

- ESSAY -

## Nicolas Medtner: An Honorary British Composer?

*Exploring interlinked connections between Russian music and Britain*

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Independent

You will see ... that clearly they [the British audiences] value me more here than in any other foreign country, and therefore our coming over to England was essential.

Nicolas Medtner: letter to his brother Emil, 22 February 1936.

2021 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Russian composer-pianist Nicolas Medtner, who had lived in Britain since 1935. A pianist in the great Russian tradition, Medtner had a significant influence on British pianism: first, through his teaching – a legacy passed on to, among many, my own piano teacher of the 1980s, Edna Iles, some of whose recordings are available on CD.<sup>1</sup> Second, all of Medtner's own gramophone recordings were made in London between 1930 and 1947 and his recital and concerto appearances were well attended and well reviewed – they are known to have left a profound impression on many for years afterwards. This essay is written in honour of the anniversary, and to pay tribute to what I learned from my own teacher.

Nikolai (Karlovich) Medtner was born in Moscow on Christmas Eve, 1879 (old style); 5 January 1880 (new style). His family were of Russian-Danish-German extraction. His older brother Emil was a writer, and leader of the Moscow Symbolists and the Wagner cult in Russia; a younger brother, Alexander, was a violinist and conductor. Nikolai showed exceptional musical ability from the start, telling his teacher Alexander Goedicke that he did not want 'children's music' – insisting on Bach, Beethoven, and other great masters. His first published piano work, '*Stimmungsbilder*' ('Mood Pictures'), opus 1, appeared when he was only 16, revealing a distinctive and individual voice which continued to evolve till the end of

his life – particularly in the gradual perfection of one-movement extended-sonata form as manifest in several of his 14 piano sonatas, as well as his First and Third Piano Concertos; this formal fingerprint is arguably his greatest contribution to twentieth-century musical thought. Receiving his piano training from Paul Pabst, Vassily Sapelnikov, and Vasily Safonov at the Moscow Conservatory, Medtner's pianistic skills were soon winning top prizes. For composition, he sought advice from Sergei Taneyev, who described him as 'born with sonata form'. Medtner nevertheless chose to drop out of Taneyev's class and to remain essentially a self-taught composer.

In 1908, Medtner was invited to teach piano at the Conservatory, but resigned in 1910 to devote himself to composition. In the same year, the Sonata in G minor, opus 22 was published: the work is a novel example of an organic piano sonata in one movement of that era and a great advance on Liszt's Sonata in B minor of 1854. The Liszt contains four sections linked into a one-movement format by its development of themes; the central section in F-sharp major contains *an entirely new theme* not connected to the opening material. Medtner's G minor Sonata is different: its opening thematic material constantly grows and transforms, so that by the middle section (in F minor), a new theme section is created out of a rigorously transformed version of the opening idea.

Allegro assai  $\text{♩} = 72$

The image shows a musical score for the first two staves of a piano piece. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked 'Allegro assai' with a quarter note equal to 72 beats per minute. The first measure of the top staff has a dynamic marking of 'mp'. The first measure of the bottom staff has a fingering instruction 'Red \* Red \* Red'. The second measure of the bottom staff has a fingering instruction 'Red'. The third measure of the bottom staff has a fingering instruction 'Red'. The fourth measure of the bottom staff has a fingering instruction 'Red'. The fifth measure of the bottom staff has a dynamic marking of 'p' and a fingering instruction 'Red'. The sixth measure of the bottom staff has a fingering instruction 'Red'.

Ex. 1a: Medtner, Sonata in G minor, opus 22 (1910), bb. 8-13.

**Interludium**  
Andante lugubre ♩ = 42

Ex. 1b: Medtner, Sonata in G minor, opus 22 (1910), bb. 196-200.

Next to his most well-known *Skazki*, or *Tales* (*‘Legends’*); not *Fairy Tales* – a misleading title),<sup>2</sup> the Sonata in G minor has always been Medtner’s most widely-played work. In 1961 Harold Truscott wrote the following in *The Music Review*:

This Sonata is one of the outstandingly original large-scale twentieth-century achievements in music. Its handling of every aspect of its language is bold with the assurance of genius. Its language is that of Medtner’s classical and romantic predecessors, but at every point he is doing with the certainty of complete achievement things which had never been done in this field before, and he is using these things as the right and natural means of expressing what he has to say. The unity of the whole structure is evident at a single hearing [...]. The unusual features which help to make that structure give the work a permanence one only, as a rule, associates with the tried classics. This music is outside fashion; it will always be there, and will always be ready to yield a little more of its secret. But it will never have given everything.<sup>3</sup>

Medtner married Anna Bratenshi in 1919, but they were not enthusiastic about the Russian Revolution of 1917: the family business had been taken over by the State without compensation. The couple opted to stay for as long as they could, but as the regime became more oppressive, they decided to leave in 1921. From then until 1927 they stayed in Germany—partly because Medtner had found an important publisher there (Julius Heinrich Zimmermann)—but then subsequently moved to France, remaining until 1935. During this time, both Medtner’s music and piano playing were becoming more widely appreciated – particularly in America, where Rachmaninov helped to organise a successful concert tour in 1925. The *Musical*

*Courier* reported of Medtner's debut recital in New York's Town Hall on 13 November:

It quickly became evident that one was in the presence of genuine greatness [...]. It was quite obvious that the audience was generally thrilled, and there were expressions of wonder that this man's works were not better known in America. The answer is, that art that never descends below the highest classical standards and never deals either with trivialities nor the highly obvious has a longer way to go to popular recognition than that of a simpler and more ephemeral nature. Medtner is one of the world's great classic masters, and it is to be hoped that America will realize it.<sup>4</sup>

The Medtner's sojourn in France was made possible through the support of Marcel Dupré (composer, and eventually organist at St Sulpice, Paris), who found for them an attractive apartment in the Meudon district from where Medtner was able to teach the piano – Dupré's daughter Marguerite being one of his students. Despite this much-appreciated assistance, recognition in France as a composer was slow. In 1935, there came the opportunity to move to London.

But there is a lot more background as to how and why the Medtner's came to Britain. First is a feature about Medtner by Ernest Newman in the January 1915 edition of the *Musical Times*, and in the following year, two of Medtner's works were featured in Book 6 of J. and W. Chester's 'Educational Series of Russian Music' edited by Annie T. Weston, which introduced my teacher to this music. Then in 1922 Hamilton Harty received a letter from Rachmaninov, recommending Medtner as both pianist and composer.<sup>5</sup> Harty took Rachmaninov's advice seriously and in 1928, Medtner was invited to Manchester to play his Piano Concerto no. 2 in C minor, opus 50, for the Hallé's seventy-first Season. (The work is dedicated to Rachmaninov.) After a very successful two-piano rehearsal—Medtner not perhaps realising that Harty was not only a composer himself but also an excellent pianist—Anna Medtner described Harty in her diary as '... a splendid musician and charming person', who 'accompanied magnificently' – hearing him say more than once that '[Medtner] is the greatest of the living composers'.<sup>6</sup>

After the concert on 22 November, Neville Cardus' very substantial review of the concert devoted a sizeable portion to Medtner's performance. The final section,

which assesses the Concerto, gives an impression of how Medtner's music was perceived at the time:

... It [the Concerto] is indeed a thoroughly conservative work for a modern Continental composer. We had been led by reports from London to find the composer not a little austere in his ideas. On the contrary, there was no small amount of 'Pianist's music' in the work — refined but elaborate figuration. In the charming second movement we even got a whiff of the scented salon. But after listening to the Concerto for a while, with our ears intent on the melodic or thematic material, we were compelled to change our point of view. The really distinguished parts of the work are surely its rhythmical changes and contrasts. Here is a Russian composer for whom rhythm is not an elemental affair [...]. Medtner's rhythms are not to be considered as a convention of accents; they are subtler, more flexible than that. Delicacy and variety are their very spice; perhaps a closer acquaintance with the Concerto would reveal that Medtner's rhythm has its system of recurring stresses; last night it struck us as a thing ordered intuitively by a highly cultivated mind which thinks out its music primarily in terms of delicate changes and combinations of energy. The orchestra played its part well enough, but another rehearsal might have lent to the instrumentation something of the pianist's sensibility of touch. Medtner writes no merely 'effective' passages for his orchestra; his scoring is thick, almost without colour or light. Yet here again, rhythm keeps everything vital and organic. The work defies summing up after a solitary hearing; it tells eloquently of a rare musical culture and of a personal attitude to the great musical traditions. *It is musician's music* [italics mine] — perhaps, at bottom, pianist's music. And, after all, a piano concerto ought to be that.<sup>7</sup>

But this was not Medtner's first British appearance that year. Following an invitation from Tatiana Makushina, a London-based Russian soprano, Medtner gave his debut recital at the Aeolian Hall on 16 February 1928; some of his songs were included in the event. As plans took shape and word got around, Medtner secured further engagements: these include a reception in his honour at the Royal Academy of Music, a BBC recital, and two concert appearances with London music clubs. The Aeolian Hall concert created a sensation with the public. Anna's diary notes:

Yesterday our thoughts went back to Moscow. The way in which they greeted and received each piece and constantly demanded repetitions was such that for some minutes I thought, no, this was not London, it couldn't be that this was all taking place in an unfamiliar foreign place, where Kolya [Anna's nickname for

her husband] was appearing for the first time. The warm welcome, the deathly silence during the performance, had so good an effect on Kolya that he played altogether exceptionally *and in a way that even for me was new* [italics mine]. The ovation was such that all the organisers, the manager of the hall and then all the people who crowded into the artist's room said that such a storm of enthusiasm was unknown here. Many people did not get in. It was a sell-out to the last seat. For this was entirely unexpected, because we were unaware that Kolya was known here so well. He got a heap of letters with greetings, expressions of thanks, requests to meet and so on.<sup>8</sup>

Among the audience who greeted Medtner backstage afterwards was distinguished pedagogue Tobias Matthay who, full of admiration, kissed Medtner's hand! Strangely, this enthusiasm does not seem have extended to the *The Times'* somewhat sniffy critic, who wrote:

It was as pianist rather than as composer that we have found M. Medtner interesting. We have often wondered why his works have attained the reputation they have; when he plays them himself the question is answered. He knows exactly how to present his own work to an audience, how to turn what may look dull in the written notes and sound ordinary in less skilful hands into a thing of perfect grace and well-moulded outline.<sup>9</sup>

More intelligent critics such as Ernest Newman could write with more perception, such as the following excerpt from a review of a similar London recital given later:

[...] Yet not only is the hall crowded, but everyone stays to the end of a long programme; and one is astonished at the number of young men and women in the audience, and the obvious keenness with which they listen. The only conclusions we can come to are that Medtner's piano works must have had a larger amateur clientele than one had imagined [...] for Medtner is one of those composers who are classics in their lifetime. He does what every notable composer has done – takes the current language of music, impresses his own personality on it, extends its vocabulary, and modifies its grammar to suit his own ends, and then gets on with the simple business of saying what he thinks in the clearest terms possible.<sup>10</sup>

The RAM Reception took place on 24 February; Medtner and Makushina gave a trimmed-down version of the Aeolian Hall programme. The Principal – J. B. McEwen

– turned pages, and Sir Henry Wood gave the final address. Afterwards, Medtner was made an Honorary Member. Among the professors present were York Bowen and Benjamin Dale, both of whom were strong advocates of Medtner’s music – Bowen had the G minor Sonata in his repertoire and Dale remained a sympathetic friend until his own death in 1943.<sup>11</sup> Another Academician, Dora Bright, corresponded with Medtner, the contents of which (now in the Library of Congress) expressed the artistic ideals she valued in his work.<sup>12</sup>

Earlier, I referred to Medtner’s gramophone recordings. Although he is known only for those released in 1936, 1946 and 1947, he did undertake some trial recordings for Columbia from 31 March to 1 April 1930 in the Central Hall, Westminster, and in Petty France during February 1931. They were not issued, to Medtner’s great disappointment - he appeared not to have realised that he was only being regarded as a guinea pig for the testing of two different electronic recording processes! Fortunately, a sizeable number of the test-pressings survive, revealing a fire and intensity in Medtner’s playing, giving them the edge on many of the later recordings. In recent years they have been issued commercially.<sup>13</sup>

Medtner’s 1930 visit featured the British premiere of the Sonata in E minor, opus 25, number 2, his largest single-movement piano solo. This took place in Liverpool on 6 March. It was well received for a work which takes over thirty minutes to perform and a feat of performer and audience endurance. Further premieres took place on 20 March at the Aeolian Hall, these being his *Second Improvisation*, opus 42 (in the form of variations) and the Violin Sonata no. 2 in G, opus 44. The latter was performed with May Harrison who, afterward, continued to champion the work. Taking a more personal interest in British composers, especially since the RAM reception, the Medtners attended the world premiere of Arnold Bax’s Third Symphony on 14 March, performed in a BBC Symphony Concert at Queen’s Hall. They met the composer during the interval and according to Anna’s diary her husband regarded Bax as ‘much better than Stravinsky or even Richard Strauss’.<sup>14</sup>

In 1931, he visited Scotland, where he gave a successful performance of Piano Concerto no. 2 with the Scottish Orchestra (conducted by Robert Heger) at St Andrew’s Hall on 3 February. Two days later, he gave a solo recital, which featured

the world premiere of *Sonata Romantica* (opus 53, number 1), which I consider as one of his greatest works. Medtner had been invited to Glasgow by the Scottish composer-pianist Erik Chisholm, whose Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music was founded in 1930 with Medtner among the composers listed as Honorary Vice-Presidents.<sup>15</sup> Both concerts were favourably reviewed in *The Scotsman*, but the second performance of *Sonata Romantica*, given during a recital in St Andrews University the next day, attracted a more enthusiastic review in *The Dundee Courier* of 20 February. It was described as

... an entirely new work [...]. It showed that as a composer he [Medtner] has a very sensitive and highly developed intellectuality. The movements were Romanza, Scherzo, Interlude and Finale. All were woven together with fine craftsmanship and a rich texture; the execution was again brilliant.

During this visit, he ordered that the portraits adorning the walls of the hall be taken down, as he found them unnerving!

Whilst in England from January till February 1935, the Medtners stayed with Mikhail Braikevitch – erstwhile Mayor of Odessa, and an old friend. An architect by profession, Braikevitch was, at that time, involved in the building of a housing estate in Golders Green, north London. Despite the friendship and encouragement of Dupré, the Medtners were becoming less and less happy with life in Paris, so when Braikevitch offered them a house on low rent at Wentworth Road,<sup>16</sup> they were pleased to accept, moving to London in early October. It turned out to be their best move yet, for in 1936 Nicolas wrote to his brother Emil as follows:

You will see [from the reviews] that clearly they value me more here than in any other foreign country, and therefore our coming over to England was essential.

From 1936 onwards, his entire output was composed in Britain. *Sonata-Idylle*, opus 56, was completed in October 1937, and became the first work to be published in London (by Novello); Zimmermann (later Wilhelm Zimmermann) would continue to be his European publisher. Both movements of the work are in G major, and approachable from a technical standpoint. In contrast, Violin Sonata no. 3 in E minor, opus 57 ('Epica') of 1938 is a more ambitious work: in four movements, it

plays for over 35 minutes and is dedicated to the memory of his brother, Emil, who died in July 1936.

Both the Violin Sonata and *Sonata-Idylle* received their world premieres in the Aeolian Hall on 10 February 1939, the violinist being Arthur Catterall, who also championed Medtner's violin sonatas. In his comprehensive biography of the composer, Barrie Martyn comments on the work and its premiere as follows:

The audience, which included the pianists Moiseiwitsch and Egon Petri, greeted the work with great enthusiasm, responding to qualities which surely make it one of the great violin sonatas: a nobility and profundity of ideas, masterly structure, a violin part fully exploiting the potential of the instrument and taxing the musicality, technique and stamina of a virtuoso, and piano writing which never dominates but always complements a partnership of musical equals. However, the work's publication by Novello's at the beginning of 1940 could hardly have come at a less opportune moment in history, so helping to ensure that this masterpiece would suffer the seemingly pre-ordained Medtnerian fate of neglect and obscurity.<sup>17</sup>

In 1930, Edna Iles introduced herself to the composer after an Aeolian Hall concert which took place on 20 March.<sup>18</sup> She had previously written to him, having given the British premiere of his Piano Concerto no. 1 in C minor, opus 33, with the City of Birmingham Orchestra conducted by Adrian Boult on 16 February that year. This led to an extended period of lessons, starting in Paris in 1934, then in London until the late 1940s. Born in 1905, Edna was the only daughter of Herbert Iles (a successful industrialist) and his wife Amy; they lived in Moseley, Birmingham. Having given her first recital for wartime charities in 1915, aged 10, she made her Wigmore Hall debut in 1920, aged 16, playing Liszt's Sonata in B minor. At 17, she was the first native British pianist to give the British premiere of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto no. 3 in D minor with the City of Birmingham Orchestra conducted by Appleby Matthews in 1921. With large-scale works such as Benjamin Dale's Sonata in D minor, opus 1, and Bax's Sonata no. 2 in G already in her repertoire, she was more than equipped (both technically and intellectually) to tackle Medtner's large-scale Piano Concerto no. 1.

However, the connection between the Ileses and the Medtners was to take a more significant turn when the Second World War broke out, forcing the cancellation of a performance of Piano Concerto no. 2 with the City of Birmingham Orchestra which had been scheduled for December 1939. Despite the so-called 'phoney war', the possibility of bombing raids on London was a serious possibility: Medtner had suffered pneumonia attacks in the past and his doctor had forbidden any stays in bomb shelters. During a visit to the Ileses in the summer of 1940, the Medtners expressed their concerns; it was therefore agreed that if conditions in London became worse, they should close up their London home and stay with the Ileses *en famille* until things improved. Considering himself and his family at risk due to their home's close proximity to the Central Electricity Generating Board, Herbert Iles took the initiative of renting a house in Wythall, a countryside village seven miles to the south of Birmingham. By this time, Medtner had already completed one out of two pieces for two pianos: *Russian Round Dance*, opus 58, number 1 (which is dedicated to Edna Iles), and during this Birmingham and Wythall period he completed the second piece, titled *Knight Errant* (opus 58, number 2), as well as *Two Elegies*, opus 59 - the latter is one of the most profound and beautiful of the late works. He had also started on Piano Concerto no. 3 in E minor, opus 60 ('Ballade'), which would be brought to completion in Warwickshire when the Iles family, with the Medtners in tow, moved in February 1941 to Foreign Park, a sizeable house situated a mile from Wootton Wawen.

Life at Foreign Park took on a regular routine: Edna assisted Medtner with his English by them reading aloud together from the classics, particularly Shakespeare, the Brontës, Dickens, Galsworthy, J. M. Barrie, and George Bernard Shaw. Herbert Iles had a studio built on the property for Edna to practise without disturbing the composer's working schedule. Their solitary existence was broken by some very welcome visitors, including Benno Moiseiwitsch, who sought Medtner's advice regarding the forthcoming premiere recording of the Sonata in G minor, opus 22, which took place in London in March 1943. Other visitors included the conductor and composer Lawrance Collingwood of Sadler's Wells Opera and EMI, and Anthony

Bernard, the Musical Director of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Concerto no. 3 ('Ballade'), opus 60, was finished at Foreign Park in February 1942 in a version for two pianos,<sup>19</sup> and Edna was allowed to study the solo part in advance so as to assist the composer to hear the work in that form. Coronary attacks in the autumn of that year interrupted the orchestration process, though this was completed in the summer of 1943, by which time his health had sufficiently improved for them to return to their London home on 20 April.

Back home, Medtner was able to resume with his work, despite the sadness of losing many friends and supporters in that year.<sup>20</sup> On 12 October, he played for Myra Hess' Wartime Concerts in the National Gallery, for which he was joined by Oda Slobodskaya in some of his songs. In addition, Edna Iles played three of the *Skazki*. Six days earlier, they had given a private performance of Concerto no. 3 ('Ballade') at Hess' home in Hampstead – Moiseiwitsch turning pages for Medtner, Hess for Iles. The Royal Philharmonic Society had already agreed to present the world premiere in the Royal Albert Hall with Adrian Boult as conductor on 19 February 1944. The performance was a success, and the composer was recalled three times, but despite the great enthusiasm of Kaikhosru Sorabji in the *New English Weekly* of 2 March, other critics rose only to the height of 'pleasing' (*Daily Telegraph*), 'logical and well-knit' (*Sunday Times*), or even 'humdrum' (*The Times*). Nevertheless, Medtner gave a repeat performance in a benefit concert for the Joint Committee for Soviet Aid on 5 June. In 1951, the Concerto was published by Wilhelm Zimmermann, bearing a dedication to the Maharaja of Mysore, whose financial munificence had enabled important works to be recorded commercially for the HMV 'Medtner Society' three-volume collection, issued between 1946 and 1947.

Meanwhile, there remained the question of who would be next to take up the Concerto. Benno Moiseiwitsch honoured his promise to perform the work and did so – firstly with George Weldon and CBSO in Birmingham Town Hall on 5 August 1945, and then with Basil Cameron during the 1946 Proms season. But in January and March 1946 Edna Iles played all three concertos in three concerts at the Royal

Albert Hall, performing with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by George Weldon. Iles and Weldon repeated the First Concerto at the Royal Albert Hall in December 1946 with the Philharmonia Orchestra, who were subsequently engaged by HMV to record all three concertos, with Medtner as soloist and Issay Dobrowen conducting the Second and Third Concertos. Medtner requested that Weldon be engaged to conduct the First because he had gained much experience conducting it (as well as the Second) with Edna Iles and the CBSO.

On New Year's Day 1946, Medtner and Arthur Alexander gave the premiere of *Russian Round Dance* and *Knight Errant* (which were both published by Augener that year) during a BBC studio concert of his music. On 2 June, Medtner made his last public appearance with another two-piano event, this time with Benno Moiseiwitsch in the Cambridge Theatre, London. In 1948, Medtner received his British naturalisation papers, having not been to the Soviet Union since his last concert tour in 1927.

Medtner's late period is concluded by Eight Songs, opus 61, composed between 1945 and 1951, setting texts by Eichendorff, Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tyutchev. But, by far the most important work from this period is the Piano Quintet in C, opus posth. The Quintet has an interesting history, having taken 44 years to compose. The first movement was completed between 1904 and 1905, followed by a sketch of the finale shortly afterwards. It was only around 1945 that inspiration suddenly came to complete the work. A strong religious basis underlies the work – each movement bears quotations from scripture, and contains the *Dies Irae* and the Russian Orthodox Easter chant. The work's completion on 23 November 1948 was a heavy drain on Medtner's health; two weeks later, he suffered another heart attack. 16 months later, he eventually felt well enough to record the Quintet with the Aeolian Quartet for the BBC on 11 May 1950.<sup>21</sup>

He was not well enough, however, to give the first public performance of the work on 6 November 1950 in Kingsway Hall, asking Colin Horsley<sup>22</sup> to play it as part of the composer's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday concert given by Oda Slobodskaya, Manoug Parikian, Ernest Lush and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Altogether, 14 songs were sung, either in the German original, with the Russian text translated into English by Henry

Drinker, Edna Iles using Anna Medtner's literal translations. In October 1951, shortly before his death, Medtner confided to a friend:

I think my present solitude is necessary to prepare myself to enter the other world. One should have time, before dying, to think about death; one should accept it, and even desire it.<sup>23</sup>

Medtner died just before 5am on 13 November; his funeral (Russian Orthodox), took place on 16 November. He is buried in Hendon Cemetery. Medtner's remains have never been re-interred in Russia, but in 1958, Anna was invited to return to Moscow with the promise of a state pension and the task of overseeing and approving the 12 volumes that constitute the Soviet Medtner Complete Edition. This was achieved by the time she died in 1965.

How does one assess Medtner's legacy? Does it influence British composers in any way? Unlike the popular appeal of his friend and supporter Rachmaninov, Medtner's music requires more concentration from performers and listeners. In addition, his music needs to be *understood*, especially by performers. An early enthusiast, the conductor and composer Clarence Raybould, wrote the following:

I had not understood in my younger days why Medtner's music was unjustly and strangely neglected. I have found out during my mature years why this was so, and I am convinced that it was, and still is, on account of the *comparatively poor rhythmic sensitivity of many otherwise well-equipped performers* [italics mine]. The very essence of Medtner's music is a curiously subtle sensitivity to rhythmic change and flow, and I fear this is sadly lacking, as it probably always was. Anyone wishing to master the composer's many problems must have a sense of something more complicated than the ordinary three-against-two, though even that elementary flow is not properly grasped by the majority of young performers!<sup>24</sup>

Arthur Alexander highlighted some distinctive qualities of Medtner's playing:

Now, in my experience, no one has equalled Medtner in the extraordinary *musical* clarity of his playing, particularly in crowded and complex music in the lower registers of the piano [...]. Moreover, he possessed to an acute degree the rare power of colouring melodically passages that in the hands of others remained mere notes, and his subtleties of nuance and pedal were

unforgettable [...]. But above all, [Medtner's] playing throughout was *imbued to a remarkable degree with such strongly individual rhythm* [italics mine] that, without seeing him, one could always have named the performer's identity.<sup>25</sup>

But what of Medtner's influence as a composer? Helpful comparisons can be made if one studies the works of York Bowen and Benjamin Dale. Firstly, Bowen, Dale, Bax, and others who were students at the RAM in the 1900s were strongly influenced by Russian romanticism, particularly in the piano repertoire. An example is the coda of Bax's Piano Sonata no. 1 with its Russian bells, directly inspired by Bax's journey to Russia in 1910 in pursuit of an elusive *femme fatale*. Also important are the strong Russian preferences of the young Henry Wood, who introduced that repertoire as conductor of the Proms. He maintained a close connection to the RAM, and his first wife was a Russian singer with whom he made several gramophone recordings. Secondly, I referred earlier to Medtner's command of extensive thematic development. As a comparison, I would suggest that one studies Dale's masterpiece, the Violin Sonata in E, opus 11, which dates from 1922 – roughly contemporary with Medtner's Violin Sonata no. 2 in G, opus 44 (1925). The organic evolution of themes throughout the work, its structural distinction and the large imaginative canvas Dale presents makes for an important comparison. The Sonata is not a one-movement work but an extended three-movement form in which the opening theme returns as the coda of this 35-minute work, conveying the impression of having taken one on a long journey, with many wonderful insights along the way (see Ex. 2a).

It is also worth highlighting the evolution of harmonic development by the 1900s. Chordal foundation had already reached the augmented 11<sup>th</sup> by this time, and was strongly apparent in all three RAM composers, particularly Dale's Piano Sonata in D minor, opus 1 (1905) which was premiered by Bowen at the Wigmore Hall that year. Such harmonic evolution was already a well established part of Medtner's style, characterised by the constant exploration of tonality – pushing and extending the boundaries while remaining loyal to his artistic credo. Dale does the same: see Ex. 2b and note how the violin holds the E firmly throughout, while the piano keeps pushing the harmonic boundaries against it.

# SONATA

To my wife

B.J.Dale Op. 11

*Lento espressivo* ♩ = 60

*p* *mp* *ten.* *mp* *p*

*ten.* *mp* *mp* *p*

*pochiss. rit.* (*A tempo*) *pp* *pochiss. rit.*

Ex. 2a: B. J. Dale, Sonata in E for Violin and Piano, opus 11 (1922), I: Lento espressivo, bb. 1-13.

Musical score for the first system (measures 1-5). The system includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line starts with a half note, followed by a quarter note, and then a half note. The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. Dynamics include *dim.*, *p*, *ppp*, and *p espress.*

Musical score for the second system (measures 6-10). The system includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line continues with a half note, followed by a quarter note, and then a half note. The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. Dynamics include *poco f*.

Musical score for the third system (measures 11-15). The system includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line starts with a half note, followed by a quarter note, and then a half note. The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. Dynamics include *pp*, *p (sonore)*, and *pp*.

Ex. 2b: B. J. Dale, Sonata in E for Violin and Piano, opus 11 (1922),  
I: Lento espressivo, bb. 160-165.

Other, more tantalising, similarities reveal themselves, as with this excerpt from York Bowen’s *Ballade no. 2* in A minor, opus 87, and the first movement of Medtner’s *Sonata-Ballade*, opus 27:



Ex. 3a: Medtner, *Sonata-Ballade*, opus 27 (1914), bb. 24-25.



Ex. 3b: Bowen, *Ballade no. 2* in A minor, opus 87 (published in 1931), bb. 42-44.

Medtner's *oeuvre* is continually being re-explored and championed by a growing number of pianists, several of whom have even tackled the complete works.<sup>26</sup> And so I wish to be optimistic that composers like him who—like many British composers of his period—form part of a perceived ‘maturing-of-tendencies’ tradition, will increasingly become part of the British mainstream tradition in future.

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he is the UK Music Executor/Trustee and founder of the Edgar Bainton (UK) Society. He is also a founder-Trustee of the Erik Chisholm Trust, and has recorded for the BMS (with violist Martin Outram), Dutton Epoch (with cellist Joseph Spooner) and more recently Oboe Classics (with Mark Baigent) for a CD of Rutland's Boughton's oboe works, released in 2017.

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- Holt, Richard, ed. *Nicolas Medtner: A Memorial Volume*. London: Dennis Dobson, 1955.
- Martyn, Barrie. *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995.
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- Purser, John. *Erik Chisholm, Scottish Modernist (1904-1965): Chasing a Restless Muse*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009.
- Truscott, Harold. "Medtner's Sonata in G minor, op. 22". *Music Review* 22, no. 2 (May 1961): 112-23.

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## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> *Edna Iles*, 6 vols., St-Laurent Studio, YSL 0210 78, YSL 0211 78, YSL 0212 78, YSL 0215 78, YSL 0262 78, YSL 0263 78, CDs, <http://78experience.com/welcome.php?mod=disques&collection=64>.
- <sup>2</sup> Medtner's preferred words were 'conte' in French, and 'Märchen' in German. Medtner's *Sonata-Skazka*, (opus 25, number 1) was called 'Sonata-Legend' by my teacher – a very appropriate alternative.
- <sup>3</sup> Harold Truscott, "Medtner's Sonata in G minor, op. 22", *Music Review* 22, no. 2 (May 1961): 122-23.
- <sup>4</sup> Press review, quoted in Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 168.
- <sup>5</sup> Sergei Rachmaninov, letter to Hamilton Harty, 28 June 1922, in *Hamilton Harty – His Life and Music*, edited by David Greer (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1978), 86.
- <sup>6</sup> Martyn, 196.
- <sup>7</sup> Neville Cardus, review of Medtner's Piano Concerto no. 2 in C minor, opus 50, [loose press cutting in my possession, possibly published in the *Manchester Guardian*, 23 November 1928].
- <sup>8</sup> Martyn, 191.
- <sup>9</sup> "Nicolas Medtner – First Appearance in London", *Times* (UK), 17 February 1928.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted in Ernest Newman, "Account of a London recital by Medtner", in *Nicolas Medtner: A Memorial Volume*, ed. Richard Holt (London: Dennis Dobson, 1955), 42.
- <sup>11</sup> In her 1943 obituary of B. J. Dale in the RAM Magazine, Dora Bright makes reference to the Medtner connection. I am grateful to Christopher Foreman for this information.

- <sup>12</sup> I am very grateful to Lesley Day – a MMus student at Canterbury Christ Church University who is currently working on a thesis on Edna Iles – for placing copies of the Medtner-Bright correspondence (and of others) at my disposal.
- <sup>13</sup> Details of the complete Medtner recordings (including those originally unissued) are as follows: Appian Publications & Recordings, APR 5546, APR 5547, APR 5548, CDs. St-Laurent Studio, YSL 0004 78, YSL 0005 78, YSL 0006 78, YSL 0007 78, YSL 0023 78, YSL 0024 78, YSL 0027 78, CDs, <http://78experience.com/welcome.php?mod=disques&collection=6>.
- <sup>14</sup> Martyn, 203.
- <sup>15</sup> John Purser, *Erik Chisholm, Scottish Modernist (1904-1965): Chasing a Restless Muse* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 19.
- <sup>16</sup> Number 69 now has a blue plaque on the front, commemorating Medtner's time spent there from 1935-51.
- <sup>17</sup> Martyn, 228-29.
- <sup>18</sup> Martyn, 203.
- <sup>19</sup> Medtner's pencil MSS of this version was presented to Edna Iles by the composer and is now part of the Edna Iles Collection in the British Library, London.
- <sup>20</sup> Among the composers closely associated with Medtner who died in 1943 were Rachmaninov and B. J. Dale, and the violinists Arthur Catterall and Rowsby Woof.
- <sup>21</sup> This recording is only featured in the St-Laurent Studio set of CDs (YSL 0027 78), not the APR series.
- <sup>22</sup> The New Zealand-born pianist Colin Horsley spent his entire career in the UK and after Medtner's death was asked by Anna Medtner to play her husband's Concerto no. 3 ('Ballade') at the Memorial Concert on 5 April 1952.
- <sup>23</sup> Quoted in Bernard Pinsonneault, *Nicolas Medtner: pianiste, compositeur: 1879-1951* (Montréal: Éditions Beauchemin, 1956), 101.
- <sup>24</sup> Like note 10, these two quotes are taken from contributions to Holt, ed., *Nicolas Medtner: A Memorial Volume*, (London: Dennis Dobson, 1955).
- <sup>25</sup> See note 21.
- <sup>26</sup> These include Geoffrey Tozer, Nikolai Demidenko, and Hamish Milne. Other champions include Marc-André Hamelin, Earl Wild, and Malcolm Binns. The latter studied with Medtner's friend Arthur Alexander at the RCM.