

## The Musical Times

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

JANUARY 1, 1915.

MEDTNER.

BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

One result of the present animus against Germany in England will be to make a number of people more curious as to the contemporary music of our Allies. Modern French music is fairly well known over here; but comparatively little is yet known of the music of Russia apart from that of Tchaikovsky. Yet the Russian group—to speak of a 'school' is of course absurd—is on the whole the most interesting in Europe to-day; no other country can show so many composers of ability, or such diversity of ideals among them—a diversity so great that to speak of 'the Russian spirit' or 'the Russian point of view' has a touch of the grotesque about it. One of the most interesting of the modern Russian composers is Nicolai Medtner. Some people, it is true, deny that he is a Russian at all in what they regard as 'the true sense of the word'; but in the first place it does not really matter what the nationality of a composer may be so long as his music is good, and in the second place it is impossible, as I have often pointed out, to get the adherents of the nationalistic theory to agree among themselves as to who *is* 'national' and what constitutes 'nationalism.' A few weeks ago we had Mr. Francis Toye, for example, denying that Stravinsky's music is Russian. Stravinsky, according to Mr. Toye, is 'a convincing argument against the dangers of "cosmopolitanism"—nothing more. Insensibly there has crept into his music all the defects of the train-de-luxe Ritz-Carlton atmosphere in which he has passed so much of his time. He is about as "Russian" as a *salade russe*.' Yet Mr. Calvocoressi, whose opinions on Russian music will be listened to with respect by all English readers, assures us that 'Stravinsky is one of the youngest, but also the best, representatives of the actual Russian school whose vicissitudes have of late been so many and so confusing.' He is 'Russian born and Russian in spirit'; he 'has undergone no foreign influence, except perhaps to a slight extent that of the modern French "impressionistic" school—itsself much influenced'—[a point that Mr. Toye, in his contempt for cosmopolitanism and the train-de-luxe, seems to have overlooked]—'by the more progressive Russian musicians, like Borodin and Moussorgsky.' Stravinsky is 'not an imitator but a continuer of the chiefs of the nationalist school'; he is 'the only one who has achieved more than mere attempts to promote Russia's true musical spirit and style.' To me this difference of opinion is amusing rather than vital.

For my own part, if I do not like Stravinsky's music it does not matter a rap whether he is a 'true Russian,' living in an insanitary hut in the heart of Russia, garbed like a moujik, drinking vodka, and writing 'true Russian music'; and if I do like his music, it is a matter of perfect indifference to me that it should have been written by a Russian who prefers Paris to Odessa—as, I should imagine, every sensible man would do.

Medtner also seems to worry our nationalists a little. In a recently published book on Russian music I read that 'Worthy of mention as emphasising the difficulty of classification and revealing the variegated complexion of contemporary Russian music, are Steinberg, who, though taught for some time by Korsakov, has shaken off that influence, and Medtner, whose German origin must surely account in a large measure—and obviously a good deal more than his Moscow training—for his thoroughly Brahmsian style.' The remark about Medtner's heredity and style puzzles me somewhat. If Medtner is bound, by some law familiar to musicians but as yet unknown to biologists, to write like a German because, though born in Moscow, his parents were German, I cannot understand why Beethoven did not write like a Fleming, and why Delius, whose parents were German, also does not obey the call of his German blood and pen unmistakably German music. But that is not all. It would appear from the passage I have just quoted that if you have German blood in your veins you must inevitably write in 'a thoroughly Brahmsian style'; and that leaves me wondering how Germans like Wagner and Bruckner and Cornelius and Wolf and Strauss and Schönberg and a few hundred others have managed to behave in such a disgracefully un-Brahmsian and, therefore, un-German way as they did. Medtner is evidently one of those plaguey fellows, like Beethoven and Stravinsky and Borodin and Offenbach and César Franck and Delius and Sgambati, who obstinately refuse to fit into the frame the nationalists have so kindly prepared for them. To complete the confusion of the general reader, it only needs to be added that Medtner's style is anything but 'thoroughly Brahmsian.' But Brahmsian or not, Russian or not, Medtner is one of the most interesting young composers of the day\*; and that ought to be enough for us.

The first thing that strikes anyone acquainted with Medtner's music as a whole is his extraordinary technical competence. A musician more thoroughly skilled in the mere craft of composition could not be imagined; and when this craft is exercised upon good material it gives us the joy that always comes from watching a master of any game perform at his ease. But I am not sure that the technique did not, in the earlier works, sometimes get in the way of the thinking. His mastery of device was in excess of his invention; hence the rather empty formalism of some of the developmental passages in his longer early works. His superlative pianism, too, has been

\* He was born at Moscow in 1879. He studied first at the Conservatoire there, afterwards under Savonov.

something of a disadvantage to him at times. It has made him occasionally overload his scores with notes, and seduced him, especially in a few of his songs, into an elaboration of pianistic detail for its own sake that goes beyond what the idea really requires or will really bear. He is a pianoforte writer pure and simple; apart from three short pieces for the violin, and a few songs, the whole of his work, so far as I know, is for the pianoforte. And evidently by the time he began composing he had developed a pianoforte technique that was always a prime consideration with him when writing. Many of his early works are virtually studies in particular pianistic problems, especially problems of rhythm and cross-rhythm.

It is no doubt his absorption in these latter that has made some people imagine him to be merely a Brahmsian. There is certainly this similarity between the two men, that they are endlessly interested in the possibilities of rhythm. It was inevitable that two composers exploring the same field should sometimes hit upon the same discoveries; nor is there any reason to doubt that in his earliest days Medtner was attracted by Brahms's rhythmic innovations. But he soon went far beyond Brahms in rhythmic variety. He was an expert from the beginning in the two or three typical Brahms devices—bar-overlapping, the combination or alternation of duple and triple units, and so on. His later works abound in rhythmic novelties and felicities to which there is no parallel in Brahms; and the rhythm, however unexpected it may be, always gives the impression of perfect spontaneity and inevitableness.

I have already hinted that to a very young man so fine a pianistic technique as Medtner's is occasionally a danger to him as a composer. There is a good deal of mere academicism in the youthful Sonata in F minor (Op. 5),—a rather cubbish work, but with undeniable suggestions of strength about it, especially in the second movement; and there are plentiful signs of what Tchaikovsky used to call mere 'head work' in the fine Sonata in G minor (Op. 22). In such a song as 'Das Veilchen,' too, it is obvious that Medtner has over-written a simple poetic subject in the way that Max Reger so often does; the pianist in him has led him on to elaboration after elaboration when the poet in him must have been vainly whispering to him to stop. But in the bulk of his work the thinking is really helped by his technical assurance. Nothing is more remarkable in Medtner's music than the way in which a figure that is essentially quite simple is made interesting by some slight but effective touch of individuality in the handling of it—the harmonic decoration of the second main theme of the second of the two 'Märchen' (Op. 8), for example, or the curious way in which the melodic contour, the harmonic flavour, and the rhythmic gait all combine to give a clear and unusual physiognomy to the second subject of the G minor Sonata (Op. 22). We see the result of this technical sufficiency, again, in the interest

that, from the very beginning, he was able to give to the inner parts of his music.

He resembled Brahms negatively, so to speak, in his scorn of the facile lyricism that is so seductive to most young composers. His mind is on the whole objective rather than subjective: not that he has no heart, but that he is never guilty of wearing it on his sleeve. At first there was a faint but unmistakable Chopinesque strain in him; we can see it in the fifth and eighth of the 'Acht Stimmungsbilder' that constitute his Opus 2; it is a Chopin, however, with a solid modern German technique. But for some years a good deal of his music was really 'Brahmsian' in the sense not that it derived from Brahms, but that it showed the same kind of high seriousness and the same close and skilled workmanship. The traits that remind us even distantly of Brahms have become less and less noticeable as he has developed. He seems to be simplifying his texture as he gets older. He is discovering that when the thinking is sufficiently direct, the vision sufficiently clearly seen, a good many notes can be left out that at one time he would have thought it necessary to put in. In the fine Sonata in E minor (Op. 25, No. 2), for example, the writing is as purely pianistic as in any of his early works; to no one but a pianist would it have occurred to state the ideas of the first couple of pages, for instance, just in the way that Medtner has done. But the involution, the rich decoration, are here not simply plastered upon the idea by the hand of the pianist, as they obviously were in some of the earlier works; now it all seems an organic part of the idea, something inwrought into its very tissue. His imagination and his style are perhaps seen at their best in this Sonata and in the Sonate-Ballade in F sharp major (Op. 27). The music flows swiftly and easily and continuously; there are no such gaps or ill-concealed joins in the texture as are observable in some of the earlier works, or even in a late one like the G minor Sonata, and no such academicism, brilliant as it is, as we have in certain parts of the second of the two 'Märchen' (Op. 8). The more he shakes off the tyranny of his super-pianism the clearer his music becomes, without any loss of weight. The little writing which he has done for the violin has probably made him conscious of this. Thinking in terms of the most sensitive of solo instruments has taught him how to draw lines of greater fineness, and at the same time has made him simplify somewhat the texture of the pianoforte accompaniment.

Individual as his music is, he is far too sane a spirit to think that originality is synonymous with singularity. He has none of the little *dichés* that the smaller composer fondly imagines will mark him out for all time as original, whereas they merely serve to make him hopelessly out of date in ten years. Medtner is another proof that it is possible to work in the ordinary harmonic medium—developing it in complexity, of course, according to the necessities of the idea—

and yet convey an expression of complete originality. For his forms he is content to rely on those that have already shown their serviceableness for his particular purposes. He began with the four-movement sonata, but has discarded this form in his later works of the sonata type, which are all written in one continuous movement, with the exception of that for violin and pianoforte, which is in three movements. But 'abstract' as his music seems on the surface to be, it is evidently the expression, in many cases, of a quasi-poetic train of thought. This is clear even from the markings: in the course of the G minor Sonata, for instance, we get such directions as *tenebroso*, *sempre affrettando*, *impeto*, *irato*, *precipitato*, *con timidezza*, *dolente*, *irrisoluto*, *risoluto* (in the next bar), *sdegnoso*, *concentrando*. The 'Sonaten-Triade' bears as motto a quotation from Goethe, and the big E minor Sonata one from a Russian poem. There is no doubt there are two strains in him—an abstract one, to whose cultivation he has so far devoted most of his powers, and a delicately poetic one, of which we get many a hint in the 'Sonaten-Triade,' the Violin sonata, the three Nocturnes for violin and pianoforte, some of the songs, and elsewhere. He is still young, and it is quite possible that all he has hitherto written, interesting and masterly as it is, is only by way of prelude to something that shall fully express his whole personality. But already his music is of so fine a quality that no one who wishes to keep abreast of the best activities of the day can afford to neglect it. Those who cannot spare the time to go through his music as a whole will get an excellent idea of him from the following works—'Acht Stimmungsbilder' (Op. 1), the Étude, Moment Musical, and Prelude that form Nos. 1, 3, and 4 of the 'Quatre Morceaux' (Op. 4), the charming 'Idyll' from Op. 7, the 'Zwei Märchen' (Op. 8), the 'Sonaten-Triade' (Op. 11), the three exquisite Nocturnes for violin and pianoforte (Op. 16), the three 'Novellen' (Op. 17; the second is particularly striking), the beautiful Sonata for violin and pianoforte (Op. 21), No. 1 of the 'Zwei Märchen' (Op. 20), the G minor Sonata (Op. 22), the 'Märchen-Sonate' (Op. 25, No. 1), the E minor Sonata (Op. 25, No. 2), the 'Vier Märchen' (Op. 26), and the 'Sonate-Ballade' (Op. 27). Of the songs, the reader may be advised to make the acquaintance first of all of the set to words by Goethe (Op. 18); the third of these, 'Einsamkeit,' is particularly beautiful. Wolf or Marx might have been proud to sign it.\*

Fritz Kreisler, who is in the United States, has said to an interviewer, 'My devotion to my own land is well known. I have many friends in France, Belgium, England, and Russia. How could I change my feeling towards them? How could any personal enmity enter in? To bridge over the abysses of hatred that this war will leave behind it—that must be the mission of the artist.'

\* Medtner's works are mostly published by the Russischer Musik-Verlag. They can be obtained through Messrs. Novello & Co.

## SOME REFLECTIONS OF A NATIVE COMPOSER.

We British composers are not a fortunate race; there does not appear to be any particular reason or desire for us even in our own country.

Yet with extraordinary and admirable zeal, we keep on steadily producing a succession of works in the larger, as well as the smaller forms. The great majority of the works we write, if they even achieve a first performance in public, seldom come to a second hearing; and it is only in the rarest cases that they reach the ultimate goal, and secure a place in the national musical repertory. Most of our work that attains a public performance is listened to with bored indifference on the part of the public, and dismissed with faint blame or more damning faint praise by our professional critics. It is as if they said: 'Your music may be good, or it may be bad—we really are not sufficiently interested to decide.'

With unabated industry we continue to bring forth every year a fresh crop of choral works, symphonies, symphonic poems, overtures, concertos, suites. Day after day, our principal champion fights his way out through the ever-growing drift of scores which we send to him, hoping that he may be able to give them a performance during his next season of promenade concerts. But even Sir Henry Wood cannot for ever continue to produce works for which there is no public demand, and there comes a moment in the life of the composer when, the fever of striving having temporarily abated, he drops out of the fight for the time being, and ponders deeply on the problem of why he works so hard, and so continually, for nothing.

He regards, with bewildered eye, the countless days he has stolen from his righteous occupation of teaching, or performing upon an instrument, and the midnight hours he has filched from his proper rest; and it slowly dawns upon him that he may be only wasting his life in a vain dream.

Perceiving in the distance the inevitable logical conclusion to these musings, fear descends upon him, and he hastens back once again to the fray, enduring laborious days and nights that he may, on the one hand, gain the wherewithal to live, and on the other, strive to realise his dream of creating great works that will cause his name to be honoured and beloved in his own land.

When he occasionally becomes articulate with his wrongs and grievances, he wastes his time by blindly and indiscriminately attacking musical critics, musical publishers, and the general public. The truth lies much deeper than he supposes, for he is at odds with a great national quality which, as far at least as it touches him and his works, frequently appears to have degenerated from nobility to injustice. The open generosity with which England has always received his foreign rivals would naturally appeal more strongly to him if, to make room for them, he had not to stand aside.