings of his work. This development would undoubtedly have surprised the composer, who contended with widespread indifference to his music for much of his lifetime. Although he is now regarded as one of the last great Romantic composer-pianists, with gifts comparable to those of his close contemporaries Rachmaninoff and Skryabin, the growth of Medtner's posthumous reputation has been rather slow, even in his native Russia. Several factors account for this circumstance, which is deeply curious in view of the stature of his creative achievement. The recordings that Medtner made in his prime reveal him to have been a pianist of altogether exceptional abilities, possessing a consummate technique, a marvellously supple and vital sense of rhythm, a lucid intelligence and a rare communicative gift; and he was, moreover, a matchless interpreter of his own music. The composer's shy and rather retiring temperament, however, led him to regard the career of a touring virtuoso with disdain. Very early in his life, he decided that, if he was to play in public at all, he would only perform his own music and that of Beethoven – a composer for whose work he had a remarkable imaginative sympathy.[1] Unsurprisingly, his unwillingness to compromise in this respect made him a rather unattractive proposition for agents and concert managers, who were understandably nervous about his capacity to draw an audience without programming a familiar pot-boiler or two. He nonetheless managed to build up a considerable following in Russia before the Revolution, especially in Moscow, even though his public appearances were comparatively infrequent. His rare concerts abroad aroused little interest, however. Under these circumstances, it was naturally difficult for his work to make wider international headway.

Matters subsequently improved but little during his lifetime, and viewed from any perspective other than a purely artistic one, the remainder of Medtner's career is a rather depressing tale of material hardship, neglect and sheer bad luck. In 1921, he and his wife moved abroad, a decision prompted by their antipathy to the Bolshevik regime. As a result, his music fell under a

[1] Medtner kept several Beethoven sonatas in his repertoire and was especially renowned for his interpretation of the Fourth Piano Concerto. Sadly, he only recorded a single work by Beethoven – the *Appassionata* Sonata – in 1946, five years before his death. He was not entirely satisfied with the results, as he was in poor health when the recording was made and found it difficult to summon the physical stamina required to play for long periods. His reading is nonetheless deeply impressive, in spite of some minor imperfections: it was released on CD in 1998 by Appian Recordings and Publications (*The Complete Solo Piano Recordings of Nikolai Medtner: Vol. 1*, APR 5546).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800003268 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cloud of official disfavour in the USSR which was not to lift for many years.[2] The couple were to spend the next three decades until Medtner's death in 1951 living for the most part in very reduced circumstances, largely dependent on the generosity of friends and admirers. They initially settled in Berlin, but Medtner experienced difficulty in securing concert engagements in Germany and, even more dispiritingly, found that his music was regarded with condescension as being stylistically outmoded in the post-war musical climate, with the rise of atonality, serialism and other 'progressive' idioms. Rachmaninoff, who was a staunch friend of Medtner's and greatly esteemed his talent, helped to organize a concert tour of America in 1924–25, after which Medtner decided to settle in Paris and try his luck there. Life in the French capital proved to be no easier than it had been in Berlin and for another decade he and his wife eked out a precarious hand-to-mouth existence. These experiences undoubtedly intensified his growing sense of overwhelming artistic isolation. His acute lack of sympathy with most manifestations of musical modernism found eloquent expression in his book *Muza i moda* (The Muse and Fashion) in 1935, an extended polemic in which he expounded his own creative aesthetic, emphasizing the importance for composers of maintaining a living connection with tradition and the musical past rather than blindly submitting to the dictates of fashion.[3] Its publication passed almost unnoticed. Only in England did his music and his appearances as a performer meet with a more enthusiastic reception and on the strength of this the Medtners eventually moved to London in 1935, settling in Golders Green. Here, the composer managed to support himself for a time through a mixture of private teaching and occasional concert appearances and radio broadcasts, but he was once again fated to be unlucky. With the outbreak of war in 1939, the slender trickle of royalties from his German publishers dried up, demand for private lessons ceased and concert life virtually came to a halt. To make matters worse, the composer suffered a serious heart attack in 1942 from which he took a long time to recuperate. By this point, the couple were wholly reliant on the generosity of friends. Medtner's final years, though clouded by ill-health, were cheered by a long overdue piece of good fortune. In 1946, the Maharajah of Mysore helped to found a Medtner Society and sponsored the production of a series of recordings for EMI, which enabled the composer to commit to disk his performances of many of his most important works, as well as a considerable number of shorter pieces. This project was realized just in time, as Medtner's formidable pianistic powers were beginning to wane on account of his increasing physical frailty. Sadly, his habitual poor luck also haunted this project: with the change-over from the production of 78s to long-playing records, which took place shortly after his recordings were published, they quickly disappeared from the catalogues, with the result that they were not as effective in bringing his music to wider awareness as they might otherwise have been.

While this combination of circumstances goes a long way towards explaining the comparative neglect that Medtner suffered, a further explanation lies in the

[2] For official Soviet attitudes to Medtner's music, see, for example, Dmitri Paperno, *Notes of a Moscow Pianist* (Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1998): 52 and 80. Medtner was reviled during the infamous campaign against musical 'formalism' inaugurated by Andrei Zhdanov in 1948 and, as Paperno points out, his posthumous rehabilitation in the USSR came about largely through the courageous advocacy of his work by Emil Gilels.

[3] Nikolai Karlovich Metner, *Muza i moda* (Paris: Izdatel'stvo 'Vozrozhdeniye', 1935; reprint London: YMCA Press, 1978).

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nature of the music itself. Unlike Rachmaninoff's keyboard works (or his earlier ones, at any rate), Medtner's music does not generally have an immediate surface appeal and sometimes requires repeated listenings before one can establish a rapport with its highly elusive emotional world. Even of itself, this represented a formidable obstacle for many contemporary listeners, as Medtner's contemporary Nikolai Myaskovsky, who was an ardent admirer of his work, acknowledged in a perceptive essay published in the Moscow periodical *Muzïka* in 1913. The root cause of Medtner's comparative unpopularity, in Myaskovsky's view, was that Medtner made so few concessions to his audience. For one thing, his music, though often technically demanding, does not generally feature obvious displays of virtuosity, with the result that listeners who approach it in the expectation of hearing brilliant pianistic effects are inevitably disappointed by what Myaskovsky described as its *beskrasochnost'* and *nezhivopisnost'* – roughly, its lack of external vividness and overtly picturesque qualities.[4] But, as he went on to point out, for listeners who are willing to approach it on its own terms, Medtner's art can prove deeply rewarding: Myaskovsky drew attention to its rich expressivity and technical subtlety, praising Medtner's unobtrusive contrapuntal mastery and his highly developed sense of form.

The three dozen or so pieces that Medtner composed between 1905 and 1932 and to which he gave the title *Skazki*, amply bear out Myaskovsky's contention, as they are undoubtedly amongst the finest late representatives of the Romantic keyboard miniature. Medtner's title can be most accurately translated as 'tales' or 'folk tales': the common English rendering as 'fairy tales' is rather unfortunate, as it might lead listeners to expect music of a rather twee and sentimental cast – which is, in fact, anything but the case. (Only one or two of the pieces – such as 'Dance of the Elves' op. 48, no. 2 – have descriptive subtitles suggesting an evocation of the supernatural.) While some of these pieces are cheerful and light-hearted, others are deeply tinged with melancholy and, in a few cases, are pervaded by an ominous mood of latent violence. Indeed, the *Skazki* are impressively varied in scope and mood. Formally, they range from the simplest of lyrical miniatures lasting a mere three pages such as the wistful 'Narrante a piacere' op. 26, no. 3, to much more elaborate pieces such as the impressive 'Dance Tale' op. 48, no. 1, which is virtually a small-scale tone-poem. Their emotional range is equally diverse, from the delightfully witty 'March of the Paladin' op. 14, no. 2, to the imposing, sombre grandeur of 'La campanella' op. 20, no. 2 or the tumultuous op. 35, no. 4, an evocation of the storm on the heath that occurs in *King Lear*. The level of imaginative inventiveness is consistently high throughout, and from a compositional standpoint the *Skazki* abound in interesting subtleties. Apart from the freshness and piquancy of Medtner's very individual harmonic language, many of the *Skazki* are also notable for their remarkably irregular phrase structure and rhythmic intricacy, exploring as they do all manner of sophisticated metrical displacements and unusual cross-rhythms.

As a result, these pieces require a highly developed musical understanding on the part of the pianist if they are to be successfully realized in performance, as well as a refined control of the instrument. Very little of their fragile beauty and elusive imaginative world will be conveyed in superficial or thoughtless

[4] Nikolai Myaskovsky, 'N. Metner: Vpechatleniya ot ego tvorcheskogo oblika' (N. Medtner: Impressions of his Artistic Personality), *Muzïka*, 119 (1913); reprinted in S. Shlifshtein, ed., *N. Ya. Myaskovskiy: Sobranie materialov v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 'Muzyka', 1964): 11–25; 115.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800003268 Published online by Cambridge University Press

readings, and in the experience of the present writer, it is all too easy for them to sound dull and unremarkable under the hands of insensitive players. Fortunately, Hamish Milne, who is a noted Medtner specialist, brings to this music the right qualities of sympathy and engagement, and some of the performances recorded here are very persuasive indeed. From a purely pianistic point of view, Milne's playing is especially notable for its wide range of tone colour and the limpid *jeu perlé* of his passage work in soft dynamics – an accomplishment displayed most impressively, perhaps, in the exquisite *skazka* op. 42, no. 2, subtitled 'Phrygian Mode'. On the other hand, Milne surmounts the technical difficulties of the more robust and extravert *skazki* with assurance and considerable élan. Although one might have reservations about his interpretative approach in one or two instances (the infectious 'March of the Paladin', for example, is taken at what seems a rather cautious tempo and, in the opinion of the present writer, at least, Milne's account does not altogether capture its sly wit and or convey its headlong rhythmic exuberance), these recordings are nonetheless a noteworthy achievement and can be warmly recommended to listeners seeking a sympathetic introduction to this marvellous music.

Patrick Zuk
Durham University

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800003268 Published online by Cambridge University Press