THE PIANO MUSIC OF NICOLAI MEDTNER

By HENRY S. GERSTLÉ

IT is highly gratifying in these days of so much futile mouthing to encounter such an interesting personality as Nicolai Medtner. Upon a foundation of the most extraordinary technical equipment there lies in his music a rich imagination, emotional sincerity and abstract beauty possessed by few living composers. He has been called "the Russian Brahms," but inappropriately so, for the resemblance between the two men is but slight. No doubt the reason for his having thus been dubbed is his constant employment of several of Brahms' favourite devices, such as cross-relations, shifted rhythms and syncopation. Perhaps occasionally we may find in his music a somewhat forbidding austerity or lack of spontaneity that suggests the German master in his less inspired moments, but this is rare. He is by turns tender, noble, lyrical, passionate, gay. Like Brahms, he writes with impeccable taste and genuine feeling; and he avoids sentimentality and commonplace. But he is not deaf to the appeal of the sensuous, as was the Lion of Hamburg. His music reveals a seriousness and high purpose, a passion for perfection, and a detestation of the obvious and facile. But these are *desiderata* of all great art. Occasionally his melodies are so obscured by other elements of the music that an inattentive listener may fail to perceive them at all. Medtner makes no concessions to popularity and rarely descends to earth; therefore, justly to appreciate him, we must climb to his level and approach his music in the proper spirit. None of it is easy of execution, and it is not to be tossed off like a *morceau* of Mendelssohn or Grieg. For this reason, and also because he has resisted the lure of the ballet and opera house—much easier roads to fame—his music is all but unknown. Medtner is essentially a "composer for musicians," and the sympathetic listener will probably derive more pleasure from him in the privacy of his study than he will in the concert-hall.

It is not the materials with which a composer works that make him a prophet or a poseur, a personality or a nonentity, but the spirit in which the work is conceived. Polytonality,

atonality, harmonic planes, do not necessarily make "music of the future." What is new to-day may be hopelessly outmoded ten years from now. On the other hand, a composer with an original idea may employ a common chord in a way that sounds entirely new and beautiful. The unthinking musician falls into one of two classes. Either he is a "Brahmsite" (in the broad sense of the term), and dismisses all ultra-modern music as mere noise; or he is a wild, raving "Red," to whom no contemporary composer is of any account who contents himself with the materials of composition which the great masters employed. The truth is that there are good and bad in both categories. A mere platitude, you say? Granted. But the number of musicians with such partisan minds is legion. We should always welcome innovations in art; they make for progress. But they are only a means to an end, and not the end itself. A composition based on polytonality may be a monumental masterpiece; it may also be a mere bundle of tricks, as stereotyped and unoriginal and barren of ideas as a symphony by Macfarren or a fugue by Albrechtsberger. A composer employing such a device may "make a crowd of idiots stand and stare at him in gaping astonishment and admiration" (as Frederick Delius once said about a celebrated ultra-modern writer), or he may create a work which has the perennial charm of a Rameau or a Mozart.

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Nicolai Medtner was born of German parents in Moscow on the day before Christmas, 1879, and studied with Vassili Safonoff at the Conservatoire in that city, having entered in 1891. Upon graduating nine years later he was awarded the Gold Medal; and after having in addition won the Rubinstein prize for piano-playing, he made several tours of Germany and Russia. He then became professor at the Conservatoire, which position he held until the Revolution, when circumstances prevented his continuing in that capacity. After the war he taught music in a school in a suburb of Moscow until the summer of 1922, when he left his native land and began a tour of Europe as a concert artist.

Thus far his published compositions consist chiefly of piano works and songs, although there are also a few works for violin and piano. A piano concerto is said to have been written during the war; apparently it is still in manuscript. Apart from this last, no works for larger media have come from his pen. It is therefore difficult to assign him a place among contemporary composers, but

it may be said without fear of ridicule that his output for the piano is as fine as that of any living writer, while some of his songs are worthy of a Hugo Wolf. The members of the "left wing" will scoff at this statement, no doubt. There is much to admire in the piano works of some of Medtner's more radical contemporaries; but on the whole they give one the feeling that they are merely groping along the byway of musical progress, a byway long and beset with many turns and divers dangers. Some day a genius will arise among them who will be able to walk unobstructed and with head erect. One can only sit back and wonder who it will be.

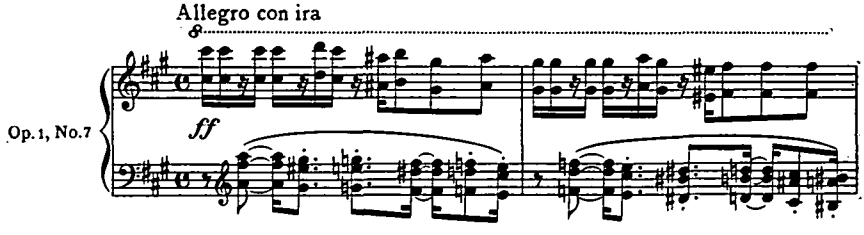
Medtner's technique of composition, as already mentioned, is remarkable; but by this it must not be understood that his music appeals to the mind only. It finds its way to the heart as well; and if one will but take the trouble to become sufficiently acquainted with his music, he will eventually reap the rewards of his labour, for Medtner's music is completely satisfying in both respects. In addition to this, it contains real inspiration and deep personal feeling. It would not do to call him a reactionary. He is rather a development of latter-day romanticism, for there is a poetic element running through a great proportion of his works. Harmonically his music is several degrees further advanced than the master whom he is supposed to resemble, but it is not "queer" or "ausgesucht." He employs no chords merely for their physical effect; all is the outcome of logical unity of thought and keen sense of design and proportion. But original his music certainly is. Upon hearing it for the first time one is constantly surprised by felicitous turns in the harmony, melody or rhythm. We seldom hear what we have expected. Thus it is that often his music makes no immediate appeal, but familiarity with it breeds growing admiration. Some of the pieces which at first made little impression on the writer are now among the most treasured in his possession. Medtner's themes are not always arresting in themselves, but he makes them so by the exercise of his marvelous skill in developing them. All the parts of his music—upper, inner and bass—have an independent interest; and withal, it is accompanied by perfect spontaneity. Except in a few of his works, mostly of the early period, it never gives one the feeling that it is "manufactured." He has few *clichés*, and he never repeats himself.

The forms in which he moulds his works are conditioned by the musical thought. Thus in his sonatas he is not content to fill up formulæ already used to perfection by the masters of an earlier epoch, but creates his own forms to suit his ideas. *Novels* and *Fairy Tales* are the generic titles which he gives many of his

shorter works, which unfold themselves in the manner of a story or legend. (*Fairy Tales* is here used as the English equivalent of *Contes* and *Märchen:* Medtner uses both French and German as well as Russian titles in most of his works.) The appellation is more appropriate in some cases than in others, but the music always "goes"—it is never static. In that sense some of the sonatas could with equal propriety be called novels or tales, or even epics.

It is not possible closely to analyse the characteristics of a composer; nor does the writer believe that flowery language and constant literary allusions serve to convey to the reader a real understanding and appreciation of the music: the printed notes alone can do this, always presupposing sympathy and intelligence on the part of the reader. What is here set forth is therefore merely a description of the works under consideration. The writer does not wish to be dogmatic in his appraisals of the various compositions; they are predilections merely.

Medtner's *opus primum* is a series of eight *Mood Pictures.* There is little evidence of immaturity here. He wisely chose to withhold his works from publication until he had quite satisfied himself that he had reached the artistic standard which he had set for himself. The best of the set is the seventh—an outburst of anger, or perhaps one should say violent wrath. The main theme is typically Medtnerian:

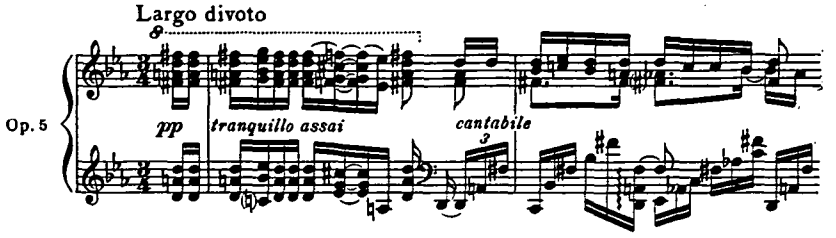


There is a contrasting section in $\frac{5}{8}$ time, with a startling inverted pedal. The fifth Mood Picture is impressionistic; its odd descending figurations and enharmonic changes seem to lead to nowhere. There is a touch of Debussian influence here—a mere hint, not a direct imitation. The fourth piece, with its alternate moods of seriousness and capriciousness, is also worthy of special mention. Some of Medtner's favourite rhythmical devices may be found in it.

The three *Improvisations,* Op. 2, are adequately described by their individual titles: *Nixie, A Ball Reminiscence, Scherzo infernale,* but the *Étude* which is the first number of Op. 4 is perhaps

the finest of the pieces thus far considered. It is built up of a syncopated figure and has a beautiful *meno mosso* section which grows more and more agitated and culminates in a stirring climax.

In the *Sonata in F minor*, Op. 6, it is to be feared that his technique has gotten the better of his invention, particularly in the first movement, where there is a great deal of mere note-spinning. The beautiful slow movement, however, more than atones for this defect. Note the delicious harmonic colouring of this episode:



Medtner's individuality begins to reveal itself more distinctly in the set of three *Arabesques*, Op. 7, which comprises the delightful *Idyll* and two *Tragedy Fragments*. Each is a masterpiece. The *Idyll* is such a perfect art-work that the setting down of a few bars from it would be equivalent to quoting one line of a fine poem.

In the five *Fairy Tales* of Op. 8 and 9 we meet with the narratory element which plays such a large part in his more recent works. The two pieces of the former *opus* seem to be connected in spirit, if not in theme. There are some interesting things in all of these pieces, but in truth it must be said that they are among the least inspired of his compositions. There is a direction in the first *Fairy Tale* of Op. 9 to the effect that if the performer wishes to shorten the piece he should substitute an alternative passage in small notes for the one in large notes and then transpose the four bars following down a semitone. The fact that Medtner gives alternative passages in several of his works testifies to his painstaking method of composition. One imagines that he can not decide which of the two ways he has conceived the passage is the better, and leaves it to his interpreter to decide. Not a bad idea!

With the three *Dithyrambs*, Op. 10, we again reach the heights attained by the *Arabesques*, although here the feeling is more intense. The first, *maestoso severamente*, with its bell-tones, ostinato bass, and stunning climaxes, is a composition of great dignity and power. It has a sublime middle section, *con dolore*,

which can without injury be compared to Brahms at his best. The second is more passionate, while the third is tender and lyrical, and of great beauty—a constant source of delight. It has a spiritual affinity with Bach's two-part Invention in E major, and, oddly enough, is in the same key.

Passing over the *Sonata Triad*, Op. 11, which consists of three one-movement sonatas (rather dry works), we come to the two *Fairy Tales*, Op. 14. These show a decided advance over the earlier pieces bearing that name. The first is simple in construction and naïve in content; it improves wonderfully upon acquaintance. The second is totally unlike the first in style, for it is one of the most elaborately developed of any of his works. All sorts of devices are employed, and always with ease and naturalness. It starts off at a jog-trot:



The ending (as is usual in Medtner's compositions) is delightfully managed.

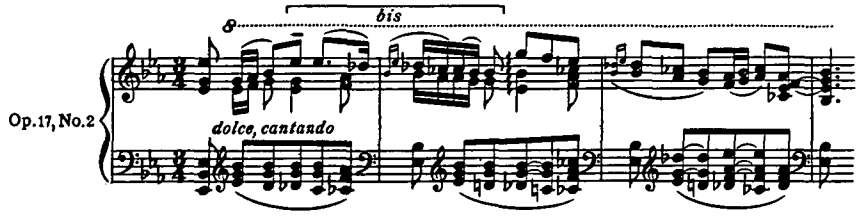
Although this article deals with the piano music only, one can hardly refrain from calling attention here to the three enchanting *Nocturnes* for violin and piano, Op. 16. Every violinist worthy of the name of artist should know them.

The programmatic element is further developed in the three *Novels*, Op. 17, the first of which is pervaded by an *Innigkeit* which is deeply moving. It opens tranquilly and becomes gradually more and more animated until the light-hearted second theme is reached. This is all restated, and a wonderfully-wrought coda added. The third, a gripping and impassioned work, will repay close study. But it is the second to which particular attention

must be directed. After a whimsical introduction of four bars, the main theme, with its intriguing rhythm, appears:



This syncopation is as ingenious as anything that has come from Broadway. The touching second theme is clothed in the serenely beautiful Æolian mode with major third; and upon its reappearance we find it in the pure Æolian, which is the same as the descending melodic minor mode of our time.



These themes are worked up into an impressive climax, the harmonic progressions of which are ravishing in their effect. The ending is most original:



The two *Fairy Tales* which make up Op. 20 are worthy successors to those of Op. 14. The first, which is based on a sinuous melody counterpoised by a Chopinistic left-hand figure, contains a most extraordinary episode of changing harmonies over a

dominant pedal culminating in a climax which is steeped in scarlet:



The sinister does not play a large part in Medtner's emotional make-up, but in the companion piece to the one just considered we have the expression of a mood that is positively harrowing in its menacing intent.



Upon this skeleton theme (the epithet is chosen advisedly) all manner of arabesques are woven, until the music becomes a labyrinth of dissonance. It is a story of dark deeds and ominous portents.

The *G minor Sonata*, Op. 22, is an excellent example of modern treatment of the sonata form. It is in one movement, and between the development and the recapitulation is placed a slow movement of much charm, the theme of which is made up of fragments of the two main themes of the allegro, thus giving a unity to the whole. The coda is fairly electrifying. This sonata marks a decided advance over the earlier ones; it is a noble, virile work.

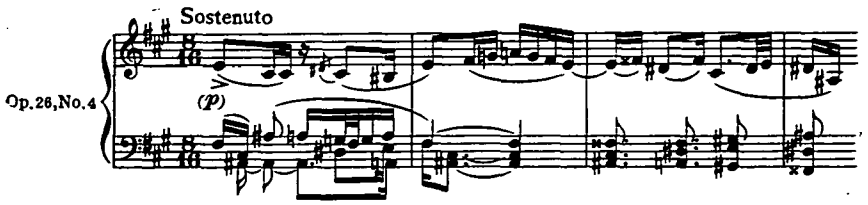
Lyric Fragments is the appropriate title given to the set of four pieces which are numbered Op. 23. The first one is a little gem. Within the limits of three pages is exhibited a wealth of beauty and emotion that is but rarely met with in works of like dimensions. It contains so many felicities that to quote any of it would be but to slight the rest of it. It is a never-ending delight to play and to hear. The last piece of the set is a thing of sheer loveliness. It resembles the first *Novel* in emotional scheme, but not in construction, as it is built upon one theme only, which in the latter part of the work appears in diminution, the tender opening mood giving place to one of unrestrained joy.

Two sonatas are included under Op. 25. The first, called a *Sonata-Fairy Tale*, is divided into the conventional three movements, of which the last two are connected. The first movement begins auspiciously enough, but its almost unbroken flights of semiquavers render it somewhat monotonous rhythmically; and only its modal feeling, similar to that of the second *Novel*, serves to hold what little interest there is left at the end. The lyrical second and the spirited and march-like third movements are far superior. There is a recapitulation of all the themes at the conclusion. Bracketed with this work is the magnificent *E minor Sonata*, dedicated to Rachmaninoff, which in grandeur of conception and intensity of expression is approached by few modern piano sonatas. Here the themes—a baker's dozen of them—are sung *à longue haleine* and weave a tonal pattern of sublime beauty and poignant expression that goes deep into one's consciousness. A vastly conceived work (it is forty-five pages long and in one movement), it is yet simpler harmonically and rhythmically than many of his smaller works. The close adherence to tonic and subdominant harmonies gives it a slight Muscovite flavour. Medtner's individuality is less in evidence here than in the best of his other works, but this does not in any way detract from the beauty of this sonata, which reaches its climax in a vertiginous dance, and then subsides like a spent force. There is one theme that bears a curious resemblance to that of the finale of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony. (See Example *a*.) Such "unconscious cribbing" is rare in Medtner. Example *b* is the penultimate bar, which resolves to the tonic E minor chord.



Although shorter and lighter in vein than most of the earlier ones, the four *Fairy Tales*, Op. 26, contain an abundance of beauty and interest. A more serenely happy piece than the first has seldom been penned. The laughter depicted in the middle section is a quaint conceit, and the whole thing is a delight from the first measure to the last. The same may be said of the second Tale, which is fully the equal of the first, but here the gaiety is of a more boisterous nature. It proceeds at a tarantella-like gait which is kept up until the very end. There is a certain joyousness and

élan about this piece which is irresistible. The third piece is pleasing without being remarkable, save for an odd modulation to a remote key and back again. The last one, with its contrasting moods and perverse rhythms, forms a worthy close to the set. Here is a fragment of the episode leading to the restatement:



(In the original the hands are reversed: it is given as above for the sake of simplicity.) The coda is most ingenious; the following is a curious passage therefrom:



Neither the *Sonata-Ballade*, Op. 27, nor the *Sonata in A minor*, Op. 30, approach in any way the great *G minor* and *E minor Sonatas*, but both are works of power and nobility of thought. The orgiastic codas are perhaps the most remarkable features of these sonatas.

The last work to be published before the outbreak of the Great War was a set of three pieces, Op. 31, consisting of an involved and verbose *Improvisation* (in variation form), the prolixity of which is disquieting, to say the least; a *Marche Funèbre*, which somehow or other fails to "come off"; and, lastly, a *Fairy Tale*, not without charm.

Eight years elapsed before the publication of the next piano work, the first of three cycles of pieces collectively entitled *Vergessene Weisen* and numbered Op. 38, 39 and 40. They are the latest of his works to reach us. What does Medtner mean by this title? Melodies written before the war and temporarily forgotten during that period of strife and sorrow? Or were they written in early youth, put away, and then resurrected and published? One thing is certain: they point backwards rather than forwards, and possess no more individuality than his Op. 1. Perhaps they were published through necessity. The individual pieces are designated by Italian names. Why? There is nothing Italianate about the *Sonata Reminiscenza* or any of the four *Danze* which follow; and although the melodies of the *Canzona Fluviala* and the *Canzona Serenata* are outlined in thirds and sixths, they are as devoid of the "folk-element" as is the rest of Medtner's music.

Whatever the reason for his lapse, one can only be thankful for what Nicolai Medtner has already given us and hope that he will soon again manifest that splendid vitality and imagination that mark his pre-war works. He is still a young man, and with his admirable equipment may confidently be expected to do so.