A Performer's Analysis of Eight Piano Sonatas of Nicholas Medtner

Sarah Louise Kinley

Butler University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses

Part of the Composition Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses/60

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.
A PERFORMER'S ANALYSIS OF
EIGHT PIANO SONATAS OF NICHOLAS MEDTNER

A Thesis
Presented to the
Jordan College of Music
and
The Committee on Graduation Honors
Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Distinction
Summa Cum Laude

Sarah Louise Kinley
May 1, 1970
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. THE HISTORICAL MEDTNER</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE COMPOSITIONAL MEDTNER</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medtner and Sonata Form</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compositional Characteristics</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. A PERFORMER'S ANALYSES</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonata in F Minor, Op. 5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonata in G Minor, Op. 22</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairy Tale Sonata in C Minor, Op. 25, No. 1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonata-Ballade, Op. 27</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonata in A Minor, Op. 30</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonata Romantica, Op. 53, No. 1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonata-Idyll, Op. 56</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
THE HISTORICAL MEDTNER

The piano sonatas of Nicholas Medtner are only a portion of the great heritage bequeathed to the piano by one of the most unique and significant, although relatively unknown, modern Russian composers. Medtner's personality penetrates his compositions but can be truly discovered only through considerable study of and acquaintance with his music. "But to the earnest and sincere student approaching with goodwill and sympathetic spirit, this music will yield treasures of grave and sad, but great and most moving, beauty."1

A composer's chronology from Appendix I of Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians2 reveals a list of some of Medtner's peers and their approximate ages at the time of his birth in 1879 and his death in 1951.

Composers born or living at Medtner's birth:

- Balakirev: 42
- Borodin: 46
- Brahms: 46
- Debussy: 17
- Dohnányi: 2
- Dvořák: 38
- Grieg: 36
- Ippolitov-Ivanov: 20
- Karg-Elert: 2

1Sorabji, K.S., Around Music, p. 133.
Composers living at Medtner's death:

- Britten
- Copland
- Hovhaness
- Ibert
- Kabalevsky
- Khachaturian
- Kodály
- Milhaud
- Poulenc
- Prokofiev
- Shostakovich
- Stravinsky
- Tcherepnin
- Villa-Lobos

The influences which acted upon Medtner in his composition were of a bilateral nature. The West-European influence is of major importance, but Medtner's Russian contemporaries and their compositional idioms certainly cannot be ignored.

"...whatever may have been the ties of Medtner's creative personality with West-European musical tradi-
tions, its national aspect had apparently much stronger and more profound Russian leanings than is ordinarily suspected. This being so, it would seem most appropriate to look upon the late composer as a rather unusual inter-racial phenomenon risen mysteriously on the borderline of two neighboring but distinctly different cultures. Both of these to be sure, come constantly into mutual play in Medtner's music, but the extent of their respective influence and intensity in his individual composition will probably forever be differently evaluated by serious listeners, depending on their own national and musical background no less than on their in-born sagacity. 3

Medtner was a composition student of Russia's foremost contrapuntalist, Taneiev, and was a piano pupil of Safonoff. His initial period of creative activity in Russia coincided with an epoch of enthusiasm for Scriabin and the new ideas as opposed to Tchaikovsky and his school. The fact that the public was demanding music that was novel and even extreme was one of the reasons for the limited size of Medtner's early audiences. Medtner composed in active opposition to the revolutionary ideas of his time, and that he was almost the only one among his musical contemporaries who did not adopt the new musical slogans was probably one of the most original things about him. He also remained alien to the ethnographic approach to music which was regarded as almost compulsory for a Russian composer. The Russian characteristics that do appear in his music may have crept in unconsciously, but any folk tunes which he may have

used were never stated as a whole—only as motivic kernels. One of Medtner's few uses of the Russian folk melos is demonstrated in the analysis of the Op. 22 Sonata.

The more conservative harmonic formations of Scriabin's compositional techniques had a great influence on Medtner, but as far as his Russian contemporaries were concerned, Medtner was more firmly grafted upon the idioms of Tchaikovsky and his followers.

The Russian characteristics that do exist in Medtner's compositions are rather obscured by the seemingly stronger West-European influences. It is thought to be the German influence which gave Medtner's works their solidity and balance. His harmonic vocabulary is basically that of the later romantics. One author referred to a rather strange paradox in Medtner—that of a composer who comes too late and too soon.

It may be said that he came too late to enjoy the full success of his work as one of the last great Imaginative-Romantics, and too soon to see music-lovers tire of that particular type of composition (lately fashionable but already beginning to show signs of wear and tear) much of which is arid, scrappy and without recognizable melodic line, architecture or cumulative rhythm.

Medtner was indeed a staunch traditionalist with an enduring admiration and respect for Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin, and Wagner. The preceding list interestingly enough

---

does not include Brahms, however, and Medtner was frequently labeled the "Russian Brahms." Those who search for similar compositional elements and techniques in order to associate one composer with one of his contemporaries from another country can easily draw some obvious comparisons between Brahms and Medtner, i.e. frequent use of a two against three rhythm, shifting of accents, thick clusters of notes in the left hand, and many others. However, to draw these comparisons and to then tag Medtner as the Russian Brahms is doing a grave injustice to the composer and is ignoring the idiosyncrasies which give Medtner's style its personality. In his article "Medtner as Interpreter," Marcel Dupré has denied the Russian Brahms appellation but makes some very meaningful comments concerning the universality of Medtner's music. Dupré feels that by means of a deliberate sacrifice of amusing detail and affected harmony, the individual character of Medtner's music and its ability to touch the heart of man shine through.

By that we can recognize that he is not related to Brahms or any other Russian master he loved, but to Beethoven. I myself think that is the reason for his preference for the piano sonata, within which framework his thought moved easily, and which he filled with his fervent and tragical sensitiveness.

A true understanding and appreciation of Medtner's

---

5Ibid., p. 3.
6Dupré, Marcel, "Medtner as Interpreter," Nicolas Medtner, p. 106.
music can best be achieved by almost isolating him from the contemporary scene and then considering him as a modern romantic who recognized that the views and techniques of his predecessors could be logically developed to the degree of complexity and elaboration necessary to a twentieth-century composer. By taking these ideas, adding those elements of style that are uniquely Medtner, and then joining them in the element that lay nearest to Medtner's heart--that of form--a performer can sensitively begin a study of the music of Nicholas Medtner.
CHAPTER II
THE COMPOSITIONAL MEDTNER

Medtner's musical life was divided relatively equally between composition and performance. The fact that he was an outstanding pianist is evidenced in almost all of his compositions. The piano compositions pose performance challenges from every musical viewpoint: the vocal pieces all possess a very significant piano part, giving them more the nature of a duet than a solo performance with accompaniment; and a similar situation exists in the violin sonatas. Concerning the Sonatas for Violin and Piano, Alexander commented that "the violin could be more satisfactorily placed, as there is a tendency to use it like a third hand on the piano."\(^1\)

A capsule view of the composer's entire output includes six categories: the piano concertos, compositions for piano solo, two-piano solos, music for violin and piano, numerous songs, and one composition for piano and strings. The three piano concertos are some of Medtner's best-known works, the Concerto No. 1 in C minor being the most popular. "One feels that with more vivid orchestration these concertos would take their rightful place in the repertoire of the concert pianists."\(^2\)

---


\(^2\) Ibid., p. 3.
Among the works for solo piano are fourteen sonatas ranging in length from the small-scale Sonaten-Triade, Op. 11 to the colossal E minor Sonata, Op. 25, No. 2. Eight of the sonatas are represented in this analysis, including his first and last sonatas, the well-known Sonata-Ballade and E minor Sonata, the Fairy Tale Sonata, the Sonata Romantica, the relatively familiar Op. 22 Sonata, and the A minor Sonata. Not discussed are the three short sonatas which are grouped under Op. 38, the final movement of the Op. 39 cycle ("Sonata tragica"), and the Sonata Minacciosa which is included in Op. 53 with the Sonata Romantica.

The numerous Fairy Tales are Medtner's best-known compositions and are also probably those most frequently performed. Three cycles of piano pieces comprise Op. 38, 39, and 40. The works consist of sets of five or more movements all thematically related but each complete within itself. They are more satisfactory, however, when played as an entire cycle. Also among the piano solos are two sets of Variations and Improvisations, and some miscellaneous pieces which include the Three Novelettes Op. 17, Three Arabesques, Op. 7, and Two Elegies and two cadenzas to Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, all under Op. 59.

The two-piano solos comprise Op. 58 and are titled Russian Round Dance and Knight Errant.

The violin and piano works include three sonatas, Two Canzonas with Dances, and Three Nocturnes which are gen-
erally thought to be the best of the group.

The Pianoforte Quintet for piano and strings is without an opus number. Medtner's opus numbers extend to sixty-one, and it was the composer's tendency to group several compositions under one opus number.

Medtner and Sonata Form

The emergence of sonata form is the result of gradual development by a number of composers. Nicholas Medtner proved himself a master in his individual handling of the form; he caused no significant changes in its development, but his sonatas demonstrate one of the more outstanding uses of the form as an instrument for the expression of musical ideas. During a period when many composers either rejected sonata form or tried to find new principles to apply to the form, Medtner accepted the traditional structure. However, he did not attempt to invent ideas which would conform to the bounds of the form, but rather used it as a mold to give his works the inner cohesion, consistency, and logic which were the basis of his composition. Instead of taking precedence, the form is created by the dynamic forces of the music.

Medtner observed the standard rules of sonata form only as far as they coincided with the purpose and spirit of an individual sonata. The essential features of the form as used from the 1700's to the present include three basic
divisions known as the exposition, development, and recapitulation with two and sometimes three themes presented in the exposition. Its most standard form is diagrammed as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{Exposition} & \text{Development} & \text{Recapitulation} & \text{Coda} \\
I & II (III) & I & II (III) \\
T & D & T & T
\end{array}
\]

The letters "T" and "D" represent the tonic and dominant keys which, in the case of a sonata in the minor mode, would usually become the tonic key used in the first theme followed by its relative major key for the second theme.

Medtner basically conformed to this classic definition of sonata form with a few subtle variations. The keys he employed usually formed a logical circle but did not always follow the pattern illustrated above. For example, he did not hesitate to follow a first theme of a minor mode by a second theme in the minor dominant key instead of the relative major. The majority of the sonatas open with a minor tonality, but a major tonality often triumphs as a result of suffering in the minor key.

The diagram indicates a repeat of the exposition, but in many contemporary sonatas this tendency is not always followed. Medtner indicated an exact repeat of the exposition in a few of his sonatas and occasionally wrote out what was
in essence a repeat with slight variations, but in the majority of his sonatas the exposition is not repeated. The themes stated in the exposition are always altered in their recurrence in the recapitulation, the first usually showing the influence of its development with the second theme. The sonatas are not cyclical, but a theme from one movement often recurs in another and a relationship between the themes can be instinctively felt. When the same theme is used in more than one movement, its mood is usually changed when it reappears. Ivan Ilyin felt that the whole character of a Medtner sonata was determined by the first movement and its principal theme. Ilyin described from his philosophical viewpoint the forms that Medtner used in some of his sonatas. He defines the Sonaten-Triade, Fairy Tale Sonata, and Sonata Reminiscenza as lyric forms; the Op. 5 Sonata, Op. 30 Sonata, and Sonata-Ballade as dramatic; and the Op. 22 Sonata and "Sonata tragica" as tragic.3

Medtner himself did not apply an actual program to any of his sonatas, but the prevailing mood of the composition is indicated by the title in several cases. However, Ilyin propounded that "spiritually-musical analysis of the themes, tonalities, harmony, rhythms, and counterpoint will bring to light and confirm the artistic profundity of Medtner's

---

The composer frequently used a single extended movement for the expression of his thoughts. In the shorter sonatas where this occurs the musical flow is often continuous, but in the longer sonatas there are usually obvious divisions indicated by a change of mood or tempo, though they are always connected in some manner, often by a single sustained note.

Medtner's architectonical instinct penetrates all of his sonatas. Performers of his music should strive to communicate this organic unity in their execution of the works and should appreciate the depth and meaning that Medtner gave to sonata form in a time of revolution and chaos.

Compositional Characteristics

Medtner presented his own viewpoints on various elements of composition in his book *The Muse and the Fashion* which was translated by Dr. Alfred Swan of Haverford College. A few extracts from the book are interesting to note in a study of Medtner's compositions and help to clarify some of the composer's intentions.

In studying and discussing various compositions, little distinction is usually made between the terms "melody" and

---

"theme." Medtner emphasizes the distinction between the two. He describes the theme as something that is acquired rather than invented.

The intuition of a theme constitutes a command. The fulfillment of this command is the principal task of the artist, and in the fulfillment of this task all the powers of the artist himself take part. The theme is the most simple and accessible part of the work, it unifies it, and holds within itself the clue to all the subsequent complexity and variety of the work. The theme is not always, and not only, a melody. It is more than a melody, for—as Bach has proved in his fugues, and Beethoven in his symphonies—it is capable of turning into a continuous melody the most complex construction of form.5

Medtner then refers to melody as a "form" of the theme. In his commentary on the type of melody he regards as being "sickly-sweet" he proposes that "the melodic form, in becoming self-sufficient, degenerates into a melodic scheme, and does not contain in itself the potentiality for development that belongs to the melodic themes of the great masters. Such melodies we can no longer call themes. They have not been preceded by any contemplation, intuition, or inspiration. Mostly they are fabricated like confections, to satisfy the taste of a public that is easily satisfied."6

Medtner's themes may seem rather amorphous at first, but attain a growth and development which seems natural at

5Medtner, Nicolas, "From 'The Muse and the Fashion,',' Nicolas Medtner, pp. 222-23.

6Ibid., p. 223.
all times. He does not employ clever melodic fragments but uses subtle motives which sound as if they are seeking more solid ground. Because of this fact, most of Medtner’s melodies are capable of extensive development as evidenced in the sonatas.

As previously mentioned, Medtner’s harmony is similar to that of the romantics. He employs crushes of harmony and extensive chromaticism, but any dissonance present moves in relation to consonance. The contrapuntal art reached a high degree of perfection in Medtner and became almost second nature to him. He considered the harmonic key-signature as the framework of his compositions and the contrapuntal polyphony flowing in the key as the “arterial circulation of the piece.” The more remote harmonies of Medtner’s compositions are reserved for the end and for the elaborate codas which are typical of Medtner. The extreme harmonic point is often reached in the coda, but the harmonic center is still that of the original tonality. Medtner felt that “form” and “harmony” were synonymous and said that “form without contents is nothing but a dead scheme. Contents without form, raw material. Only contents plus form is equal to a work of art.”

The characteristic by which Medtner is most easily

---

7 Dupre, Marcel, "Medtner as Interpreter," Nicolas Medtner, p. 106.

8 Medtner, op. cit., p. 223.
recognized is his rhythm. It is never obtrusive with meaningless meter changes, but is subtle and sophisticated. He employs the contrapuntal technique of diverse rhythms between the hands for rhythmic purposes and derives his rhythms from the natural development of his thematic material. The proper execution of Medtner's rhythms presents a challenge to the performer, for it is in the precise and tasteful execution of the rhythms that some of the meaning of the music is conveyed.

Medtner's overall style is not novel or exotic, but it is still uniquely and individually his. It is of such a nature that a listener can unconsciously hear similarities in his melodic ideas among various compositions, but his development of the musical ideas that are typically Medtner is always new and refreshing.

A few peculiarities of Medtner's style are interesting to note before discussing each of the sonatas. They include:

1. Harmonization on the ascending minor scale
2. Sequences of ninth chords
3. Doubly augmented and diminished chords
4. Use of scales other than the ordinary major and minor ones
5. Descending chromaticism
6. Stressed weak beats
7. The rhythmic motive of two against three
8. Repeated melody notes in groups of three

The characteristics outlined can now be applied to each sonata. In analysing the works, an attempt will be made to assimilate the various factors and discuss them in relation to performance of the sonatas.
CHAPTER III
A PERFORMER'S ANALYSES

Sonata in F Minor, Op. 5

The sonata in F minor exemplifies Medtner's consistently high plane of organization in his sonatas—intricate and complex, but always comprehensible. His first piano sonata, one might expect it to be one of his shorter and less involved compositions, but this is not the case. It is a prime example of all that is typically Medtner and lends itself to extensive analysis. Ilyin has subjected it to what he refers to as a spiritual analysis, for he believes that the sonatas can be understood only by entering into the main theme and following it through.

Each sonata is a spiritual organism in which everything is mutually interconnected and grows out of a single kernel, a single problem indicated by the first two themes.¹

Even though Medtner himself never assigned a specific program to any of his sonatas, such a viewpoint toward the compositions as Ilyin's can be of interest and possible value to a performer in his interpretation and understanding of the sonatas. For this reason, a summary of Ilyin's viewpoint will be undertaken at this point as it applies to the F

¹Ilyin, Ivan, "Sonata Form in Medtner," Nicolas Medtner, p. 164.
minor Sonata and others, not for the purpose of forcing a programmatic aspect on the sonatas, but rather as a possible aid to communication of musical meaning.

Ilyin propounds that each sonata has two protagonsitic themes, the second theme being an event in the life and structure of the first theme and the first theme undergoing change under the influence of the second. If the first two themes do not succeed in their "creative intercommunion," a third theme intercedes. The recapitulation never produces the first theme in its original form, but always demonstrates the influence of the second theme. When the second theme fails to solve the problem of the first, or when the final counterpoint of the first movement does not yield the expected major joy, as in the F minor Sonata, all following movements are devoted to finding new ways leading to the transfiguration of the first theme. If the transfiguration is achieved by the end of the first movement, then new themes may arise from it.²

Referring to the Sonata, Op. 5, Ilyin describes the opening theme in F minor as a "mournful lament."³ The theme is introduced and developed canonically. The transition to the second or B theme introduces the bass motive of the new theme, pictured by Ilyin as a comforting reply to the A theme.

²Ibid., p. 184.
³Ibid., p. 187.
Example 1: A theme

Example 2: B theme

Example 3: Bass motive

The closing material of the exposition utilizes the rhythm of two against three, a rhythm used frequently by Medtner. A repetition of the exposition is indicated—an infrequent occurrence in the sonatas. An extensive development, referred to as a struggle between the two themes by Ilyin, leads to a fortissimo recapitulation in contrast to the rather hushed original statement. The themes are cleverly woven into a pattern of sixteenth notes for their final statements but
according to Ilyin, the problem has not been solved and a further development follows.

The themes of the second movement, Intermezzo, naturally evolve from the previous movement and form a gloomy march. The movement assumes a large ABA form, becoming a song of entreaty before the march is resumed. The march continuously pushes forward, and a performer should note the presence of several moving lines. (See example 5.)

Example 4: A theme

Example 5: Underlying lines

The inside lines are transposed, inverted, and rhythmically altered throughout the movement. The B theme brings back a
major tonality, but the march continues.

Example 6: B theme

The movement climbs to a coda in triple meter and grows to a final fortissimo using a motive from the A theme. It quickly dissolves to a single sustained note which serves as a bridge to the third movement, a device frequently found in the Medtner sonatas. Ilyin describes the conclusion of the movement as "a blind alley, hopelessness, darkness...."

Salvation comes with the third movement.... Its theme is "prayer for the power to pray," and the consequences of this. Somewhere, beyond the confines of the visible world, choirs of angels become audible (pp "tranquillo"), and the voice of the supplicant at once joins them.... The choirs are heard again in the modulations. Then they grow still, and the first prayer is resumed,.... giving way at last to a new access of sombre thought.

The harmonies of the movement are more remote than those of

5Ibid., p. 187.
previous movements, and the movement appears to be only the alternate and simultaneous statements of the themes given in the examples below, the B theme being Ilyin's choir of angels.

Example 7: A theme

Example 8: B theme
Motive No. 1 from the A theme is used in various rhythms and combinations, while Medtner exhibits his contrapuntal facility in his development of motive No. 2, later used as an accompanying figure. The movement ends exactly as the second ended, only a whole step lower.

The finale brings the sonata to a relentlessly driving conclusion in which "truth has been found, the main problem has been solved, and...life renews its course."6 It structurally appears most close to a sonata-rondo with three themes appearing as follows:

\[
\text{ABCB  AB CAB AB  A, Third movement  ABCB}
\]

\text{A theme}

\text{Example 9: A theme}

---

\(6 \text{Ibid., p. 187.} \)
Example 10: B theme

Example 11: C theme

The B theme is the triumphant recurrence of the B theme from the first movement. In both the first movement and the Finale, this theme is altered to become one of the frequent descending chromatic motives in the sonatas.

Example 12: Chromatic passage
A pattern of four descending scale tones also appears often in the F minor Sonata and others. The sonata concludes majestically in F major, showing the triumph of the major tonality and that of the second theme over the first.

Ilyin designates such a programmatic description as he has given the F minor Sonata as the general character of sonata form in Medtner. That each performer might undertake such a spiritual analysis of the sonatas in order to enhance his insight and understanding of them would seem a logical part of his study, but to assign such a description to each of them when Medtner himself had no program in mind might also seem slightly unnecessary. If one undertakes a careful scrutiny of Medtner's thematic material in the F minor Sonata, its various combinations, modes, and executions, through Medtner's meticulous organization of material one can achieve a deep insight into the composer's intentions—an understanding which expands best through experimentation and study of Medtner's compositional techniques.

The Sonata, Op. 5 makes technical demands on the performer in that it is a very extensive single-movement work, its contrapuntal passages require careful voicing, and all its thematic and motivic aspects demand the performer's constant attention. Since his material is so extensive, the performer must take care to always clearly present the listener with the thematic material which though always present, may easily be camouflaged by surrounding harmonies. Triple repetition
of a note in a melodic line is also a favorite melodic tendency of Medtner, making it the responsibility of the performer to voice the repetitions in such a way as to make it an inherent part of the melodic thought. The F minor Sonata does not contain the rhythmic intricacies of many of the others, but still requires the performer to be very precise.

Medtner's first sonata is certainly exemplary of the composer's skillful handling of sonata form and the careful organization of his thematic material; however, its emotional impact in performance is not so great as some of his later sonatas. It is, however, of high aesthetic value and can now be used as a valuable stepping-stone to an evaluation of the later sonatas.

Sonata in G Minor, Op. 22

The G minor Sonata is one of the more well-known sonatas and enjoyed a mild popularity at the time of its inception. Sorabji discusses it in relation to the E minor Sonata which he and many other critics consider to be Medtner's greatest. He claims that both the E minor and G minor Sonatas show less conformity to the modern trend in sonatas, i.e., away from an architectural and architectonic structure. Though not as detailed and complex as the E minor Sonata, Sorabji feels that the G minor foreshadows the former in a number of ways, but considers Op. 22 an earlier and slighter
work while he refers to the E minor Sonata as "the very greatest of all modern piano sonatas."\(^7\) Boyd, however, finds the Op. 22 Sonata the more successful of the two,\(^8\) possibly because it is a more straight-forward, easily conceived work.

The G minor Sonata is one of Medtner's compositions which more overtly hints of the use, though perhaps unconscious, of the Russian folk melos. The A theme of the sonata shows a close resemblance to the Russian folksong "Johnny's Meditation," demonstrated in the example below.

Example 13: A theme

\begin{verbatim}
\textit{Allegro assai}
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
\textit{Johnny's Meditation}
\end{verbatim}

\(^7\)Sorabji, K.S., Around Music, p. 60.

However, inasmuch as this folksong was recorded for the first time some thirty-five years after the publication of Medtner's sonata, the theme of this work could not have possibly been borrowed by the composer from any sources, and therefore must be taken unhesitatingly as his own "folk-like" creation.9

This viewpoint could also be easily challenged, however. Since folk literature tends to be passed from one generation to another, often for many years before it is actually written down or recorded, Medtner could have conceivably been acquainted with the folk melody in some manner before he wrote a similar theme in the G minor Sonata.

The introduction of the sonata prepares the listener for the hushed but stately mood of the first theme and also introduces an important three-note motive which serves as one of the basic units of the architectural structure of the sonata.

Example 14: Opening motive

The tragic but tender B theme asserts itself at first rather haltingly and then moves on.

Example 15: B theme

From this point the introductory motive is usually present in various forms of which the performer should be cognizant since it becomes the basis of the higher levels of the architectonic structure of the sonata. A rhythmic motive also moves into prominence, first appearing as a sixteenth followed by a dotted eighth, then its converse. The movement crescendoes into one of Medtner's frequent passages of the two against three rhythm until both hands are playing triplets reminiscent of the three-note motive of the B theme. The A theme is always present in some form, but now shows the influence of the second theme. The sonata now devotes itself to the expansion and development of its themes as it crescendoes and accelerates until interrupted by an andante interlude. Though both the rhythmic and melodic motives are still present, the interlude seems to be primarily new material. As it moves into a maestoso section the harmonies become more remote and chromatic. When it returns to the tranquillity of the first section of the interlude, the tempo has increased and it continues to gain momentum until the recapitulation is reached. In its
drive to the end, the sonata becomes increasingly rhythmically and harmonically complex. The final two pages illustrate Medtner's unique rhythmic art, the rhythmic motive continuously heard with a suspended rhythm of groups of six quarters in the right hand. An eighth-note triplet accompaniment is added in the final lines leading to a triumphant conclusion in G minor.

The G minor Sonata exemplifies Medtner's concentrated thinking in a single-movement sonata form. Technically, the sonata challenges the performer and provides him with an excellent opportunity for the expansion of musical thought. Because of its rather straightforward presentation of material, a study of the Op. 22 Sonata would bring more immediate musical rewards than some of the others. A performance of the G minor Sonata would be a worthwhile musical experience, both for the performer and the listener, and would be a beneficial preparatory study to some of the later, more extensive sonatas.

Fairy Tale Sonata in C Minor, Op. 25, No. 1

Medtner's next sonata in chronological order is his C minor Sonata to which the name "Fairy Tale" is also attached. Referring to the nine short compositions known as "Fairy Tales," Austin in his tribute to Medtner quotes Gerald Abraham's comments on the title "Fairy Tale" as used by the composer. Abraham says that "generally Medtner contents himself with
vague generic titles such as his favorite 'Skazka' which is always rather misleadingly translated 'fairy-tale.' Misleadingly, because Russian folk-lore knows nothing of fairies.

"Musically Medtner's 'tales' have points in common with the ballades of Chopin; the lyrical nature and the quasi-narrative tone that justifies the title. But, unlike Chopin, Medtner does occasionally give the listener a tiny clue to the poetic subject in his mind."  

The Fairy Tale Sonata is a three-movement work which provides an interesting and enjoyable musical experience, though it is one of the shorter sonatas. The first movement in sonata-allegro form opens with a taunting, light, and impish theme in C minor.

Example 16: A theme

\[\text{Example 16: A theme}\]

\[\text{Example 16: A theme}\]

\[\text{Example 16: A theme}\]

\[\text{Example 16: A theme}\]

\[\text{Example 16: A theme}\]

The motives indicated in Example 16 are two of the basic rhythms used throughout the sonata. A third figure also gains prominence—that of the sixteenth note followed by an eighth, a figure which also played a prominent role in the Op. 22 Sonata. Three intervals are of major importance throughout the sonata; the half-step, the repeated unison, and the third. After a short development of the first part of the A theme, a second part of the theme asserts itself.

Example 17: A theme, Part 2

Just before the B theme, a new melodic idea is introduced in the bass as a transitional theme.

Example 18: Transition theme
The B theme in G minor is lyrical in contrast to the light, detached nature of the A theme. It is closely related to the first theme in that the second part of B is a free inversion of the second part of A.

Example 19: B theme

All themes enjoy full expansion in the development section which remains primarily in G minor.

The recapitulation demonstrates some change in the theme but instead of bringing back the second part of the A theme as in the exposition, it launches into a lengthy and involved coda, characteristic of Medtner's style. The coda bears close resemblance to the development section and brings back the triplet rhythm along with the introduction of the familiar rhythm of two against three. All themes are stated clearly but in a highly emotional and passionate manner. The movement seems to resolve itself and concludes
with a great C major chord.

The theme of the second movement sings easily and seems quite capable of telling a story.

Example 20: Theme, second movement

Andantino con moto

The harmonies become thicker and achieve a lush, passionate quality. The movement enters a modulatory and developmental section which leads to an expanded statement of the theme. Medtner's compositional peculiarities exhibit themselves in cross accents and the two against three rhythm. Groups of six sixteenths motivate a feeling of increased motion which leads to the lento section with the theme in the left hand and a shimmering accompaniment of thirty-second notes in the right hand. The movement begins to die away, and this time it does not resolve but ends with a low descending scale which stops on D flat. A structural gap serves as the transition to the third movement where all themes from the previous movements are combined with new themes. The nature of the previous thematic material now undergoes a change since the basic meter of the new section is five. Two themes are stated simultaneously and are then inverted.
Example 21: A theme, B theme

A third theme is then introduced.

Example 22: C theme

The movement is divided into three basic sections, the first being an allegro statement of the new themes and the second an andantino section which begins to bring back the themes of previous movements. The theme from the second movement is heard in the treble while the transition theme from the first movement occurs in the bass. The section concludes with the two-note rhythmic motive of the first movement.

The final section is allegro with the C theme from the third
movement in combination with the A theme of the first. The B theme of the first then joins and the sonata moves to a quiet conclusion on a single low C.

Like the other sonatas, the Fairy Tale Sonata provides a technical challenge to the performer because of its rhythms and numerous delicate intricacies. It is an enjoyable musical experience of a light-hearted nature, quite open in its conception but of substantial musical merit.

Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2

The E minor Sonata is another example of Medtner's use of the extended one movement form of composition, falling into three divisions but having no breaks other than what the Germans refer to as a "luft-pause." However, in the case of the E minor Sonata, a performance of which requires forty-five minutes, one might question whether or not Medtner has reached or possibly stepped beyond the limits of the ability of the extended single movement to be a satisfactory vehicle for musical expression. Certainly a composition of such obvious difficulty would make extreme technical demands on the performer, and increasingly detailed study of the work yields further insight into its intricacies but only increases the mystery of the sonata in its entirety and its emotional impact on both a performer and listener. By its inmost nature, it extracts a performer's best imaginative and interpretative ability.
The sonata uses a poem of Tutchev as its motto, the general nature of which is a kind of ode to the night.

"Very darkly and sombrely coloured, it is charged from first to last with the intense, infinite, and unhuman sadness of cold, lonely expanses—a true elegiac nature poem."11

The long andante introduction to the sonata immediately establishes the tonal center of E minor and introduces a lyrical theme.

Example 23: Introduction theme

Once again the rhythm of two against three is used, the interval of the fourth appears in the foreground as in the G minor Sonata, the triple repetition of the same note is heard again, and descending chromatics become a prominent figure.

The exposition begins by introducing a theme in the left hand, joined two measures later by the A theme in the treble.

11Sorabji, op. cit., p. 60.
Example 24: Left hand theme

The motive of three repeated notes is used throughout the A section and serves as a transition to the B theme. The new theme is a direct outgrowth of the previous material in that it outlines a chord and also has the motive of three repeated notes. Easily divisible into two parts, the first part of B is presented in a chordal manner and the second part moves more until the entire theme achieves a very lyrical quality.
A third theme, in a major key like the second theme, is introduced in the left hand. Closely related to the B theme, its nature seems closest to that of a feeling of awakening, becoming more grandiose and passionate in its development.

Example 26: C theme

All themes are clearly stated and expanded in the development which leads to the recapitulation by use of the characteristic descending chromatics. The recapitulation and coda die away to a slow middle section which is a restatement of the introduction, but having a more complex
and chromatic harmonic texture.

The third section is also basically in sonata form with the A theme containing the motive of the three-note repetition.

Example 27: A theme

\begin{music}
\allegro molto sostenuto, presto

\begin{music}
\textit{mp sempre marcato il tema}
\end{music}
\end{music}

The theme is then developed in a short fuggetta. After extensive development, the B theme appears—the theme of the introduction given a faster treatment for the first time.

Example 28: B theme

\begin{music}
\textit{contando}
\end{music}

A C theme is introduced in the bass line accompanied by sixteenth-note duplets on off-beats, the descending chromatic
scale again achieving prominence.

Example 29: C theme

All themes are extensively developed both separately and simultaneously with the ever present descending chromatic motive. A largamente section interrupts the recapitulation and gives the final hint of the introduction, the theme stated with off-beat descending chromatics in the bass.

The coda presents all themes for a final time with sudden alternations between forte and piano, fading to a pianissimo conclusion.

A performer undertaking a musical communication of the E minor Sonata should first study as conscientiously as possible all performance indications written into the score. Second, an intimate knowledge of all that is characteristically Medtner thematically, melodically, motivically, harmonically, and pianistically, and how these elements manifest themselves in the E minor Sonata would be of great benefit. The sonata, being so extensive, must in the final analysis be one cohesive unit—the kind of an aesthetic whole which can be achieved only when the performer develops a mental
and spiritual oneness with the musical life and heart of the composition.

Sonata-Ballade, Op. 27

The Sonata-Ballade makes one of the greatest appeals to the mind and heart of a performer or listener and has drawn more attention and comment than many of the other sonatas. Medtner's love for the beauty of nature is most recognizable in the Sonata-Ballade and the composition is said to be one of his favorites.

A brilliant formal experiment, and for its superb success not an experiment merely, but a consummate accomplishment of the closest, most lightly woven logical texture harmonically of that subdued dark-toned, mellow richness peculiar to Medtner at his best, fascinating and of the highest interest technically, the whole work is pervaded by a kind of subdued brooding ecstatic quality which makes it unique. The warm sunlit glow of the last five pages is unlike anything else in Medtner's work, and the peculiarly caressing quality of the long series of imitative canonic overlappings is astonishingly attractive and seductive....

Laberge has written of what is described by the sonata. The first movement pictures the joy of spring and the awakening of nature, the first theme reflecting Medtner's kindness. It is woven gently into a pattern of flowing sixteenths and is divided into two parts, the section ending

12Ibid., p. 61.
13Laberge, Dominique, "Homage to Medtner," Nicolas Medtner, p. 149.
with an abrupt pause which signifies nothingness.

Example 30: A theme

The B theme is one of bitter thought and deception, composed of one of Medtner's unique rhythmic patterns and an accompaniment of a motivic pattern of four descending scale tones.

Example 31: B theme
The development becomes a struggle between the two themes to resolve each other. The restatement of the themes in the recapitulation leads to the coda which closes the movement by reminding the listener of the intricate relationship between the themes—the A theme always serene but leading to the bitter passion of the B theme. The movement continues without a break into the second and last movement.

The introduction to the movement bears a motto by the poet Fet and is a poem describing the temptation in the desert. It is the struggle of the Satanic forces against the spirit of light. Three themes of a heavy and weighty nature are presented. The first theme occurs immediately in the treble, doubled in the bass line and accompanied by a two-note motive which becomes a kind of ostinato.

Example 32: A theme

![Example 32: A theme](image)

Bass motive

![Bass motive](image)
Immediately afterward two more themes are presented simultaneously.

Example 33: B and C themes

Throughout the introduction the harmonies never achieve their expected resolutions, resulting in a feeling of deception. The staccato bass line must be executed in a very subtle manner to accentuate this feeling. The middle section moves into a major key and gives a hint of the spring theme. Always, the mood is that of struggle—one theme is constantly striving to win over the others. This element of contrast and struggle becomes so intense that in the final page of the introduction the mood changes every measure. A low, simple statement of the first theme leads into the Finale.

The Finale is introduced by soft trumpet calls which become a very lyrical and tender first theme of a movement which, like the first, is in sonata form.
Example 34: A theme

The element of contrast is still omnipresent with sudden changes from pianissimo to forte every two measures.

The B theme also is very elusive, once again containing the characteristic three-note repetition.

Example 35: B theme

The theme of the introduction reappears and the movement progresses to its development section which deviates from normal expectations. There is a full statement of the A theme with the ever present element of contrast. A fugue is then formed on the theme of the introduction, followed by short variations
on this theme, always accompanied by hints of the A theme. Medtner's fondness for rhythmic complexity has exhibited itself well by this time.

The recapitulation leads to a maestoso coda in which the spring theme from the first movement triumphantly returns.

Laberge has described the Finale as a symbol of man's belief as he sees the hand of the Creator in the joy of spring. Spring is mingled with deep religious feeling, and when the spring theme last returns in the coda, it is in bell tones with the Easter blessing.

The Sonata-Ballade lends itself well to close study and rewards it. The performer could more easily relate to the mood and nature of the Sonata-Ballade than many of the other sonatas—an element which would greatly augment the success of the composition in performance.

Sonata in A Minor, Op. 30

The A minor Sonata is generally regarded as a lesser work. Only one movement in length, it is considered a lapse, though only a temporary one, in the composer's consistently high compositional plane. Sorabji refers to it as a retrogression to a cruder and more primitive technique and claims that it is a failure on the whole.¹⁴

A study of the sonata, however, does not result in

¹⁴Sorabji, op. cit., p. 62.
total disappointment since one can still find many musically pleasing characteristics about the sonata, though the composition in its entirety does not seem as musically cohesive as the other sonatas.

The introduction contains sudden dynamic changes from forte to pianissimo, as in the remainder of the sonata. Double sixths are introduced in the opening measures and remain a prominent figure in the statement of the A theme and throughout the sonata. The A theme has three divisions, the third of which is very chordal and rather heavy in contrast to the first two parts which are of a lighter, more lyrical nature.

Example 36: A theme

\[\text{Allegro risoluto}\]

\(\text{(1)}\)

\(\text{PP}\)

\(\text{(2)}\)

\(\text{p poco giuesco}\)

\(\text{(3)}\)

\(\text{molto pesante}\)
The B theme does not seem strong as a melodic line and depends on the accompaniment of eighth-note duplets and triplets for motivation. It is simply stated over and over until the development is reached.

Example 37: B theme

Various combinations of the three parts of the A theme and the B theme are presented in the development until a new theme seems to grow out of what was previously used only as a motive.

Example 38: Motive and development theme
The recapitulation is essentially the same as the exposition and the new theme of the development is used as a transition to the coda.

The coda contains repeated statements of the development theme in eighth-note triplets which continue throughout; it dies away and then crescendoes to a fortissimo conclusion.

A performance of the A minor Sonata would present a pianist with a musical challenge in several ways. Like Medtner's other sonatas, it is technically challenging; but because of its weaker nature, satisfactory musical communication to an audience would pose a greater problem in performance than a more musically cohesive composition would. The sonata should certainly not be stricken from the repertoire of piano compositions which merit opportunity for performance, but its performance value would be overshadowed by many of Medtner's other sonatas.

Sonata Romantica, Op. 53, No. 1

The Sonata Romantica is precisely what the title suggests—a very romantic, expressive composition. It is one of the less discussed sonatas, but deserves both comment and performance.

The first movement of four is titled "Romanza" and is in a moving and expressive sonata form. It is not especially long and is built carefully around two themes and
the motives of which they are constructed. The A theme is built of several small phrases that must be joined by the performer into one overall phrase with subtle rhythmic underlinings.

Example 39: A theme

A short development of A soon gives way to the major tonality of the B theme which is soft and tranquil in nature.

Example 40: B theme
The theme crescendoes and becomes more agitated, dropping again to a softer dynamic level at the beginning of the development section. The development is logically built around the two themes and their motives. As in many of the other sonatas, Medtner uses many contrapuntal techniques in the development of his themes.

The recapitulation is the same length as the exposition. The coda diminishes to a transition which begins with the characteristic two against three and accelerates in a triplet passage directly into the second movement.

The second movement in E flat minor emphasizes strong rhythms, descending chromatic passages, scales other than the usual major or minor ones, and rapid sixteenth-note passages. The movement is a scherzo with two main themes—one rhythmic, the other melodic, and uses various rhythmic and melodic motives in its development.

Example 41: A theme
In performance the movement must be rhythmically precise with careful attention given to the various accents and stresses.

Again, there is no actual break between movements, and a single sustained bass note serves as the transition to the third movement to which Medtner has given the title "Meditazione." The movement assumes a basic three-part song form with two themes.

Example 42: A theme

Example 42: B theme
The first theme is rather somber in nature while the second is much lighter. In this movement the performer should always be cognizant of the top melodic line and also the importance of the inside moving lines.

The Finale is also in sonata form with two themes of its own and recurrences of themes from previous movements in its development section.

Example 43: A theme

\[
\text{Allegro non troppo} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{p} \\
\text{non legato}
\end{array}
\]

B theme

\[
\text{dolce, grazioso, ma a tempo} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{p}
\end{array}
\]

Again, the movement has many rhythmic intricacies exhibited in quick off-beat accents. The coda is one of Medtner’s typically extensive and intricate finishes, giving the performer a technical challenge with its rapid thirty-second-note passage.

Successful performance of the sonata requires a great amount of emotional participation from the performer.
and a clear view of what the sonata as an entity is trying to express, rather than viewing it as separate movements. By its innate nature, the Sonata Romantica provides an enjoyable romantic adventure for both performer and listener.

Sonata-Idyll, Op. 56

The Sonata-Idyll is the last sonata of the fourteen that Medtner wrote; but unlike the final sonatas of many other composers, it is one of the shorter ones (only two movements), and it is the least technically challenging of the eight sonatas analyzed in this paper. As its title suggests, the Op. 56 Sonata has the nature of a simple pastoral narrative.

The first movement gives the general impression of a chorale executed in the form of a minuet and trio. An eight-measure introduction presents a contrapuntal theme.

Example 44: Introduction theme

The first section in G major has a two-part theme, the first part of which is repeated giving the section a small three-part form.
The trio section in D major is based on the theme stated in the introduction with occasional hints of the A theme.

The return of the A section begins in E but quickly moves back to G major for the conclusion of the brief first movement.

The second movement, also in G major, is in sonata-allegro form. It flows easily with a light, pastoral, airy sound and is without any special technical difficulties, as was the previous movement. Three themes are stated in the exposition in the respective keys of G major, B minor, and D major.
Example 46: Second movement themes

All themes are then developed, undergoing further development in the recapitulation to the end of the sonata.

The sonata makes extensive use of the Medtner characteristics of descending chromatic passages and scales of a mode other than the usual major or minor. It does not provide as great a performance challenge as the other Medtner sonatas but would serve as a good forerunner to a study of the more difficult sonatas.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSIONS

The piano sonatas of Nicholas Medtner are an excellent example of the composer's consistency of style and quality. Swan feels that Medtner's later works demonstrate much more maturity as shown in "the greater simplicity of his later works, as compared with certain unnecessary complications of texture in the earlier; but there is no material change of idiom."\(^1\) It is the general consensus that all of Medtner's peculiarities of style and spirit are found to equal degrees in all of his compositions. Some of his music is naturally more successful, but the composer maintained the same general value level with no low periods. For these reasons, it is not necessary to approach the work of Medtner from a chronological point of view.

Medtner's works have been offered to the public, though in an irregular sequence, yet he has not achieved the recognition that he deserves. In January, 1948, His Highness the Maharajah of Mysore gave financial backing for the recording of many of Medtner's works by "His Master's Voice." Only two of the sonatas were recorded—the Op. 22 Sonata and the Sonata-Ballade. Medtner played most of the compositions himself, but the project was not as successful as everyone

\(^1\)Swan, A.J., "Medtner and the Music of Our Time," *Nicolas Medtner*, p. 34.
had hoped.

The fact that Medtner performed his own works so frequently and with such perfection is possibly one of the reasons that other pianists during his lifetime were rather hesitant to perform them. Medtner also avoided the cheap publicity by which the music of many composers was advanced. It is the opinion of Clarence Raybould that a lack of success can also be attributed to a poor rhythmic sensitivity in many otherwise well-equipped performers. "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." However, the most influential factor affecting Medtner's initial success was his refusal to conform to the contemporary trends. He refused to yield his own standards or profane his ideas in order to be more easily understood or accepted. "One must learn to approach his music, for only then will it reveal all its content; otherwise, it may remain a sealed book."

Nicholas Medtner dedicated his life to the communication of his faith and belief in music--to his belief in its unity and autonomous existence. It was this deep dedication and desire to serve music purely for the advancement of art and

---

3 Sabaneiev, Leonid, "Medtner and His Age," Nicolas Medtner, p. 79.
not merely for his own purposes that brought him the respect of those who knew him. For those whose musical lives are enriched by contact with the music of Medtner, these qualities will always be evident. A full appreciation of his work can be gained only through a desire to understand, so it is the hope of those who have already experienced his music that many others may be inspired to study and communicate the thoughts of a man so dedicated to the cause of music.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


