

NARRATIVE AND RUSSIAN FOLKTALES IN  
NIKOLAI MEDTNER'S *6 SKAZKI OP.51*

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A thesis submitted to the School of Arts and Media  
at the University of New South Wales  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the Honours degree of  
Bachelor of Music

January 2018



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## ABSTRACT

Nikolai Medtner's *Skazki* (Tales) occupy a central part of his output. They are short pieces for solo piano, characteristic and imaginative, that fully reveal the composer's individualism and a mastery of piano writing. Yet, despite their wealth of musicality, they have never broken into the established repertoire. The *Skazki* are first discussed as a whole, emphasising their relationships with the literary and folkloric genres of *skazki* and *Märchen*, examining the various references of the word, 'skazka', and how that applies to our understanding of Medtner's *Skazki*. This thesis will then focus on Medtner's last set, *6 Skazki Op.51*, and provides an overview of their conception and context. Three of the *6 Skazki* are examined in greater detail, as links are drawn between a thematic analysis and their associations with folktale elements. Medtner's own recordings, writings, and other references also provide additional data for discussing aspects of interpretation for performance, especially relating to the programmatic aspect of the music. The combination of these aspects will address interpretative and performative issues, and thus contribute to a successful performance.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Nikolai Karlovich Medtner (1880-1951) was a Russian composer and pianist, active in the first half of the 20th century, a conservative in a time of new directions, harmonic expansion, and rupture in Western art music. Overshadowed by his contemporaries, his music has been considered “romantic and nostalgic” (Rimm 2002, p.116), but his individuality and pianistic achievements have been championed by such artists as Marc-André Hamelin and Geoffrey Tozer. Indeed, Medtner was highly regarded as a concert pianist, and drew on that experience to create compositions that exhibit prodigious pianism, blending technical expertise with melodic lyricism and a command of thematic and motivic construction. While many of his compositions lack the immediate appeal of his close friend Rachmaninoff, Medtner’s mastery of structure, counterpoint, and thematic development are qualities that reveal themselves through a close examination—qualities evident in his *Skazki* (Tales), 38 short character pieces for piano. Like the compositions of fellow composer-pianists Liszt, Busoni and Rachmaninoff, Medtner’s *Skazki* challenge the pianist, and are written idiomatically for the piano. However, the rhythmical complexities and textural nuances, which “demand supreme piano technique” (Nagahata 2012, p.1), are for one purpose—not to show virtuosity, but to exemplify the tales that served as his inspiration.

As an archetype of Medtner’s body of *Skazki*, the *6 Skazki Op.51* (1928) (hereafter, the ‘*6 Skazki*’) will provide a focus for investigating the connections between the musical and the extra-musical in Medtner’s musical imagination and, in so doing, provide an interpretive framework for performance. More specifically, the investigation will concentrate on the relationship between the musical features of the pieces and their narrative aspects—in particular, their connection with Russian folktale culture, as they are dedicated to Cinderella and Ivan-the-fool, two characters from folktales. Because of this extra-musical dimension, the *6 Skazki* offer a platform where both analytical and contextual aspects are complicit in an informed interpretation. In addition, a close examination of this set addresses the parallels between Medtner’s *Skazki* and the literary *skazki*, such as the depiction of characters, and how these relate to practical and interpretative issues (from here on, *Skazki* refers to Medtner’s works, while *skazki* refers to the literary genre). These have resulted in suggestions for interpretation that are not



written on the score; in some cases, overriding what is written. This thesis is written in conjunction with the preparation of the 6 *Skazki* for recital, and aims to pave the way for a compelling performance, further promoting the music of Medtner through the *Skazki*—arguably, his most accessible works.

## Medtner's *Skazki*

“What a world of passion, epic force, fantastic beauty, and ardour do these fairy tales reveal!

What endless rhythmical and contrapuntal combinations!” (Swan 1960, p.20)

The *Skazki* exhibit Medtner at his compositional best, combining fine piano writing with a diverse range of emotional content. Their relatively short lengths serve as a microcosm of Medtner's compositional style, and provide an accessible introduction to his other music (such as the 14 large-scale piano sonatas). Pianists and musicologists alike allude to the technical and musical complexity in the *Skazki*; Hamelin, for instance, describes them as “unbelievably pianistic” and “a delight to the performer” (2001, p.ix) and Swan (1960, p.35) considers them a “veritable orgy of formal ingenuity”.

Of the 38 pieces with the name *Skazka* (the singular of *Skazki*), 32 of them are collected into 10 cycles, with their size ranging from 2 to 6 pieces. There is also the standalone *Skazka in D Minor* (1915), a *Skazka* in the *Three Pieces Op.31*, and 4 movements titled *Skazka* in *Romantic Sketches for the Young Op.54*. The *Skazki* are loosely bound together by their brevity (most are not longer than 5 minutes) and narrative quality, created through various methods, whether it be similarities to folksong, a declamatory introduction, or a general atmosphere of story-telling. The title ‘*Skazka*’ was one of Medtner's favourites (Abraham 1960, p.90), and only he used it with any regularity. Rimsky-Korsakov composed a *Skazka Op.29* for orchestra (1883), Taneyev includes a ‘*Skazka*’ in his *Concert Suite Op.28* (1909), and after Medtner, composers such as Blagoy (*Sonata-Skazka*, 1958) and Goldenweiser (*Skazka Op.39*, 1961) have used the term for solo piano works.

Generally, the *Skazki* are a continuation of the character piece, a form beloved by the Romantic composers and by Medtner. These short pieces for solo piano evoked specific moods, feelings or scenes, providing a platform for composers to experiment with new structures and harmonies in an intimate space. As each *Skazka* creates a stand-alone idea, they have been variously compared to the Chopin *Preludes*, Brahms *Intermezzos*, Schumann *Novelettes* (Dolinskaya 1966, p.110; Chernaya-Oh 2008, p.12), and so on. Yet Medtner combines the Romantic character piece with a narrative element, an association with the literary *skazka*, and a characteristic pianism, as Hamelin (2001, p.ix) believes “even Chopin's piano music seems technically uncomfortable” by comparison. There is an extra-musical reference for more than half of the *Skazki*, which

also parallels a significant and characteristic aspect of the Romantic movement—the emphasis of the connection between literature, the visual arts, and music. These references include subtitles (“Tale of the Elves”, Op.48-2), epigraphs (“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks”—King Lear, Op.35-4), and footnotes (“song or tale of the bell, but not *about* the bell”, Op.20-2).

### What's in a name?

Although Medtner preferred the English translation 'Tales', the *Skazki* were translated as 'Fairy Tales' as a commercial expedient (Rimm 2002, p.131) during his visit to America in 1924 (Martyn 1995, p.35), which became the prevalent nomenclature thereafter. However, this nomenclature gives a misleading impression of their musical and extra-musical content to an English reader, as Medtner drew on a diverse range of influences for the *Skazki*. For example, the extra-musical references in some scores allude to the Russian folktale universe, literature such as Shakespeare's Hamlet, and poems by Tyutchev (Peace) and Pushkin (A Poor Knight). As I will show in the next section, the notion of the *skazki* is still somewhat more complex than the simple translation of 'tale' indicates.

Nevertheless, the appellation, 'Fairy Tales', is fitting for the 6 *Skazki*, since it is the only set where there are clear references to aspects of the fairy tale as understood in the English literary context. Although none of the 6 *Skazki* have published titles on the score, some were given titles in Medtner's own recital programs: No.1 "Cinderella introduced", No.2 "Song of Cinderella", No.6 "Dance of the Fool" (Bloomquist 1993, p.60). These titles, along with their dedication, have been interpreted literally by some observers; philosopher Ivan Ilyin (1960, p.179), for instance, ascribes musical motifs to each character and concludes that "the love story of these two... must be rendered with the utmost sensitiveness and spiritual concentration".

The explicit reference to Cinderella is but one of several factors that combine to make a close examination of the 6 *Skazki* instructive. Fundamentally, the body of *Skazki* represents a high level of pianism, and is a valuable part of the repertoire that has been generally overlooked by pianists. In addition, the 6 *Skazki* exhibit strong connections with literary and folkloric sources and, therefore, invite questions about how to interpret the entire body of *Skazki* in performance. Due to their overall associations with folktale characters and the relationships between the tonalities of the pieces, the 6 *Skazki* is also arguably the most unified set, and it is entirely possible that Medtner intended the set to be performed as a whole.

Surprisingly, there has been very little musical and performative analysis of the 6 *Skazki*. There are several dissertations on Medtner's *Skazki*, more generally, but they focus either on unifying musical concepts and elements throughout the oeuvre (and

gloss over the individual pieces), or they simply provide formal analyses of separate *Skazki*, none specifically on the 6 *Skazki* as a set.

### *Skazka, Märchen and fairy tale*

Russia has a rich tradition of literary (written-down) *skazki*, totalling more than 1000 (Nagahata 2012, p.15), and they have widely influenced mainstream Russian literature and poetry. The great Russian writers, Chekhov and Pushkin, wrote *skazki* in prose or in verse (*The Tales of Melpomene*, *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*), while Tolstoy and Bulgakov drew on elements of folktale (especially the juxtaposition of the fantastic and the quotidian) for their acclaimed short stories. Certain Russian folktales have inspired well-known musical works, such as Baba Yaga (from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*), and *The Firebird* (Stravinsky).

While the Russian word '*skazka*' is normally translated as 'tale' or 'folktale' (Appelbaum 2001), as noted above, there appears to be several levels of reference which I describe below from general to specific levels:

1. A tale, as a synonym for a story (though not particularly a folktale), which signals the occurrence of a narrative.
2. A folktale, originally orally disseminated, accessible to the entire Russian society including the illiterate. These are simple tales, sometimes with morals or life lessons, that an elder dispenses to children.
3. A more 'high-culture' interpretation of the folktale, elevated into a literary genre. These have greater literary and narrative complexity, perhaps with ambiguous endings and moralities (for example, Tieck's *Märchen novellen*, the *skazki* of Chekhov and Pushkin).

All three levels of reference and their attributes are relevant to Medtner's *Skazki*, for example:

1. *Skazki* that may or may not be particularly folk-like, but exhibit a narrative quality, through continuous development, or the '*narrante*' score direction. These include '*Moderato, narrante*' Op.42-3, or "King Lear" Op.35-4.
2. "Russian Folktale" Op.42-1, or the simple, modal melody in Op.51-2, reminiscent of a bard with *gusli* (plucked zither) accompaniment.

3. Musical complexity, such as “Campanella”, Op.20-2, which is highly chromatic with thick textures and counterpoint. Musical elements such as structure and thematic development are evident only after multiple hearings, or an in-depth study.

To complicate matters, the *Skazki* were originally published as the German ‘*Märchen*’ (Apetyan 1973, p.76), which is also translated as ‘tale’, ‘folktale’ or ‘fairy tale’. Martyn (1995, p.36) contends that this is “consciously taken from German Romantic poetry”, but Medtner also refers to these pieces as *Skazki* in his letters, which suggest that he considered it the equivalent of *Märchen* in Russian. For his first set of *Skazki*, op.8 (1905), Medtner wrote to his brother Emil about his proposed title of *Zwei Märchen*, and received the reply: “the name fits the epic repetition of the opening theme” (Apetyan 1973, p.76). Therefore, the genesis of this name warrants some contextual discussion.

The *Märchen* is a genre of German literature popularised by the German Romantics, such as Goethe, Schlegel, and E.T.A Hoffman, and used to describe their poems and novels. It referred to a wide range of stories that share certain devices—like “the quest and the trial... an unreal world... involving the ‘marvellous’” (Tully 2000, introduction)—from the simplest folktale to complex narratives that are psychologically and morally ambiguous. In literature, the term ‘*Märchen*’, just like ‘*skazka*’, is usually translated into English as ‘fairy tale’, and suffers from the same problem in that the translation provides a narrow impression of certain stories and their nature. It describes many of Grimm’s Fairy Tales quite well, which were originally published in 1812 as ‘*Kinder und Hausmärchen*’, but is misleading when used to describe much of the genre, such as Ludwig Tieck’s *Märchen novellen*. To take an example, *Der Blond Eckbert* (1797) features an exemplary fairy-tale beginning, with knights, castles, magical animals and the ‘sincere love’ of Eckbert and his wife. But along the way, they commit incest and murder, their “unconscious guilt” descends into “paranoid self-delusion” (Mathäs 2008, p.181), and it comes as no surprise that there is no happy ending.

Just like these *Märchen*, and like the Russian folktale universe, many of Medtner’s *Skazki* have no happy ending, and their expressive range belies a simple association with English fairy tales of childhood. Simply, Bloomquist (1993, p.53) believes that “the darkness of Russian folklore” is reflected in the tonalities, because of the 38 small-

scale *Skazki*, 27 are in a minor key, as opposed to only 9 in a major key, and 2 which are modal.

In the English-speaking world, Medtner's *Skazki* were most often called 'Fairy Tales' for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This usage was widespread, and continues to this day, especially in commercial products (programs, most recordings, the complete Dover edition scores). There is a current trend in scholarship to move away from the (sometimes inaccurate) associations created by the term, as the *Skazki* manage to transcend fairy tales associated with childhood "in their sweeping exploration of human conflicts, drives, disappointments, and happiness" (Rimm 2002, p.131). It does mean, confusingly, that '*Skazki*', 'Tales', and 'Fairy Tales' are now used interchangeably to refer to the same pieces.

### Interpreting Medtner's *Skazki*

The young Prokofiev very much admired Medtner's compositions, playing the *Zwei Märchen* for his classes in the Moscow Conservatory, only to be shouted at and (ironically) "shunned for bringing music that is too modern" (Rowan 2015, p.189). He wrote to Reinhold Glière in 1906: "Medtner's *Märchen*, Op.8, No.2... is extremely interesting technically... would you be so kind as to ask him what particular *Märchen* he used as the subject?" (Shlifstein 2000, p.160). Prokofiev asks a question that many pianists would also ask, but Medtner does not divulge the specific tale or folktale (if one exists in the first place) behind any of these pieces, instead, in some cases, providing an image or scene. Abraham (1960, p.90) writes that "it would be quite wrong to seek... an interpretation of any particular story", and Covatta (1965, p.61) believes that the *Skazki* "are not descriptive; they are not in the least program music". Yet commentators have argued that the name itself proves that they are all inherently programmatic (Lee 2015, p.23 and Chernaya-Oh 2008, p.13), and that we should treat them as tales—whether it be a simple folktale or a complex supernatural critique of society—in the form of music.

A middle ground between this dialectic would be beneficial in guiding interpretation, because when given, it is clear that we should use Medtner's extra-musical references as guidance. Perhaps like Rachmaninoff's *Études-Tableaux*, the actual program is deliberately hidden, so that the interpreter has a freedom and a (mostly) blank canvas to paint with. But the evocation of extra visual or pictorial imagery, such as drawing links to specific stories, can add an extra dimension to the musical material and performance. It can intensify the reality of performance, away from the drab repetitions of practice, and enhance musical expression. However, if a program is taken too literally, it may impose a fabricated meaning on a piece, one that may conversely limit the possibilities for interpretation and detract from the intrinsic musical attributes.



### Existing research, scope, and methodology

There are a number of key scholarly studies, other writings, and recordings that have informed this thesis. There have been two doctoral dissertations on the entire corpus of *Skazki*: Bloomquist (1993) categorises the *Skazki* into musical elements (such as melody, form and rhythm), while Covatta (1965) treats each opus as a whole and discusses their characteristics. Four other doctoral dissertations analyse *Skazki*, but none focus on the 6 *Skazki* or their associated references to the folktale: Chernaya-Oh (2008) examines compositional elements and the evolution of the genre by analysing five contrasting *Skazki*, Markson (2017) focuses on the relationship between structural form and narrative in four contrasting *Skazki*, Nagahata (2012) relates “textural subtlety” to images in the 4 *Skazki* Op.34, and Tauscheck (2012) provides a detailed performance guide of two *Skazki*, Op.8-2 and Op.14-2. There are two biographies of Medtner by Martyn (1995, English) and Dolinskaya (1966, Russian), his letters have been published in Russian by Apetyan (1973), and his notebooks have been translated into English by Bondar (2003). The notebooks of Edna Iles, one of his piano students, have been analysed by Karpeyev (2014). Selections of Medtner’s recordings have been released by Melodiya (2014), including Nos.1, 2, and 3 of the 6 *Skazki*, and by St Laurent Studios (2014), including Nos.3 and 5 of the 6 *Skazki*.

In this thesis, I have provided an overview of Medtner’s *Skazki* by discussing the various levels of reference embodied by the term, more generally, as well as the genesis and the features that apply to both the musical *Skazki* and literary *skazki*. The next chapter will develop an approach to the interpretation of the 6 *Skazki* (though certainly not the only one), and guide the performer through suggestions that are intended to offer a way of stimulating the interpretive imagination of the performer.

The chapter is presented in 6 sections. In the first, their background and context of the 6 *Skazki* are discussed, with reference to Russian folktale and to the two dedicatees (Cinderella and Ivan-the-fool). In the next four sections, three of the 6 *Skazki* (No.1, No.2 and No.6) will be thematically analysed, to develop an understanding of the structure and development, and the others (No.3, No.4 and No.5) will only be briefly discussed, given the limited scope of this study. The themes in each piece are generally identified by a conspicuous musical introduction, as they are foregrounded by contrasts in mood, harmony, tempo, or textural setting. This analysis illustrates Medtner’s command of melodic and motivic construction, and instigates a relationship between

thematic material and extra-musical narrative. The extra-musical associations with Russian folktale add a programmatic aim to the interpretation of thematic material, through the evocation of different characters and atmospheres. Consequently, the combination of these aspects will stimulate a discussion on practical and interpretive issues for the performer. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the narrative-folktale approach taken in this thesis, and the interpretive suggestions that follow.

As noted previously, this approach is intended to provide a particular way of deploying extra-musical meaning in the service of developing a compelling and original interpretation of the *Skazki*. To further this performative aim, additional interpretive considerations are discussed alongside the analysis, such as tempo changes, rubato, ‘playing short notes shorter’, and the liberty in applying the score directions. Relevant references to Medtner’s own writings, recordings, and teaching directions not only illuminate his approach to performance but also provide a contextual understanding of his artistic aims and approaches to interpretation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The 6 *Skazki* Op.51**

The 6 *Skazki* were completed in the summer of 1928 at Villers-sur-mer on the coast of Normandy, a happy time for Medtner and his wife, as they holidayed together with his brother Emil, Rachmaninoff, and other old friends (Martyn 1995, p.193). The pieces share a relative simplicity in formal structure and melodic material, but still exhibit his characteristic pianism and musicality—after hearing them, Rachmaninoff delightedly exclaimed, "No one tells such tales as Kolya!" (Milne 2001, p.vii). Medtner highly regarded the 6 *Skazki*, and in a 1937 letter to his sister, he calls them “fruits of [his] inspiration” (along with his *Pushkin Songs* Op.52 and *Sonatas* Op.53), as opposed to a “side dish to dinner” (Apetyan 1973, p.486). He writes that he is depressed that none of them seemed to ever get any recognition.

The 6 *Skazki* rank as some of Medtner’s most ‘Russian’ compositions, as there are elements of folksong and dance, folktale, and a “predominance of Russian figurative and genre themes” (Dolinskaya 1966, p.127) in the music. Of all Medtner’s works, they have the closest relationship with folk music, leading some observers to posit a deeper connection; for instance, Yasser (1960, p.59) contends that each piece “has at least one theme that is spiced with unquestionable folklorisms”, and provides similarities between the melodies used in the set and actual folksongs (see the discussion of No.2 for an example). But Medtner never uses genuine folksong, only folk-like melodies which share certain attributes with folksong or dance, and these create this sense of ‘Russianness’ that is evident in the music.

Covatta (1965, p.16) argues that “Medtner’s art in terms of technical devices coincide in large measure with the technical characteristics of the Russian folk-song”. Primarily, Medtner’s melodies are based on the three notes of the tonic triad, simple harmonies (when they are first introduced), and repetition of individual notes or small phrases. Nos.1, 4, and 6 contain dance rhythms—sometimes stuttering and temperamental, sometimes deliberately heavy—but are all in duple time, and contain a characteristic repetition in their thematic material. Also frequently used are Russian elements such as the diatonic 7<sup>th</sup> degree, the step-wise rising third (Bloomquist 1993, p.65), modality and

plagality (the common use of plagal cadences and subdominant harmonies) (Covatta 1965, p.198), and the ascending triad towards the fifth (Chernaya-Oh 2008, p.47).

The 6 *Skazki* are dedicated “to Zolushka and Ivanushka-Durachok”. Zolushka is the Russian version of Cinderella (from ‘*zola*’, meaning cinder), while Ivan-the-fool is a popular character in the Russian folktale universe, without an English equivalent. The single redeeming feature of Ivan is his foolishness: “he is not a ‘wise fool’, but a completely genuine and authentic ‘fool’” (Ivanov 2006, p.357). Yet his foolishness somehow combines with providence and leads him to victory, riches and love—the simpleton hero, lacking any self-interest, not wanting to be rich, becomes rich anyway. He cares not for the world, yet he defeats his enemies, receives a magic horse, and marries the Tsar’s daughter, among other feats. Perhaps this is why Dmitrii Likhachev believes that “the most affectionate expression of the Russian people is... “ah, my little fool you” (*akh ty moi durachok*)” (Ragsdale 1996).

There are no literary *skazki* where Cinderella and Ivan-the-fool appear together, but the stories do share certain elements, as Cinderella triumphs over her 2 evil sisters, and Ivan-the-fool has 2 brothers who look down upon him. They also seem to both be around a stove all day, as Ivan enjoys lying on it (due to the Russian climate), while Cinderella is always forced to do the dirty cooking and washing (of course, the genesis of her name). We cannot say if Medtner intended the 6 *Skazki* to portray certain folktales, but they surely portray these characters.

### ***Skazka* No.1 in D Minor**

At over five and a half minutes, this *Skazka* is the most complex in the set, revealing Medtner's innate gift for developing musical material. It is in ABCA form with an introduction and coda, and consists of six themes—A1, A2, B1, C1, C2, C3 (named by the section which they first appear in full)—and a transitional motif (TM). Medtner's tendency for foreshadowing is shown, as certain sections are introduced melodically or rhythmically beforehand, or fragments of themes appear before they are presented.

A thematic analysis summarised in table form is provided on the next page, outlining the development of the themes throughout the piece and how they interact with each other. Especially in this relatively long *Skazka*, it is imperative to note each instance of thematic material, since an understanding of these is required for a deeper analysis into their transformations. Using the summary of their development in the thematic analysis table, each theme is then discussed in turn, through a combination of the musical (score analysis), the extra-musical (folktale influences), and practical aspects (such as the intuition and experience of the interpreter), leading to suggestions for interpretation.

In the following table, the bar numbers refer to certain sections of the *Skazka*, without overlapping, as the table is intended to provide an easy navigational tool for the outline of thematic development. Any instances of upbeats between themes have been largely ignored, for ease of readability. For instance, A1 begins on the last quaver beat of b.13, rather than b.14, as in the table. However, a reader with the score should find it simple to navigate, as all upbeats or overlaps between thematic material are made very clear, due to Medtner's compositional style.

Section	Bars	Theme
Introduction	1-13	Augmentation of B1, weakly entering tonic of D minor in b.4, strongly resolving to tonic in b.10.
A	14-21 22-35 36-39  40-55 56-59 60-63	A1 presented in full, in D natural minor. A2 presented in full, in A minor. TM. Glissando at b.39 based on the scalar figure at the beginning of A1. A1 with an extension based on the end of A2. TM. Augmentation of B1 similar to the introduction, preparing for section B.
B	64-72 73-83 84-99  100-111	B1 presented in full, in F major, moving to C major. Variant of B1 in A minor and a chromatic bass line. B1 in bass, interrupted by augmentation of A1 in treble at b.88. B1 continues at b.93 in bass, again interrupted by A1 at b.96. Transition into A minor and triplet rhythm to prepare for section C.
C	112-119 120-131 132-138 139-152 153-157 158-184 185-195 196-212 213-257  258-261	C1 presented in full, in A minor with distinctive triplet rhythm that does not appear anywhere else. Extension of C1 derived from the descending minor 3 <sup>rd</sup> at the end of C1, leading into the beginning of C2. C2 presented in full, in E natural minor with distinctive dotted rhythm. C3 presented in full, first in E minor, then repeated in C major and A minor. Augmentation of B1, similar to the introduction. C3 developed, utilising the rhythm of the original. C2 reharmonised, emphasising IV, on A minor and C minor. C3 developed, treated sequentially. Dominant pedal point on A, in preparation for the return of the A section. A1 appears in the accompaniment from b.217-224. Use of TM until b.233. Fragments of A1 from b.226-232. Diminished B1 from b.223-240. B1 on A in bare octaves until b.253, becoming more chromatic. Surprise move away from dominant pedal and into F major in heavy chords derived from A1 accompaniment in b.14.
A	262-277  278-293 294-297 298-329  330-348	Augmentation of A1, but begins in F major with no sense of D minor tonic. C natural of the original A1 becomes C-sharp, leading into a restatement of the tonic at b.270. A2, with an augmented ending. TM. A1 with chromatic descending bass line, then developed through fragmentation over an A-flat pedal, ending up in D minor at b.318. A2 in D minor, with a tonic pedal on D.
Coda	349-360	TM.

Table 1. Thematic analysis of *Skazka* Op.51 No.1

This *Skazka* is described in Medtner's program notes as the introduction of the characters (Milne 2007) or as "Cinderella introduced" (Bloomquist 1993, p.60). Thus, it is very possible that the themes, motifs, and atmospheres are an evocation of certain characters from Russian folktales (at the very least, inspired by them). It is likely that Cinderella and Ivan-the-fool are portrayed in this "fiercely energetic dance" (Martyn 1995, p.194), and perhaps others, due to the rich variety of themes.

The main theme of this piece, A1 (Figure 1), does not lend itself to the characters of Cinderella and Ivan-the-fool particularly, but it is one which Yasser (1960, p.59) describes as "spiced with unquestionable folklorisms". It is characteristically Russian with its syncopation, diatonic minor 7<sup>th</sup> and use of the perfect fourth interval (Howes 1969), while its staccato accompaniment contributes to an atmosphere of a folk dance.



Figure 1. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: Beginning of Theme A1 (b.14-17)

In both A sections, A1 has a strong character, not because of its inherent composition, but because of the material immediately preceding it, as well as the pulse of its unrelenting quaver accompaniment. Before the first occurrence of A1 in b.14, it is prepared by *ff*, *staccato* chords, beginning low in the bass, and before its augmented return in b.262, A1 is prepared by stomping accompaniment figures—heavy, *fff* block chords that mask the return of the tonic (Figure 2).



Figure 2. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: A1 returns (b.258-b.268)

Similarly, A2 transforms from a soft, nervous theme in A minor (b.22) into a triumphant march at the very end of the final A section (b.330), now in D minor with a tonic pedal point. These two themes in the final A section are evocative not of a timid maidservant, or a fool; perhaps they are more evocative of the stories of *bogatyrs*—legendary knights in Slavic folktale—who include Sadko, Ruslan, and Ivan Tsarevich. In some folktales, Ivan-the-fool becomes Ivan Tsarevich (son of the tsar), after marrying the tsar’s daughter (Rancour-Laferrriere 1995, p.127), paralleling the transformation of both A1 and A2 in the reprise of the A section.

B1 is a sprightly, pentatonic, folk-like melody in F major that consists of a repetition of very similar melodic fragments, as well as a syncopated rhythmic displacement (Figure 3). It shares these features with the main theme of Op.51 No.6, which is described as the “Dance of the Fool” (Bloomquist 1993, p.60) (Figure 4).



Figure 3. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: Theme B1 (b.64-70)



Figure 4. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: Main theme

Because of these similarities, it would not be far-fetched for B1 to function as a musical representation of a carefree, wayward fool’s dance. What needs to be avoided is simply treating B1 as a series of repetitions, as the rhythm speeds up in the successive phrases, perhaps as Ivan-the-fool becomes more confident in his dance. Certainly, due to its position in the structure of the piece, the first full occurrence of B1 (b.64) creates a marked change in atmosphere, as it is prepared by a contrasting, *sempre risoluto* augmentation of itself (b.60) in crotchets (Figure 5).



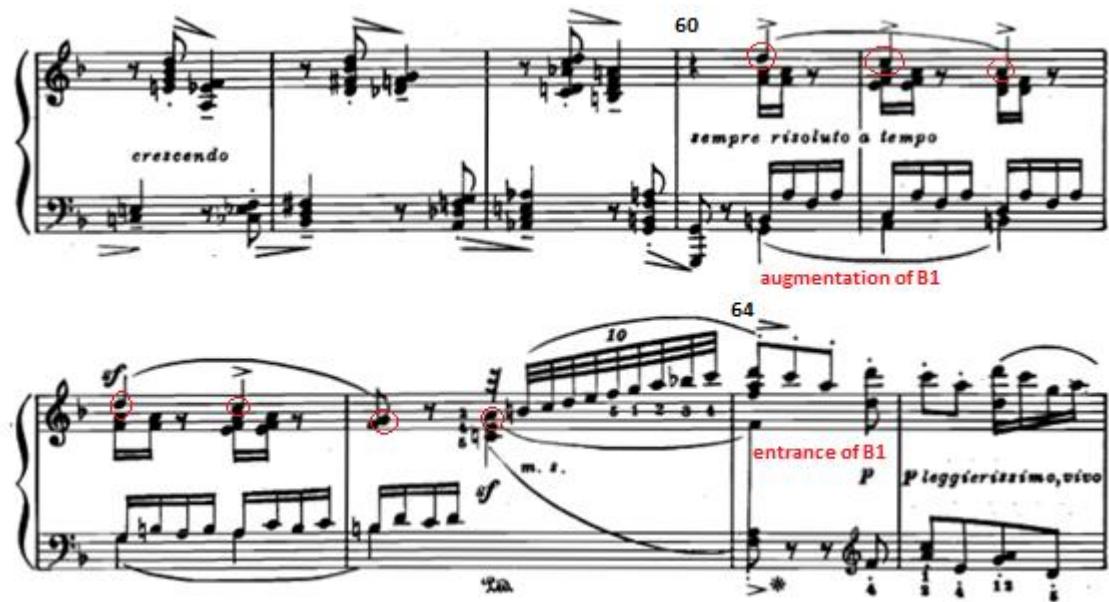


Figure 5. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: Preparation of B1 (b.57-65)

This change could be emphasised by a gradual *accelerando* beginning from b.64 continuing through B1, resulting from a *ritenuto* beforehand at b.60, and Medtner does this in his 1947 recording (0:56, Medtner 2014a). As the piece is marked *al rigore di tempo*, this example illustrates the need to not take the direction literally, but as a guideline, since it refers to keeping a steady pulse in the dance-like passages (see the fifth *Skazka* for another example) rather than a direction to play metronomically throughout. Medtner's own instructions to his student, Edna Iles (collected in her notebooks), provide another strong argument for a flexible tempo, as he "frequently asked Iles to begin a section slower than one might have assumed from the printed indications and then increase the tempo" (Karpeyev 2014, p.111). A slower tempo allows new material to be introduced clearly to an audience, such as around b.64, or further reinforce a recapitulation, because it signifies a new mood, section, or atmosphere.

The augmentation of B1 in b.60 is also used for the introduction (as well as its function as a transitional passage in b.60 and b.153), and therefore plays quite an important role in the piece (Figure 6). The treatment of this augmented version is quite different, as there is an underlying legato semiquaver accompaniment, and the harmonies change every crotchet beat. Because the listener may not perceive the connection between the two passages, one way to strengthen this in performance would be to accentuate the descending D-C-A fragment in b.1, b.60 and b.64, perhaps even slowing down the quavers in the latter case, as that is the most recognisable aspect of the theme.



Figure 6. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: Introduction (b.1-4)

In the introduction, the B1 theme in the treble and the bass line should be naturally voiced louder, and it would be more effective if the inside voices were softer than the *piano* marking—*pianissimo* and *leggiero*, almost murmuring. One way of achieving this (though not necessarily the only way) is an unbalanced wrist position, where the fifth finger in both hands is at a lower level than the rest of the fingers. This could allow easier voicing of B1 in the treble and the bass line, as it is imperative that they stand out among the semiquavers. Medtner also notes to practice this piece “almost only in fast tempo” (Bondar 2003, p.66), which relates to the relative unimportance of each semiquaver compared with their contribution to the general harmonic structure in this section.

C1 only appears once, not ever being developed or repeated, and is noticeably in contrast with its surroundings—marked *cantando*, and features a triplet rhythm that does not occur anywhere else (except when its entry is prepared at b.102) (Figure 7).



Figure 7. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: Theme C1 (b.112-119)

As it shares a key and austere atmosphere with the main theme of No.2 (“Song of Cinderella”), it could possibly be a portrayal of Cinderella. It is tinged with sadness, accompanied by bare fifths and triads in a two note ‘sighing pattern’.

Regardless whether there is an association with Cinderella, C1 naturally has a completely different character to the themes preceding it, and therefore the beginning of the C section (b.112) is another example where a tempo change (unmarked) would be welcome (Figure 8). The section serves as a contrast to the lively fool’s dance of B1, and is signified by a perfect authentic cadence into A minor, and the only occurrence of theme C1. A *meno mosso* is particularly appropriate in this case, as C1 disappears rather

quickly if played at *Tempo I*, yet occupies a prominent place in the overall structure. Medtner slows down to a metronome marking of around  $\text{♩}=132$  (Medtner 2014a, 1:38), but it could be taken even slower, depending on if there is a *ritardando* leading into it.



Figure 8. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: Transition from B section to C section (b.104-116)

More generally, Medtner may develop his motivic material to an extent where their connections are hidden, typically through counterpoint or reharmonization (such as the augmentation of B1 in the introduction). This is not usually a problem for the small-scale genre of *Skazki*, but this *Skazka* is one of the longest in the oeuvre, containing several themes of note, and so it is important to highlight the connections in the repetition and imitation of themes that occur throughout.

For example, A1 furtively begins to appear in both hands at b.217, and in counterpoint from b.318 (Figures 9 and 10):

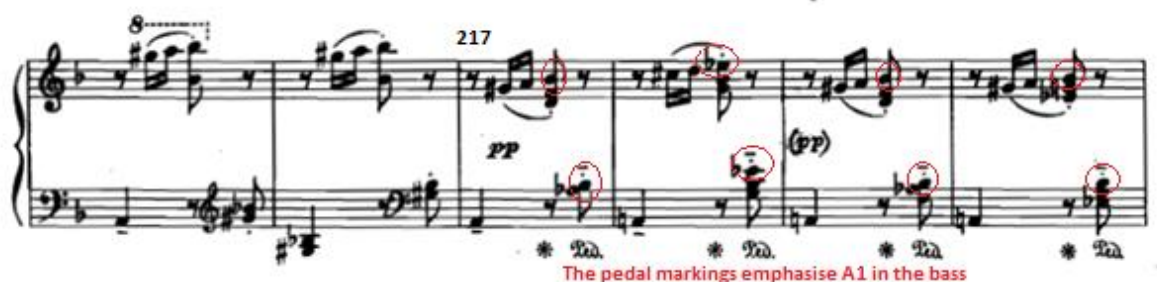


Figure 9. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: A1 in both hands (b.215-220)



Figure 10. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: A1 in counterpoint (b.316-319)

C2 first occurs under a constant E minor harmony (Figure 11), but then appears hidden in a reharmonized passage at b.189, in the middle of chords (Figure 12):



Figure 11. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: Beginning of Theme C2 (b.132-135)

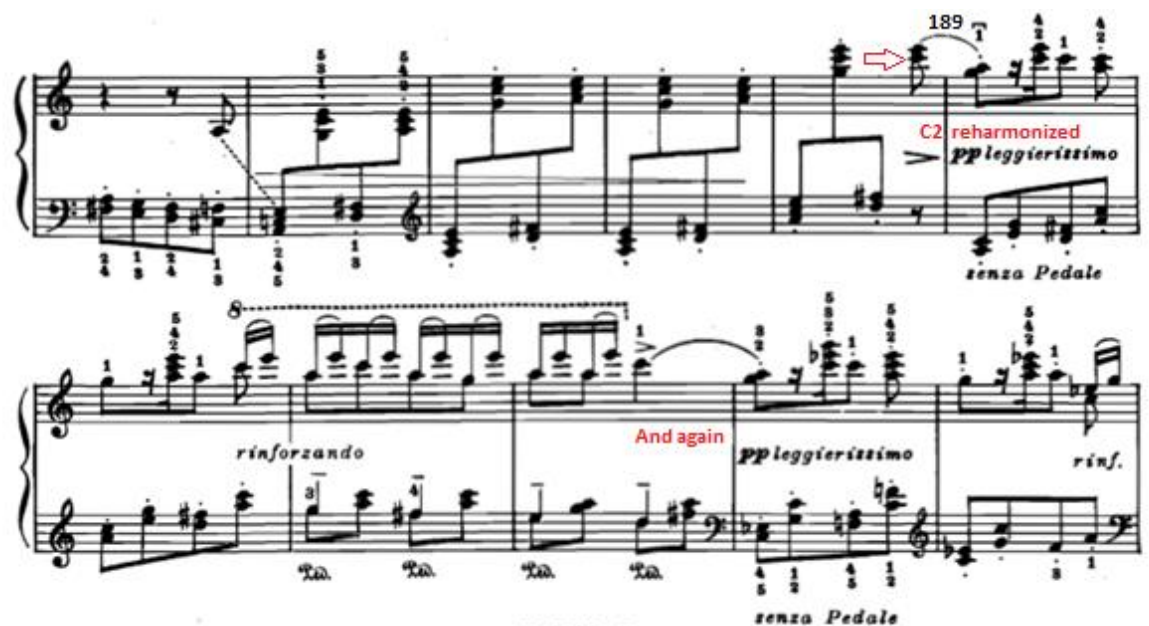


Figure 12. *Skazka* Op.51 No.1: C2 reharmonized (b.184-194)

Medtner does help highlight the development of themes—for example, in b.217, the pedal markings coincide with the augmentation of A1 in the left hand (Figure 9). Simply accenting or voicing the bass line crotchets would work for A1 in b.318 (Figure 10), but it would be extremely difficult to voice C2 in b.189 (Figure 12). Instead, the distinctive dotted rhythm, which sets C2 apart from the other themes, can be emphasised, by shortening the semiquaver and playing it more like an acciacatura (for

more on the idea of playing short notes shorter, see the discussion of the second *Skazka*).

It is up to the interpreter to resolve any difficulties regarding the demonstration of thematic development, depending on how the material has been transformed. A successful performance is dependent on the clarity of the links between themes, as the listener will have a clearer understanding of the innate structure of the piece. The suggestions provided here are based on the performer's experience and intuition, but certainly not the only way of resolving any problems.

### ***Skazka* No.2 in A Dorian**

The second *Skazka* has a marked narrative quality, creating the atmosphere of a storyteller accompanying himself on his instrument. It is structured as an overall arch form—a ternary form is surrounded by a declamatory, harp-like introduction, setting the stage for the tale and the entrance of the narrator, and a coda with similar material. Fundamentally, Medtner’s compositional techniques contribute to the sense of narrative, as he “creates the impression of a journey with the [continuous] development of motivic material” (Markson 2017, p.44). Notably absent from this *Skazka* are harmonic complexity and chromaticism (which occur in all the other 6 *Skazki*), and the simplicity of the tonal palette and texture help create reminiscences of a bygone period.

Compared to the first *Skazka*, there is an economy of material, as Medtner utilises only three themes of note. These are presented in table form below, outlining their development throughout the piece, and how they are combined with each other.

Section	Bars	Theme
Introduction	1-12	Pitch material derived from A1, B1 and B2. Ends on E.
A	13-27 28-46 47-68	A1 presented in the bass, in A Dorian, with five-note scalar fragments as accompaniment. A1 repeated in treble. Transposes a fifth up from original A1. Transition, developing fragments of A1, first in C major at b.47, then B minor at b.65. From b.61, I64-V repeated of A major and the first three notes of B1 in preparation for B section.
B	69-84 85-92 93-108	B1 presented in A major, then ascending fragments of B1. B1 altered, reharmonized with D major, ending in A major. B2 presented in A major, then repeated in the bass. B1 appears in b.105 in A major, then b.107 in A minor, acting as the transition.
A	109-127	A1 in the bass in A Dorian, B1 acts as a countermelody until b.113, when original five-note scalar fragments come back. B1 reappears as countermelody at b.116, and B2 at b.121.
Coda	128-142	Introduction material until b.134. Echoes of A1 return at b.137 to end.

Table 2. Thematic analysis of *Skazka* Op.51 No.2



Like the first *Skazka*, the introduction material is derived from themes that appear later—in this case, all three themes appear in the unfurling semiquaver triplets (Figure 13).



Figure 13. *Skazka* Op.51 No.2: Introduction (b.1-12)

The first four bars are a written example of one of the maxims of performance practice—to play identical passages differently. In this instance, the *forte* dynamic markings should not be literally interpreted as loud, but interpreted as a contrast in relation with the *piano* that follows, keeping a *tranquillo* atmosphere. The notation in two voices suggests a call-and-response between two instruments (b.1 and 3, b.2 and 4). Medtner (2014a, 1936 recording) supports this by playing b.3 noticeably slower than b.2, at the same tempo as b.1, despite the gradual *accelerando*. He does not hold the pedal marking in b.10, instead applying a new pedal in b.11, perhaps due to an excess of harmony in the right hand. Interestingly, he discussed the pedalling in b.12 with Edna Iles: “Lift pedal several times letting one note disappear at a time, starting with

disappearance of bottom note, finishing with top still being heard” (Medtner, quoted in Karpeyev 2014, p.80). Although it is unclear if this was done in his recording, it creates a special effect that he seemed to have a fondness for—one note ringing out after a dense passage, held by the pedal (this also appears in the endings of Nos.3, 4, and 6 in the 6 *Skazki*).

On the surface, the program note “Song of Cinderella” does not seem to fit this tale, as there is no melody that she could conceivably be singing. It makes much more sense if we interpret the description as a song *about* Cinderella that a storyteller is singing (theme A1, Figure 14), as the direction *cantabile* appears every time A1 is presented (b.13, b.28, b.47), as well as in the introduction.



Figure 14. *Skazka* Op.51 No.2: Beginning of Theme A1 (b.12-27)

Along with the Dorian mode, the five-note scale fragments that accompany A1 contribute to the folk-like atmosphere, as they are very characteristic of a *gusli*—a Russian lyre (tuned diatonically, like the scale fragments). In general, Medtner suggested lifting the hand between phrases, to enhance the sense of phrase structure, direction, and to delineate their boundaries:

There must be a continuous movement of both hands; they must not rest on keys doing nothing, but between long notes, or where there is a rest, or between short phrases or groups of notes, they must be raised ready for next note or group of notes.

(Medtner, quoted in Karpeyev 2014, p.40)

In this case, the physical gesture may aid the interpretation of the five-note accompanying motif, as if strumming the strings of a *gusli*, while the long line of the melody unfolds underneath.



Medtner frequently recommended playing short notes shorter, and especially in rubato: “Always in true rubato, the long notes are longer and the short notes are shorter” (Medtner, quoted in the notebooks of Edna Iles, Karpeyev 2014, p.134). This direction is quite pertinent here, as the dotted quaver rhythm is so prominent in A1, and shortening the semiquaver could alter the character of the theme considerably (Figure 15). By experimenting with the degree of shortening, greater expressiveness can be gained, especially during repetitions of the theme.



Figure 15. *Skazka* Op.51 No.2: Dotted rhythm in Theme A1 (b.13-27)

Medtner (2014a) plays around with this concept in his 1936 recording, as there is some shortening in the first presentation of A1 at b.13 (0:25), but it is dependent on his placement of *rubato* in the passage. For example, b.28 is lengthened (0:50) and therefore b.29 is slightly faster to make up for the lost time, with an obvious shortening of the semiquaver. As the *Skazka* gets more animated and extroverted, the semiquaver begins to almost be snapped from b.47 (1:21), as the tempo and the dynamic increases. This concept can be used to create a playful atmosphere, a contrast to the solemnity of the beginning, transitioning into section B and the presentation of B1 in b.69. Just like *rubato*, it must be experimented with, offering a platform to demonstrate the individuality of each interpreter.

Section B is a lively folk dance, marked *vivo* in A major, and built from simple tonic, dominant and subdominant harmonies. B1 (Figure 16) is fragmented and sequenced, increasing in intensity, until it is presented *forte, risoluto* in D major at b.85, and there is a sudden *diminuendo, poco allargando* just before the climax of the piece in b.93, heralded by the presentation of theme B2 (Figure 17).



Figure 16. *Skazka* Op.51 No.2: Theme B1 (b.69-72)

In fact, Medtner plays the prior bars (b.91-92) *molto allargando* and *pianissimo*, almost stopping the piece in its tracks, to further emphasise the significance of B2 in b.93.



Figure 17. *Skazka* Op.51 No.2: Theme B2 (b.93-96)

Greater emphasis is placed on B2 if there is a noticeable break of dynamic and tempo just before b.93, but this must be negotiated carefully, as the liveliness of the B section is in danger of being ineffectual if the music summarily breaks off, and creates a jarring effect.

To Markson (2017, p.53), “the height of bucolic joy is set free”, and B2 certainly represents something jubilant—marked *jiocososo*, *cantando* [sic], then *vivo risoluto*, *marcato*. 10 years later, Medtner used it again as a main theme in the 4<sup>th</sup> movement of his *Violin Sonata No.3*, which Martyn (1995, p.227) describes as “a noble melody radiating spirituality”. Yasser (1960, p.59) also notes a similarity to the folksong ‘Our Wine Cellar’, perhaps better known as the main theme of the ‘Dance of the Oprichniks’ in Tchaikovsky’s opera *The Oprichnik* (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Main theme of ‘Our Wine Cellar’, no.29 of Tchaikovsky’s *50 Russian Folksongs*

Yet B2 leaves as quickly as it appears, as B1 returns in the minor, providing a seamless transition back into the tranquillity of section A (Figure 19).

To the interpreter, there is not much time at all to reunite the two moods, as it is imperative that the transition is smooth and natural. It may be wise to start to slow down a few bars before the *calando* marking, as it gives the music more time to settle down (even with the *diminuendo*).

97 *vivo risoluto*

*marcato*  
B2 in the bass

*diminuendo*

B1 in A major

*calando*

*Tempo I*  
109 *legatissimo*

*(riten.)*

B1 in A minor

*p* *tranquillo*  
A1

Figure 19. *Skazka* Op.51 No.2: Transition back into section A (b.97-111)

The reprise of the A section (b.109) is much shorter than the first, and both B1 and B2 make brief appearances as the storyteller wraps up his tale, as if they are fleeting memories of bygone events (Figure 20).

*diminuendo*

B1 as accompaniment in the treble

A1 in the left hand

*p*

B2 in A minor  
*espressivo*

*sempre ritardando e diminuendo*

128 *poco a*

Beginning of Coda

Figure 20. *Skazka* Op.51 No.2: End of the second A section (b.117-128)

They are presented as countermelodies to A1, taking the place of the five-note scalar accompaniment that gave the first A section a more insistent mood. Instead, the minor versions add a sense of melancholy, of pensiveness, and lead straight into the coda (b.128). The introduction material returns, again unfurling upward, but without coming back down—as an echo of A1 appears at the very end.

***Skazka* No.3 in A major, *Skazka* No.4 in F-sharp minor, *Skazka* No.5 in F-sharp minor**

The third *Skazka* begins on the same note as the end of the previous one, but it is the beginning of a charming melody that skips over bar lines without care, and one of Medtner's most popular *Skazki* in performance. Medtner (2014a, 1936 recording) does not seem to follow his beginning articulation and pedal markings, as the pedal is changed every crotchet beat and thus the staccato accompaniment sounds smooth (Figure 21). He did give advice to Edna Iles in reference to the beginning of this piece: "put hands on keys, play first note very quietly, without any movement... effect will be hypnotic" (Medtner, quoted in Karpeyev 2014, p.98).



Figure 21. *Skazka* Op.51 No.3: Beginning (b.1-5)

Both the two extant analyses of this *Skazka* (Bloomquist 1996, p.84; Chernaya-Oh 2008, p.49) regard the structure as sonata form, because there is a 1<sup>st</sup> subject in A major (b.1) and a 2<sup>nd</sup> subject in E major (b.30), and they reappear in the recapitulation. However, there are three features that weaken this interpretation: firstly, the 2<sup>nd</sup> subject in the exposition begins with a double bar line and a new tempo, and has an unstable harmony (Bloomquist notes that "such instability might even lead some analysts to reject a sonata-form interpretation"); secondly, the 2<sup>nd</sup> subject does not return in the tonic, but in an altered form that can be arguably considered a new theme; and lastly, using a sonata-form analysis, the exposition is more than twice as long as the recapitulation.

The structure can simply be interpreted as A (b.1-25) B (b.26-97) A (b.98-128) and a Coda (b.128-143). Rather than label b.30 as the 2<sup>nd</sup> subject, it is the beginning of Section B, which is much faster and livelier, starting in E major. It is lengthy because of its tempo, along with Medtner's penchant for pedal point passages (there are 8 bars on B, then 12 bars on E before the return of section A—see also the 44-bar dominant pedal

point in the first *Skazka*). The climax features chromatic chords, *forte* and *strepitoso*, and there is a very short transition back into section A, similar to the second *Skazka*. The coda features scintillating, rapid passages in the upper register, but unexpectedly, the opening melody returns once more in a lovely echo.

A sonata form analysis works better with the fourth *Skazka*, as there are two themes that fit into the roles of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> subject (presented in the tonic and dominant, both recapitulated in the tonic). It is in F-sharp minor, with a 1<sup>st</sup> subject that begins with 10 consecutive A's—the same A as the last note of the third *Skazka* (Figure 22). There is an underlying duple meter still reminiscent of a folk dance, but the abundance of chromatic lines (especially in the bass) create a darkness in places that contrasts with its neighbouring *Skazki*.



Figure 22. *Skazka* Op.51 No.4: The 1<sup>st</sup> subject (b.7-11)

Care needs to be taken whenever the 1<sup>st</sup> subject is presented, as it frequently occurs in the alto and tenor lines, with different articulations to its surrounding accompaniment. It is first presented in the treble at b.7, over *mezzo-staccato* and *staccato* accompaniment (Figure 23). It is also presented in the tenor at b.27, with *staccato* accompaniment and a *legato* chromatic bass line (Figure 24).



Figure 23. *Skazka* Op.51 No.4: The 1<sup>st</sup> subject first presented in the treble (b.6-11)





Figure 24. *Skazka* Op.51 No.4: The 1<sup>st</sup> subject presented in the tenor (b.24-30)

Again, some pedal markings will negate the effect of certain *staccato* notes, such as the accompaniment in b.7; the pedal is used to emphasise the articulation of the 1<sup>st</sup> subject, aiding the tenuto and phrasal structure. Medtner also suggested: “[From bar 7 on] keep left pedal down, play with soft hand and *mou* tone, and charm!” (Medtner, quoted in Karpeyev 2014, p.83). Even though it is repetitive by nature, contrast is created in the ever-shifting harmonies through chromatic lines. But always the 1<sup>st</sup> subject plods on, perhaps an undercurrent of something sinister or supernatural, as “some sort of sorcery is clearly afoot” (Milne 2005). Characteristically, this tale concludes with one of Medtner’s favourite techniques—the *lunga* note that ends has not actually sounded for 12 bars, but has just been held by resonances of other notes over the pedal.

The brief fifth *Skazka* features insistent quaver triplets, as if the wind surrounds the scene. Also in F-sharp minor, the quavers serve as motivic material in the introduction and coda, and weaves around the two themes. It lasts around 2 minutes, and serves as an interlude between the mystery of the fourth *Skazka* and the exuberance of the sixth—unlike the other *Skazki*, there is no sense of finality, as the harmonic plan does not match up with the thematic structure.

The first (main) theme occurs in the bass at b.29, the second theme at b.45 and is developed until b.74; the first theme returns at b.75, and the second theme at b.95. However, the piece begins in F-sharp minor, modulates to A major in b.59, and only weakly returns back to the tonic at b.95, therefore hiding the recapitulation of the main theme. In effect, this creates an unbroken structure—a journey without a conclusion—without a clear delineation of the return of thematic material. What is evident is the unescapable wind, which opens and closes this *Skazka*, as the triplets wind their way through the music.

It is worthwhile to stress again the need to not take Medtner's score directions too literally. From the very beginning, "1/16<sup>th</sup> pedal!" is a noble goal to strive for, but ultimately suggestive rather than practical. What this is referring to is the aim for a "gossamer texture" (Hamelin 2001) in the triplet quavers, because they are not discrete notes but join to create a continuous line. Similarly, *molto egualmente* and *sempre a tempo* (b.29, written without any *ritardando* beforehand) should not be equated with playing metronomically, or always with an exact pulse. They are there to emphasise keeping a fast tempo overall, but there is ample room for *rubato* to shape the melody. Medtner (2014b) slows b.29 quite substantially (0:24, 1930 recording) for the sake of introducing the main theme.



### ***Skazka* No.6 in G Major**

The sixth *Skazka* is unquestionably a portrayal of Ivan-the-fool, as Medtner refers to this *Skazka* as “Ivan-Durak” in a letter to his brother Alexander (Apetyan 1973, p.433), and it is titled in Medtner’s program notes as “Dance of the Fool” (Bloomquist 1993, p.60). This *Skazka* is harmonically inventive, featuring many chromatic passages and modulations; it is also essentially based on rhythmic displacement, perhaps representing the inability of Ivan-the-fool to keep in time. Yet every dissonance resolves satisfactorily, and the underlying pulse keeps him in check—just as in all the literary *skazki*, Ivan’s foolishness combines with providence and leads him to victory, riches and love. It is a fitting image for one of Medtner’s only pieces that can be described as “uninhibited exuberance” (Hamelin 2001).

Described as “musical onomatopoeia” (Milne 2007), the stuttering 4-bar introduction outlines the rhythmic motif (RM) that unifies the entire *Skazka*, consisting of 4 semiquavers and a quaver (Figure 25).



Figure 25. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: Introduction and rhythmic motif (RM) (b.1-4)

The RM is used in the themes, as a countermelody in its own right, and as melodic material during transitions. This serves to naturally create the rhythmic displacement and syncopation that occurs in this *Skazka*, through the juxtaposition of its irregular length with a constant 2/4 pulse in the bass. It may have been inspired by his *Piano Concerto No.2, Op.50*, composed a year earlier in 1927, as a similar rhythmic element is found in the 1<sup>st</sup> movement (Figure 26) (Dolinskaya 1966, p.127).



Figure 26. 2<sup>nd</sup> subject of the 1<sup>st</sup> movement, *Piano Concerto No.2* (b.46-49)

The structure of this *Skazka* is formed through the location of the themes, as seen in the table below. Using this analysis, it is clear that there is a delineation between section A, tonally stable and featuring only A1, and section B, where the dance is developed harmonically using B1, B2 and B3.

Section	Bars	Theme
Introduction	1-4	On the dominant chord (D major), introducing the rhythmic motif (RM).
A	5-32	A1 presented in G major, consisting of idiosyncratic repetitions of phrases, and featuring the RM. Repeated at b.14, then sequenced from b.19, modulating into B minor at b.25, using RM.
B	33-40 41-54 55-67 67-72 73-84 85-98 99-110	B1 presented in B minor. Modulation into F-sharp minor, using RM. Rhythm of B2 presented in b.45, before C dominant Lydian in b.49. B1 beginning in C dominant Lydian, then E minor in b.57, and G pentatonic in b.59 (with a bass note of A). The bass A then functions as a dominant to D major, as a fragment of B2 is introduced in b.63, in preparation for the presentation of B2. B2 presented in D major. B3 presented, featuring tritones between the bass and the melody, beginning over a G major chord. B2 in B-flat major, then B3 beginning over E-flat major. Pre-dominant (dominant of dominant) pedal using RM. From b.103, dominant pedal on D, using RM and the 2 <sup>nd</sup> half of A1.
A	111-140	A1 in G major, then sequentially developed. At b.133, repetition of RM reinforcing purely diatonic G major.
B	141-148 149-156 157-164	B1 in G major, but with a F natural permeating the accompaniment. B3 based on G, with altered harmonies. B2 based on G, but with elements of Locrian and whole tone scales.
Coda	165-175	Based on the notes of the G major triad, but highly chromatic.

Table 3. Thematic analysis of *Skazka* Op.51 No.6

The construction of rhythmic cells is a stylistic feature of this *Skazka*, used to great effect to portray Ivan-the-fool's dance. This is seen in theme A1, which consists of two halves: 4 repetitions of an irregular phrase based on the notes of the tonic triad, and 2

repetitions of a regular 2-bar phrase based on a plagal harmony (Figure 27). The idiosyncratic repetition in the RM is the basis of the first half of A1, but it is elongated by two quavers to create a phrase lasting 5 quaver beats that will also not divide into 2/4—an extra bar is needed so that it lines up ‘correctly’ with a bar line, and so that Ivan-the-fool can continue dancing in time to the pulse.



Figure 27. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: A1 presented (b.5-13)

Straightaway, there is an impression of a folk dance, created through the simple melodic material, as well as the ‘Russian plagality’ of the second half of A1 rounding out the theme. A1 is simply repeated and then developed as an ascending sequence, providing a modulation into B minor at b.25 which is reinforced by repetitions of the RM, outlining B and F-sharp.

Section B begins with a constant quaver beat in the bass, alternating between i6 and iv6 of B minor, as theme B1 is introduced in the treble (Figure 28). Again, it consists of repetitions of similar melodic material, but altered slightly so that it never lines up with the strong beats. For example, the C-sharp and E quavers in b.33 become semiquavers in b.35, therefore shifting the entire phrase forward by one quaver beat, and altering the position of the accents on the high F-sharps.



Figure 28. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: Theme B1, showing the repetitions of melodic fragments (b.33-40)



Figure 29. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: Theme B1, showing the use of RM (b.33-40)

The RM is featured in B1, but also surrounds it, as the transition passages (b.25-32 and b.41-44) are based on its rhythm (Figure 29). There is a constant sense of syncopation helping to create the haphazard nature of this dance, which is emphasised through the harmonic and tonal instability that begins in b.45. The music moves from the B minor of B1 to F-sharp minor (b.41-45), then to C dominant Lydian at b.49, which is fundamentally formed through the two chords in the bar (C E G and D F-sharp B-flat) (Figure 30).



Figure 30. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: Modulating passage from F-sharp minor (b.45-49)

This is clearly evident as the music settles back into B1 in b.55, but now in C dominant Lydian, seen through the altering of the accompaniment chords (enharmonically, B-flat in b.49 has become A-sharp in b.55 as it will resolve into B in b.57) (Figure 31).

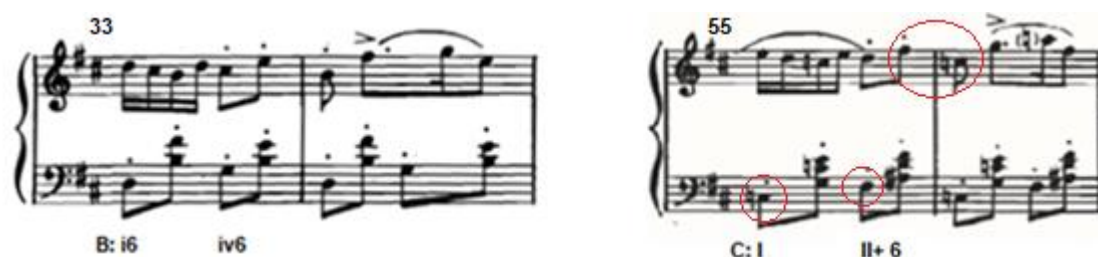


Figure 31. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: Comparison between the beginning of B1 (b.33-34) and the altered version (b.55-56)

The plagal chord (iv6) has been substituted with an augmented II triad, and the resulting juxtaposition between the notes of the two chords leads to the enharmonic equivalent of C dominant Lydian in the melody. The tritone is emphasised in both the melody and the bass line, adding an element of surprise, as the dance perhaps goes a little awry—B1 then continues into E minor in b.57, G pentatonic with a bass note of A (functioning as

a dominant of D major) in b.59, and pleasantly resolving into a diatonic D major in b.67 where theme B2 is introduced.

B2 (*dolce, grazioso*) has a characteristic dotted rhythm, moving gracefully down in fourths, but disappears quickly after 6 bars (Figure 32). It is another passage where a slight *ritenuto* may enhance its effect—calm and diatonic, with charming syncopations. Perhaps signifying the entrance of another character, it serves as a contrast to the frenetic semiquaver runs surrounding it.



Figure 32. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: Theme B2 (b.67-70)

Very soon, the tritones return in both the vertical harmony and the horizontal line as theme B3 is introduced, recognisable through a crotchet tied to a semiquaver in the melody, a tritone above its accompanying chord (Figure 33).



Figure 33. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: Beginning of theme B3 (b.71-75)

B2 returns in B-flat major at b.85 (this time, Medtner writes *poco sostenuto, ma poi a tempo*, implying that there is a natural *ritenuto* to begin with), and B3 at b.91 beginning on an E-flat chord in the bass.

The transition back to section A involves successive repetitions of the RM, layered on top of each other. Medtner begins 4 bars of pre-dominant from b.99, built on a bass note of A (which is the dominant of the dominant), and can be described as an A dominant ninth flat five (Figure 34).



Figure 34. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: Pre-dominant (b.99-102)

It also shares a similar effect with the whole tone scale with a lowered second based on A (as there is a F-natural in b.99), creating a sense of mystery or ambiguity before the return of section A, which is purely diatonic. The dominant pedal point (b.103) builds up in a scalic fashion, from low bass rumblings of the RM, and triumphantly ushers in the liveliness of A1 in G major (b.111). Here, there could be a suggestion of a flexible tempo, perhaps an *accelerando* into section A, as there is a *Tempo I* marking at b.111, with no marked change in tempo beforehand.

In the reprise of the B section, the three themes (B1, B2, B3) are now based on G, but are all surprisingly less stable than before. B1 is now in G major at b.141, yet there is an incongruous F-natural permeating through every bar. B3 appears in b.149, but has a harmony of augmented German 6ths on A-flat (functioning as a dominant to the tonic of G, resolving in b.157), while the graceful fourths of B2 instead move down the whole tone scale (b.157) (Figure 35). Combined with the augmented 6<sup>th</sup>, the entire passage can be analysed as G Locrian—the dissonant modal sound here emphasising the instability, uncertainty, and lack of resolution.

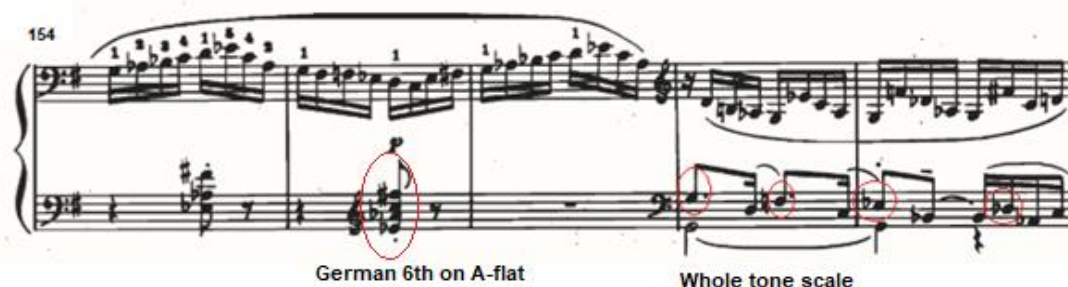


Figure 35. *Skazka* Op.51 No.6: Beginning of the reprise of B2 (b.154-158)

Even the coda, from b.165, is highly chromatic, with more notes foreign to G major than belonging to it. The incongruous F-natural makes a reappearance, held through 3 bars by the damper pedal and the harmonics of other notes, and ringing out on its own.

But something comes to save Ivan from his own foolishness, just as it does in every tale: the *Skazka* ends as it began—exuberantly, with a repeated note—and all is well with the world.

Medtner realized the extent of his ‘Russianness’ in a piece like this, so strongly linked to folklore and folk dance, and the characters of his native land. In 1934, he met Edna Iles in England, who played some pieces for him, including the *6 Skazki*. Of this *Skazka*, he commented: “I don’t know how you have understood it; it is so very Russian!”—and then agreed to teach her on a regular basis (Karpeyev 2014, p.28). To Medtner, there is a meaning in the piece that must be ‘understood’, and it is clear that this understanding stems from its cultural background. Contextual knowledge is implicit in a faithful interpretation, especially to an interpreter coming from a different worldview.

Covatta (1965, p.199) writes that “[Medtner] had a profound understanding of the Russian folk melos and he is perhaps at his best when dealing with the tales of his native land”. It is undoubtedly true that the folkloric background of this *Skazka* has informed and inspired the music. But it is a testament to the composer that the subject has been so vividly depicted, with such harmonic and rhythmic invention, in a piece lasting less than three minutes.



## Conclusion

The *Skazki* “represent an entirely new genre that fuses literary and folk sources with equal parts dark fantasy and theatre” (Rimm 2002, p.131), and stand on their own as an original contribution to the solo piano repertoire. They are arguably Medtner's most accessible works, due to their conciseness, even though they are intricate, technically difficult, and written to a high level of musicianship. This thesis offered another perspective on the *Skazki*, through their narrative and folkloric aspect, and aimed to investigate their sources, musical construction, and to ultimately provide performance analysis and practical suggestions for their interpretation.

Fundamentally, it is important to discuss the genesis of the *Skazki*—the term, historical background, inspiration—as it determines the artistic aims of the composer. To examine the relationship between their musical material and folkloric background, the 6 *Skazki Op.51* have been chosen as an exemplary, well-structured set, and considered as a whole. A detailed discussion of the individual *Skazki* uncovered the individual characteristics of Medtner's compositional style, as well as deeper connections with the cultural context which they were created in.

Two aspects of the 6 *Skazki* are concomitant with a compelling performance. The first is an awareness of their cultural background, narrative aspect, and association with Russian folklore—although there is no published program, these connections help create a sense of ‘meaning’ that is beneficial to both the performer and the audience. Primarily, the 6 *Skazki* have been inspired by (and dedicated to) Cinderella and Ivan-the-fool—two characters from the literary genre of *skazki*, a genre that has no equivalent in the English-speaking world, and it is essential that they be considered in any faithful interpretation. The second is an understanding of Medtner's rhythmic and motivic constructions, the continuous transformations of the thematic material throughout each of the *Skazki*, and the way the *Skazki* invite interpretation of pictorial and narrative content. These illustrate Medtner's command of composition, and strongly affect how passages are interpreted, especially as the *Skazki* are not well-known and have not experienced the weight of scholarship or many recordings.

Both these aspects are addressed in this thesis. The thematic analyses of No.1, No.2 and No.6 provide a systematic basis for an insight into the music itself, while associations with the folktale characters provide an opportunity for the performer to develop an original interpretation. Sometimes, the integration of the two aspects results in



interpretive issues—such as not taking the score directions too literally, and unmarked tempo changes. For an authentic approach to these issues, Medtner's recordings and writings, where appropriate, add to the discussion. A faithful and coherent performance is dependent on the incorporation of both the analytical and the contextual.

This thesis explores the *Skazki* through their narrative aspect, but it also synthesises the existing literature on the 6 *Skazki*, for the eventual goal of performance. In most cases, existing analysis (apart from sonata form in No.3) is perfectly valid, and can be combined with a new viewpoint to provide further insights and greater depth. However, many dissertations just state observations or analyse musical elements, and either generalize over the entire oeuvre to the detriment of individual pieces, or select disparate *Skazki* to analyse, with no connections between them. Instead of separate *Skazki*, this thesis used the platform of the 6 *Skazki*—a set of *Skazki* that tells an interconnected story of Cinderella and Ivan-the-fool, unified through character and atmosphere.

Around the time of the 6 *Skazki*, Sabaneev (1927, p.334) wrote that “today the colossal figure of Medtner is seen as a strange and solitary silhouette on the Russian horizon”. Many commentators suspect that his lack of recognition is simply due to being an anachronism—the result of being born half a century too late, into Modernism, the time of Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Schoenberg. But we are not in that context anymore, and perhaps we are now in a time where we can appreciate the wealth of musicality and the inventiveness in his compositions. Milne (2001, p.vii) believes that “there is not one *Tale* that is without merit, and several that can rightfully claim consideration as masterpieces.” And even though Medtner will “perhaps never... enjoy widespread popularity” (Martyn 1995, p.xiii), we should be grateful that his music is slowly becoming more well-known.

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## ADDENDUM

Medtner's recordings of several of the 6 *Skazki* are on YouTube.

*Skazka* Op.51 No.1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Dmut-XDVcQ>

*Skazka* Op.51 No.2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jobOuAkKvGo>

*Skazka* Op.51 No.3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n638rrFEvOo>

*Skazka* Op.51 No.5

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAM6dgr6xUE>