

MEDTNER THE SYMBOLIST

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## MEDTNER THE SYMBOLIST

Russian Symbolism was an early twentieth-century literary and philosophical movement largely comprised of poets who sought to uncover the religious foundations of human artistic creativity. They understood humanity and the material world to be infused with divine substance which could be expressed (or made manifest) through creative acts. As a part of the broader flourishing of modern religious thought in Russia, Symbolism exceeded the bounds of literature and attracted artists from other disciplines. The composer, Nikolay Medtner (1879-1951), was a prominent figure in the musical, literary, and philosophical circles of pre-Revolutionary Moscow. Friends with several Symbolist figures, most notably Andrey Bely (1880-1934), Medtner cultivated a Symbolist, “theurgic,” aesthetics in his music compositions and writings. His important book, *The Muse and the Fashion*, written years later in exile (1935), should be understood as the concrete extension of Symbolist religious aesthetics to music. Medtner directly participated in the Muscovite literary sphere by setting poetry in metrical forms that influenced the Symbolists’ own versification experiments, like the dolnik. Additionally, I argue that his approach to song composition was itself cultivated from Symbolist precepts, including the desire to unite music and word and to bring out the hidden “rhythms” of the poetry. Bely considered song to be the “most Symbolic art,” and he praised Medtner’s settings of Goethe’s lyrics as authentically Symbolist artworks (despite the German language). Furthermore, Bely considered Medtner’s music to be a direct expression of the “new religious consciousness” and placed it at the heart of his theological efforts to interpret Russian art as the manifestation of Divine Wisdom (Sophia). Medtner was not only a passive recipient of this praise, but actively pursued Symbolist, theurgic, and Sophianic themes in his music and writings. While Medtner has traditionally been excluded from the canon of Russian music, I demonstrate that he deserves pride of place in the historiography as the quintessential Symbolist composer.

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## Introduction

...I remember our meetings  
On a clear, red evening,  
And unending words  
About the unspeakably dear.  
At the time, the church would shine with gold  
In the window above old Moscow,  
And the first lacy flock of snowflakes,  
Swirling over the frozen pavement,  
Would settle into the window...  
That secluded study,  
And Goethe's portrait on the wall...  
Oh, where are you, golden youth!

Above the rows of gas lamps  
A snowstorm begins its sad song...  
Alexey Sergeyevich comes to us,  
Wryly glancing from his pince-nez,  
And smiles at the sunset...  
Awakening the soul's familiar melody,  
Your brother plays his C-minor sonata  
Behind the wall;  
The last chords of the *coda*  
Will pour out, and suddenly break off...  
Oh, if only to the old days  
We could be carried away, my ancient friend!

—Andrey Bely (1909)<sup>1</sup>

Andrey Bely (Boris Bugayev, 1880-1934) sent this poem in January 1909 as a letter to his “ancient friend,” the critic Emil Medtner (1872-1936). Rendering in verse that “one memory in my soul” which “excites and intoxicates,”<sup>2</sup> Bely illuminates deeply-seated impressions and important events from his early career in 1902. The reference to “red” evenings refers to his mystical experiences of Muscovite sunrises and sunsets shared with friends and symbolized by the image of the “dawn” in many works—especially within his first published book, the Second Symphony (1901). Emil Medtner highly prized this Symphony (really a prose-poem) and the phrase

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<sup>1</sup> Second and third stanza of Bely's poem, “E. K. Medtneru (Pis'mo),” in *Urna* (Moscow: Grif, 1909), 128-129. Originally sent as a letter to E. Medtner in January 1909, without the line “Будя в душе напев родной,”. See Andrey Bely and Emily Metner, *Perepiska: 1902-1915*, I, edited by John Malmstad and A. V. Lavrov (Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017), 649-650. “...Помню наши встречи/ Я ясным, красным вечерком,/ И нескончаемые речи/ О несказанно дорогом./ Бывало, церковь золотится/ В окне над старою Москвой,/ И первая в окне ложится,/ Кружась над мерзлой мостовой,/ Снежинок кружевная стая.../ Уединенный кабинет,/ И Гёте на стене портрет.../ О, где ты, юность золотая!/ Над цепью газовых огней/ Пурга уныло песнь заводит.../ К нам Алексей Сергееч входит,/ Лукаво глядя из пенсне,/ И улыбается закату.../ Будя в душе напев родной,/ Твой брат С-мол'ную сонату/ Наигрывает за стеной;/ Последние аккорды *коды*/ Прольются, оборвутся вдруг.../ О, если б нам в былые годы/ Перенестись, старинный друг!”

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., “Мне нечего писать; одно/ В душе моей воспоминанье/ (Волнует и пьянит оно)/ Тяжелое воспоминанье...” From the first stanza.

“unspeakably dear” is a coded reference to his favorite passage. The invocation of “golden youth” and the color gold refer to the mystical brotherhood, the “Argonauts,” that Bely formed with his friends, including Alexey Sergeyevich [Petrovsky], who introduced Bely to Emil in 1901. Bely formulated the Argonauts’ manifesto in his poem “The Golden Fleece,” dedicated to Emil Medtner along with the five-part lyric cycle, “Ancient Friend.” Both appeared in Bely’s first book of poetry, *Gold in Azure*.

“Snowflakes” and “snowstorms” invoke another favorite symbol and one which Bely directly associated with the music of Emil’s brother Nikolay (1879-1951)—a composer and the main subject of this study. The snowstorm’s “sad song” refers to one of Bely’s favorite pieces, Medtner’s early piano work Op. 1/5, which (along with other works) musically depicts the sound of a blizzard. “Goethe’s portrait” refers to the Medtner brothers’ love of Goethe, which found musical expression in Nikolay’s song settings of Goethe’s lyrics (praised in print by Bely). The “C-minor sonata” is really Nikolay Medtner’s F-minor Sonata, Op. 5—a work Bely first heard in fall of 1902 and which made a deep and formative impression. The “soul’s familiar melody” refers to Bely’s favorite melody from the sonata: its plaintive second theme (first appearing in C-minor, so his musical memory was not so bad). The sources of all these references will be fully examined in the course of this dissertation, which showcases more than just the importance of Nikolay Medtner’s music for the Symbolist poet and essayist Andrey Bely—here I show that Medtner himself was a Symbolist.

The Russian Symbolists loved a good mystery, and the most perplexing one of all surely is the bizarre disappearance of Symbolism’s greatest musical representative from the annals of history. Absent from scholarly accounts of Symbolism in both literary and musicological studies, Medtner’s music disappeared from the world along with the gas lamps and bright snowstorms of old Moscow. Bely heard in his music the icy song of those snowstorms: “The howl of the elements, hostile to man from time immemorial, sings, screams, and wails in Medtner’s music, complexly layered like the



crosscutting gusts of a whirling snowstorm.”<sup>3</sup> This richly complex, hermetic music gave expression to the deepest aesthetic, philosophic, and religious questions of the age. It offers us a tantalizing glimpse into the apocalyptic visions and mystical ecstasies of Moscow’s intellectual and cultural elite in the waning years of the Russian empire. Here, in the small world of Russia’s two capitals, emerged a group of literary, religious, and musical figures with an unprecedented level of immersion in European culture from all nations and centuries. Russian Symbolism was born of two desires: to understand artistic creativity as religious creation, and to assimilate the collective achievements of European civilization into art both new and eternal. Yet, soon they would be swallowed whole by the violent convulsions of the twentieth-century, condemning them to oblivion.

Medtner’s songs and chamber works taken on their own offer plenty of rewards to the persistent listener. His sophisticated refinement of tonality—what he considered to be a universal collective language—represents a continued development of the voice-leading, rhythmic, and formal practices of the common-practice period. Yet, without closer examination of the historical contexts, specifically Russian Symbolism, that conditioned Medtner’s compositional approach and beliefs, the modern listener has no hope of accessing its mystical, philosophical, and literary content. This is not a matter of diligently amassing quotations from contemporaries to prove a general kinship between creative artists working simultaneously in different media. The result of such an exercise would only be to show that the common ideals of a time and place were indeed commonly held. Moreover, it would risk subordinating Medtner and his music to writers with greater skill at the literary presentation of such ideals. The point is that Medtner was not merely influenced by Symbolism, but was himself an active, indeed major, participant in the propagation of its artistic and mystical ideals,

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<sup>3</sup> Andrey Bely, “Snezhnye arabeski,” *Советская музыка* 3 (1990 [1911]): 122. Accessible here: <https://mus.academy/articles/snezhnye-arabeski>. “Вой стихий, искони человеку враждебных, поет, кричит, голосит в многосложной, как сети перекрещивающихся рукавов метельных, музыке Метнера.”

just like his brother, Emil, who worked as an Imperial censor, cultural critic, and later as the publisher of the Symbolist house, Musaget.

Emil's correspondence with Bely, recently published in its entirety in 2017, is of foundational importance for assessing the Medtner's involvement with Symbolism and will be used extensively here. In his unfortunately widely-quoted late memoirs, *Nachalo veka* (1933), Bely paints a picture of Emil as kind of mesmerizing monster forcing German music and philosophy on him (likely to appease Soviet authorities). This picture is not at all accurate—both men had deep and longstanding interests in German philosophy and culture prior to meeting, indeed that must have been one reason for their friendship. Emil's personal and professional interest in the latest developments in Russian literature and mysticism, and his recognition of Bely's leading position after the publication of his Second Symphony in 1902, was the primary reason for the establishment of relations.<sup>4</sup>

Major elements of Symbolist religious aesthetics, like the doctrines of Sophia (Divine Wisdom as a mediator between human and divine) and theurgy (divine-human creativity), originated in the philosophy and mystical poetry of Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900).<sup>5</sup> Medtner's music was motivated by these same religious-philosophical premises, specifically his belief in the theurgical power of art and visions of Sophia as a Muse. Alongside Medtner and Bely, Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949) and Alexander Blok (1880-1921) were the primary inheritors of Solovyov's ideas, which proved to catalyzing for their poetry and prose. Bely himself noted a prophetic, mystical kinship between Medtner and Blok—the greatest Symbolist poet—and resorted to Blok's (and Solovyov's)

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<sup>4</sup> Their correspondence often takes the form of Bely explaining in remarkably long letters whatever recent philosophy, mysticism, or occultism he has studied, while Emil encourages him to learn German so he can read Nietzsche and Goethe in the original (Bely was already familiar with many works in translation by these authors, which he had read on his own accord). I should note that the unfinished Berlin version of Bely's memoirs, *Nachalo veka* (edited by A. V. Lavrov and published by Nauka, 2014), as well as other earlier memoirs from the 1920s, offers a more balanced picture of the Medtner's—along with considerably more factual information. This greater abundance, however, has caused scholars to simply mix the two versions together as if they were both equally reliable—see for example, Rosamund Bartlett's account of Bely and Emil in her otherwise fantastic *Wagner and Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 140-167.

<sup>5</sup> The best guide to Solovyov's ideas on these topics is Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov* (Cornell University Press, 2009).

poetry to “explain” Medtner’s music. These Symbolist poets sought to instill their creation with musical rhythms, melodic intonational patterns, and symphonic structures as a means to express hidden depths lurking behind the poetic image. On the other hand, Medtner sought to bring out those hidden poetic rhythms and melodies in his song settings. Friends and critics both lauded his ability to scan verse and reveal latent rhythms. For example, of Medtner’s first cycle of Goethe lieder, Bely wrote that, “one is involuntarily amazed by the fact that the music for Goethe’s songs was not written, but rather taken as if from the songs themselves. And yet, within the limits of Goethe’s melody, the composer freely shapes the music.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite his relatively unknown status today, Medtner was held in high regard by an elite circle of devoted admirers who appreciated the hermetic complexity, rarefied lyricism, and mystical content of the music. Yet, the very qualities that entranced his fans precluded his music from achieving the broad popularity of his friend and champion, Sergey Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), who stayed somewhat aloof from Medtner’s Symbolist circles.<sup>7</sup> The two composers met as early as 1902 when Rachmaninoff invited the younger composer to perform his first piano sonata, and they formed a close professional relationship in 1909, serving together on the board of Serge Koussevitzky’s Russian Music Publishing house.<sup>8</sup> Rachmaninoff was the most brilliant and precocious product of the Moscow Conservatory, which awarded him its “Great Gold Medal” in 1892 for high honors in both piano and composition. His fast start was soon hampered by strong criticism in the Russian press, and he faced a crippling crisis of confidence in his abilities around the

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix A for citation and original Russian.

<sup>7</sup> Rachmaninoff eventually fell under Medtner’s influence to some extent, adopting a new style of song composition more Symbolist in character in his Opp. 34 and 38. In a recent article, Philip Ross Bullock traces Rachmaninoff’s convergence with Symbolism around 1912 and attributes it to the influence of the Armenian poet Marietta Shaginyan. See Bullock, “Rachmaninoff and the ‘Vocalise’: Word and Music in the Russian Silver Age,” in *Rachmaninoff and His World*, edited by Bullock (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 82-101. He does not appear to realize that at the time Shaginyan was a protégé of the Medtners, especially Emil, with whom she was living. Furthermore, Bullock invokes Bely’s writings on Medtner, but dismisses them out of hand as representative of a “metaphorical, not practical” interest in music (pg. 93).

<sup>8</sup> Known in the West as *Editions Russes de Musique*.

turn of the century—when Medtner was enrolled as a concert pianist at the Moscow Conservatory. A prized pupil of its director Vasily Safonov, Medtner, upon graduation in 1900, was awarded the “Small Gold Medal” in anticipation of a bright performance career. Unlike Rachmaninoff, he did not undergo the conservatory’s composition course. After graduation, Medtner abandoned a performance career to devote himself to composition, to the surprise of his colleagues and to the anger of Safonov. Seeking to fill some technical gaps, Medtner sporadically consulted Sergey Taneyev (1856-1915) on matters of musical form during 1902-03.<sup>9</sup> Taneyev, typically dismissed in the music historiography as an arch-conservative, was in actual fact one of the most important cultural figures of the Russian Silver Age and hosted a popular salon. He was a long-time acquaintance of Andrey Bely, whom he taught about musical rhythm, and set to music the Symbolist translations of Bely’s friend Ellis (Lev Kobylinsky, 1879-1947). Nevertheless, Medtner mainly learned his trade the old-fashioned way—by careful study of the scores of the masters. Beethoven, Wagner, Schumann, and Chopin were his composers of choice, and the result was a fastidious compositional style in which harmonic and phrase structural conventions are twisted to the limits of recognition while ensconced in highly original rhythmic and formal practices.

Medtner published his first opus in the spring of 1903, which was heralded in print by Andrey Bely, in one of the earliest articles published on the composer.<sup>10</sup> Medtner was by no means prolific, yet by 1906 he had swiftly risen to the top of Moscow’s musical ranks. His early musical idols were the conductor Arthur Nikisch (under whom Medtner first performed Beethoven’s fourth

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<sup>9</sup> See Christoph Flamm, *Der russische Komponist Nikolaj Medtner* (Verlag Ernst Kuhn, 1995), 5-7.

<sup>10</sup> Bely’s essay entitled, “On Theurgy.” See Chapter Two for discussion and citation. There are two collections of Bely’s essays that have appeared in English. The first is Steven Cassedy, trans. and ed., *Selected Essays of Andrey Bely* (University of California Press, 1984). The second is Andrey Bely, *Between Crisis and Catastrophe: Lyrical and Mystical Essays*, trans. Boris Jakim (Semantron Press, 2016). Jakim, a veteran translator of Russian religious thought, stunningly renders Bely’s mystical essays into English. While neither collection includes Bely’s writings on Medtner, this latter collection is extremely useful for those interested in the mystical basis of Russian Symbolism and contains other writings by Bely on music.

concerto, for which he would later compose cadenzas), the pianist Josef Hofmann (who championed Medtner's first piano sonata), and Maria Olenina-d'Alheim (who pioneered the art of chamber singing in Russia and who would later premiere several of Medtner's best songs). He was also deeply influenced by the earlier music of Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915), before the latter left Russia in 1904 and subsequently developed an idiosyncratic theosophy which prompted him to gradually abandon tonality.

An important turning point in Medtner's career was a private recital given in the mansion of Margarita Morozova (1873-1958) on October 31, 1906 (repeated for the public the following week). Here he premiered about half of his eleven opuses, including his first book of Goethe lieder.<sup>11</sup> Goethe was a major "father" of Russian Symbolism, ubiquitously quoted as a source of infallible wisdom and mystical insight and viewed as a great master of poetic form worthy of emulation. While Medtner's use of Goethe's lyrics was sometimes derided as old-fashioned Germanophilia, it instead reveals deep awareness of Symbolist versification trends, as well as knowledge of Goethe's mystical import. Emil's own cult of Goethe was matched by Vyacheslav Ivanov's interest in the German poet.<sup>12</sup> In the early years of the century, Emil certainly tried to expose both Bely and his brother to a wider range of German culture and literature, especially Goethe, but his most important contribution at this early stage was that he brought Nikolay and Bely into close contact while they were both impressionable twenty-two-year-olds. As a result, a certain mutual interpenetration of ideas and influences developed between Bely's writings and Nikolay's compositions. This surely unique relationship in the history of music and literature no doubt further instigated Bely's experiments with the rhythms and melodies of language—what would become the defining element

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<sup>11</sup> Bely had in April 1906 published a review of Medtner's new Goethe lieder, Op. 6, in the Symbolist/contemporary arts journal, *The Golden Fleece*, where Emil worked as a music critic. See Appendix A for text and translation. N. Medtner would publish his setting of Bely's poem "*Zolotomu blesku veril'*" in that magazine in 1908—becoming the first and only composer to have a score published in a Symbolist journal.

<sup>12</sup> See Michael Wachtel, *Russian Symbolism and Literary Tradition: Goethe, Novalis, and the Poetics of Vyacheslav Ivanov* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

of his literary style. On the other hand, Nikolay developed an early and unusual love for poetry, which heavily influenced his musical development and “compensated” for his lack of formalized conservatory composition training. Medtner’s keen interests in literature and religious mysticism led him to participate in Moscow’s literary and religious-philosophical circles, and Bely introduced him to many important figures.

This included Margarita Morozova, perhaps the wealthiest widow in all of Moscow. She was far more than an arts Maecenas, and it is difficult to overstate her significance in all areas of Muscovite cultural life. Notably, she founded the Religious-Philosophical Society in Memory of Vladimir Solovyov in 1905 (a central point of activity for Symbolists) and served on the board of the Russian Musical Society. Known primarily to musicologists as Scriabin’s generous patron, Morozova was an intimate friend and supporter of the Medtners and of Bely. Her support undoubtedly helped to catapult Nikolay to the frontlines of Russian musical life.

As Medtner became firmly established as a major figure in Russian musical life by the end of 1900s, he was frequently compared with Scriabin by critics who viewed the two composers as the main representatives of different sides of a fundamental dichotomy present in Russian music. In 1911, the critic Yury Engel gave this dichotomy fullest expression, in an article worth quoting at length due to the myriad ways in which it sheds light on state of Russian music as viewed at the height of Symbolism before the outbreak of World War I:

Scriabin would like to break from the past altogether, even to upend the old foundations of harmony. Medtner always leans on the past—from the seeds of which he can, however, grow fresh new flowers. Scriabin craves an orgy of sounds and colors; the orchestra is no longer enough for him, and he now wants to add light and even smells! Medtner is content for now with the piano and voice, and even the violin. Scriabin is a colorist-impressionist who is able to be not only deafeningly flashy, but also elusively light and airy. With Medtner, coloring is in the background. Medtner’s strict, mature, even somewhat heavy style could be likened to a Doric column; Scriabin’s *très parfumé*, in contrast, is like a Corinthian column. Scriabin is rushing somewhere into the superterrestrial spheres of the “*Übermensch*,” Medtner is on earth. Scriabin’s ecstasy leads to some kind of hashish-fueled vertigo, from which the

mysticism of the Middle Ages and the zeal of the Khlysty<sup>13</sup> emanates; Medtner's elevated pathos pours into a bright, measured dithyramb,<sup>14</sup> in which there is something akin to the harmonious strictness of the ancient world and the neoclassicism of Goethe.<sup>15</sup>

To Engel, Scriabin exemplifies the yearning of modernity for new sounds, colors, and experiences. Whereas Medtner is much more in line with the Symbolists' retrospective humanism and cult of form. Engel seems unaware of the deeply mystical basis of Medtner's "elevated pathos" and, like most critics at the time, heavily overemphasizes the classical "strictness" of Medtner's music. Engel's review shows the great extent to which the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche had penetrated Russian intellectual life in the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> While Medtner, Bely, and the Symbolists were heavily influenced by a Nietzsche's ideas—which they understood through a Christian lens—Engel's use of the word "*übermensch*" as something "superterrestrial" reflects a popular understand of Nietzsche that had little to do with his actual philosophy. In *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Nietzsche develops the concept of the "*übermensch*" as a representative of the highest form of humanity on earth, in opposition to the "superterrestrial" heavens of established religion. It is this grounded, "earthly" interpretation of Nietzsche that would become essential for the Symbolists proper, especially Bely and Ivanov, who, in their endless zeal for reconciling modern European philosophy with Christianity, sought to unite Nietzsche's cult of the earth with the

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<sup>13</sup> A rural religious (Pentecostal-type) sect known for ecstatic rituals, whirling dances, and speaking in tongues.

<sup>14</sup> The term for a hymn to Dionysus, which in Medtner's music is stately and exalted rather than frenzied.

<sup>15</sup> Yuly Engel, Review of Medtner's 7 March 1911 recital, reproduced in Flamm, *Medtner*, 298-99. "Скрябин хотел бы вовсе оторваться от прошлого, даже перевернуть вверх дном старые основы гармонии. Медтнер всегда опирается на прошлое, из семян которого умеет, однако, выращивать свежие, новые цветы. Скрябин жаждет оргии звуков и красок, ему уже мало и оркестра, к которому он стремится прибавить свет и даже запахи! Медтнер довольствуется покуда фортепиано и голосом, да еще скрипкой. Скрябин - колорист-импрессионист, умеющий быть не только оглушительно-ослепительным, но и неуловимо-легким, воздушным. У Медтнера колорит - на втором плане. Строгий, выдержанный, даже несколько тяжеловатый стиль Медтнера можно уподобить дорийской колонне; скрябинский *très parfumé*, в противовес ему, уподобится тогда колонне коринфской. Скрябин рвется куда-то в надземные, „сверхчеловеческие" сферы; Медтнер на земле. Экстаз Скрябина приводит к какому-то гашишному *vertige*'у („вертежу"), от которого веет мистикой средневековья и хлыстовских радений; подъем Медтнера выливается в светлый, размеренный дифирамб, в котором есть нечто родственное стройной строгости античного мира и неоклассицизму Гете."

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of Nietzsche's influence, see Bernice Rosenthal's introduction to *Nietzsche in Russia* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

Christian heavens. Medtner himself treats *Zarathustra* precisely in this fashion in a program note for a 1909 song recital (reproduced in Appendix B).

From Engel's facetious description of both Scriabin and Medtner, it is clear which of the two has received greater attention in the modern scholarly literature. Indeed, Scriabin has become the face of musical Symbolism in Anglo-American musicology, while Medtner's name is nearly absent. The most important musicological monographs of Silver Age musical culture are Simon Morrison's *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* and Richard Taruskin's *Defining Russia Musically*, neither of which offer more than a passing (and largely dismissive) mention of Medtner. The major scholarly work on Medtner remains Christoph Flamm's pioneering German-language dissertation, *Der russische Komponist Nikolaj Metner*. Flamm was the first and to this point, only, musicologist to take seriously Medtner's relationship with Bely and to try to integrate Medtner into broader Symbolist contexts.<sup>17</sup> The intellectual historian, Rebecca Mitchell, has also examined the Medtner's brothers in the context of late-Imperial "musical metaphysics" in her *Nietzsche's Orphans*.

Generally speaking, the widely held notion of Scriabin as the archetype of the Symbolist composer has obscured the true historical picture. And yet, the central argument of my dissertation is that Medtner is more representative of Symbolism's main religious-aesthetic currents and that Scriabin is something of an outlier and latecomer. Biographically speaking, this point is obvious. Medtner was physically present in Moscow during the height of Symbolism as a movement, from approximately 1903<sup>18</sup> to its fracturing in 1910. On the other hand, Scriabin left Russia at the start of

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<sup>17</sup> My dissertation builds directly on his work. Recently, an important collection of essays on Medtner has appeared: Christoph Flamm and Wendelin Bitzan, eds., *Nikolaj Medtner: Music, Aesthetics, and Contexts* (Olms Verlag, 2021). See also Wendelin Bitzan's dissertation on Medtner's sonatas, available here: <https://doi.org/10.25366/2019.15>. In Russian, there is an extensive literature on Emil Medtner and his publishing house Musaget, but the most significant recent collection of work on Nikolaj himself is E. B. Dolinskaya, ed., Николай Метнер: Незабываемые мотивы, К 140-летию композитора (Moscow Conservatory, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> In 1903 the poetry of Bely, Blok, and Ivanov (and the music of Medtner) all appeared in print for the first time.



1904 and moved back in 1910.<sup>19</sup> That year produced the so-called “crisis of Symbolism,” in which the poet Valery Bryusov defected from the movement with an essay balking at the idea that art should be yoked to religion. Ivanov, Blok, and Bely all leapt to the defense of their ideals, with the latter using Bryusov’s own words from earlier in the decade against him.<sup>20</sup>

The rapid rate of change in the first decade of the twentieth century means that one cannot speak of the Russian music of 1903 in the same terms as 1913. Yet, scholars like Taruskin and Morrison write about Medtner’s Op. 1 (1903) as if it should be in the style of Scriabin’s experiments of a decade later to justify Bely’s praise of it as a major theurgic contribution to Symbolism. Taruskin claims that the Medtner brothers were “the most conservative musical thinkers of the day,” when, in 1903, Medtner’s music was no less harmonically “advanced” than Scriabin’s. The latter composer was eight years older and already well established as a Moscow conservatory professor by the time Medtner graduated from the same conservatory. Bely in 1903 would not necessarily have imagined that Scriabin would make such extraordinary harmonic innovations in ten years’ time. Taruskin adds further confusion to the historical picture when he correctly identifies that the Medtner brothers were “extremely influential among the literati of Moscow,” but then states that the only musicians who made any effort to navigate the gulf between literature and music were Scriabin and Mikhail Gnesin.<sup>21</sup>

In a 1906 article on Medtner, Bely acknowledged Scriabin’s great importance for new Russian music, while still placing Medtner ahead.<sup>22</sup> But after Scriabin’s return home in 1910, his fame in his native country began to increase exponentially as his exotically colorful music and personal,

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<sup>19</sup> The standard biography of Scriabin is Faubion Bowers, *Scriabin: A Biography*, Second Edition (Dover, 1996). For recent perspectives on Scriabin’s music and mysticism, see Kenneth Smith and Vasilis Kallis, editors, *Demystifying Scriabin* (Boydell, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> All of these respective essays appear translated in Ronald Peterson, ed., *The Russian Symbolists: An Anthology of Critical and Theoretical Writings* (Ardis, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Taruskin, *Traditions*, 780-81.

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix A for text.

syncretic esotericism was easy material for the newspapers. Insofar as Scriabin's mysticism was not rooted in Christianity, he was quite distant theologically from even Vyacheslav Ivanov—the Symbolist who took up Scriabin's cause in 1913.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Michael Wachtel argues that Ivanov thought of Scriabin as an artist beyond the bounds of Symbolism, a “true post-Symbolist” for breaking through the “limits” of art to which Symbolism itself adhered.<sup>24</sup>

Russian Symbolism is often misleadingly depicted as divided into two generations, with older Symbolists interested in aestheticism and the younger generation (represented by Andrey Bely, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Alexander Blok, and Nikolay Medtner) interested in mysticism. This division has little basis in reality. For example, Valery Bryusov, despite being typically assigned to the first generation and somewhat of a Francophile aesthete, was in fact the *de facto* leader of the junior Symbolists, who were influenced by his mystically-charged programmatic essays outlining the direction of Symbolism. They were also subject to his masterful organizational and promotional skills. He controlled the primary Symbolist journal, *Libra*, from 1904-1909 and the Muscovite *Society for Free Aesthetics* from 1906. Within this latter society all major representatives of literature, visual arts, and music mingled, lectured, and performed, including Medtner. Bely tried to get Emil Medtner published in *Libra*, but he ended up working for the rival contemporary arts journal *The Golden Fleece* instead.

Bryusov, in his 1904 essay “Keys to the Mysteries,” declared that “art is what in other areas we call revelation. Works of art are doors half-opened to Eternity.”<sup>25</sup> A year later he penned the mystic Symbolists' most iconic manifesto:

Let the poet create, not his books, but his own life. Let him keep the altar fire burning, like Vesta's fire, let him kindle a good bonfire, unafraid of burning himself and his life in it. We

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<sup>23</sup> See Rebecca Mitchell's *Nietzsche's Orphans* (Yale University Press, 2015), for an overview of Scriabin's many divergences from mainstream Symbolism (pgs. 98-99).

<sup>24</sup> See Wachtel's editorial commentary in Vyacheslav Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, trans. Robert Bird, ed. Michael Wachtel (Northwestern University Press, 2001), 312-13.

<sup>25</sup> Bryusov, “Keys to the Mysteries,” in *Russian Symbolists*, 62.

throw ourselves on the altar of our divinity. Only a priest's knife, cutting our breasts, gives us the right to be called a poet.<sup>26</sup>

Bryusov's exhortations are impressively vivid, showing the influence of Solovyov and especially of Bely's early essays. His colleagues—younger and older—explored more deeply the religious and aesthetic implications of this mystical vision of artistic creation. From the very beginning of Symbolism in Russia, artistic creation was reimagined as a religious act. The first Russian writer to invoke Symbolism as a new literary movement, Dmitry Merezhkovsky (in his 1892 lecture “On the Reasons for the Decline and the New Currents in Contemporary Russian Literature”), declared its three main elements to be “*mystical contents, symbols*, and a broadening of artistic sensitivity.”<sup>27</sup> Merezhkovsky, often inexplicably lumped in with the earlier, supposedly non-mystical generation of Symbolists, was in fact one of Russia's most influential religious philosophers. He conveyed his apocalyptic doctrine of a “third testament” through his novels, poetry, and articles. Desiring most of all to unite the humanity of paganism with the divinity of Christianity, he believed that Christianity should not be restricted to just churchly matters, but should actively permeate all areas of life. This “new religious consciousness” influenced Symbolists and other religious thinkers, especially the young Andrey Bely (who lived with the Merezhkovskys at various points). Yet, Merezhkovsky's eventual abandonment of art for religion and his belief that radical action was necessary in founding a new church would alienate most of his younger Symbolist colleagues—who were keen to unite artistic and religious creative activity and who were typically reluctant to break completely with Orthodoxy.

Bely and Ivanov, the two main theorists of Symbolism, derived its basis from the philosophy of Solovyov. Most significantly, the latter postulated that there was no hard and fast distinction

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<sup>26</sup> Bryusov, “Holy Sacrifice,” in *Symbolists*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> Merezhkovsky, “On the Reasons,” in *Symbolists*, 21. It would take over a decade from the point of this speech for Symbolism to reach maturity and general recognition as a movement.

between the material and the spiritual—that the spiritual can be directly perceived within the material which embodies it. Material reality is ugly and perishable not because it is fundamentally opposed to the ideal, but due to the imperfect embodiment of the ideal within it. Thus, in Solovyov’s thinking, the perfect embodiment of the ideal or the divine within material reality would “spiritualize” or transfigure it, rendering it perfect and immortal. This idea, which he called “theurgy,” is an extension of the theological basis of Christ’s resurrection and transfiguration to all of creation. Humanity participates in the creative project of theurgy by striving to more perfectly embody the divine in the material artifacts of creation. Symbolist art is that which strives to instill the eternal into the contingent, the spiritual into the material, the divine into the mundane.

While Medtner is unknown as a theorist of Symbolism, his 1935 book, *The Muse and the Fashion*, should be considered a major Symbolist aesthetic treatise and the only one concerning music in any depth.<sup>28</sup> Symbolism was part of a broader resurgence of religious thought in Russia that survived into the emigration. Many of the figures active in pre-Revolutionary symbolist-religious circles emigrated after the Bolshevik revolution (or were forcibly exiled) and continued their activities abroad, including Ivanov, the Medtners, their close friend Ivan Ilyin, and the Sophiologist Sergius Bulgakov. Those who stayed included Blok (who died young in 1921), Bely (who died of cerebral hemorrhage in 1934), and Pavel Florensky (who was murdered by the Soviets in 1937). While Medtner’s book was commissioned and published originally by Rachmaninoff, it was reissued by the YMCA-Press in Paris—the central organ of Russian religious thought abroad. That press was headed by Nikolay Berdyaev, the most well-known religious philosopher abroad. Thus Medtner’s book must also be considered in the context of the development of Russian religious thought in

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<sup>28</sup> Nikolay Metner, *Muza i moda* (Tair, 1935). “Tair” was Sergey Rachmaninoff’s publishing company (named after the first letters of his two daughters’ names). Rachmaninoff initially wanted to issue a new version of Emil Medtner’s 1912 book, *Modernizm i muzyka*, but Emil declined the offer claiming that his brother had supplanted him as a theorist. The American musicologist Alfred Swan translated Medtner’s book into English in 1951 and published it as, *The Muse and the Fashion: being a defense of the foundations of the Art of Music* (Haverford College Bookstore, 1951).

exile.<sup>29</sup> Following in the footsteps of Solovyov, Bely, and Ivanov, Medtner defined “symbolism” [СИМВОЛИЧНОСТЬ] in his book as the “mystical spiritual significance” of an artwork, claiming that “genuine symbolism is not a type of artistic thought, but the degree of its spiritual penetration.”<sup>30</sup>

The main purpose of Medtner’s book is to develop a Symbolist theory of music as a language capable of conveying mystical experience otherwise inexpressible in ordinary words—similar to the Symbolists’ conception of poetic language. This musical language—rooted in tonality, which Medtner viewed as the manifestation on earth of the heavenly song above—is capable of producing magical and even spiritual effects upon the world when wielded by a composer deeply attuned to the mystical sources of music within the soul. Unfortunately, in the English translation much of Medtner’s thought is obscured by the poor word choice of the translator, Alfred Swan, who clearly was not steeped in Symbolist religious aesthetics. When I provide quotations from the book, I use my translations of the original Russian, which I provide in the footnotes alongside citations to Swan’s translation.

Here I would like to briefly discuss two specific terms Medtner employs which are crucial to his argument, yet which are translated so poorly that comprehension of the original meaning becomes impossible. The first example is the word “zaklinat” (and its noun form “zaklinanie”). This word has a simple meaning of to “cast a spell” or to “make an incantation,” but it can also mean “to conjure” or even “to exorcise.” At a general level it means to impose one’s will on the surroundings through magical means.<sup>31</sup> Medtner uses it in different contexts to mean all these things, but the translator consistently renders it as “to exorcize” or “exorcism.” This choice fatally obscures the primary usage of the term—to indicate the power of music to spellbind audiences and the power of

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<sup>29</sup> This is especially true given Medtner close relationship with the philosopher Ivan Ilyin—someone equally concerned with the Christian basis of artistic creation.

<sup>30</sup> Medtner, *Мусе*, 128-129 (translation altered). “Ведь подлинная символичность не есть качество мысли, а степень ее духовной проникновенности.”

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Ivan Pogrebnyak for help with this discussion.

good thematic material to “inspire” the basic harmonies and formulas of tonal music, transforming them into powerful incantations.

The second example is, unfortunately, much more egregious as it relates to the fundamental basis of Medtner’s entire theory of music as a language. Swan translates “smysl” as “sense” when it should be rendered as “meaning.” Thus, over the entire course of the book, we read about the “senses” of the musical language, rather than its “meanings,” ironically rendering a large portion of the book completely nonsensical. Medtner built his theory of music as a language from the same philosophical sources as Bely did in his many writings on poetic language and Symbolism. In short, the “meanings” of the musical language are the building blocks of music and correspond roughly to the words in a poem: Medtner’s reasoning is simple, since the musical language does not have words, then it must deal directly with the “meanings” instead. He believed that a composer could express mystical experience of the heavenly song through the musical language and the “meanings” available to it, just like a poet could express that same experience through combinations of words. Medtner created an entire musical theory to account for these “meanings,” which emerge from the rules of tonal voice-leading.

Medtner defined the musical language in clear theological terms: “Just as man is the image and likeness of God, so too the language of music is, as it were, the image and likeness of praise to God.”<sup>32</sup> Composers effectively serve as mystics who possess a special awareness of this heavenly music within their souls. This is the “original meaning” of music, and one which transforms the varied history of musical practice into one divine language connecting all of humanity: “Only those who value this connection are given mastery of the musical ‘language,’ and only through the sacred

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<sup>32</sup> From unpublished notes written after Medtner completed his book. Original Russian text (with German translation) in Flamm, *Metner*, 246-47. My translation.

protection of this connection can musical art be created and endure.”<sup>33</sup> Over the centuries, composers have gradually uncovered the rules and foundations of the musical language and thus comprise a mystical community linked across space and time. Individually, composers, through quiet contemplation and attunement to the soul, can incorporate glimpses of the heavenly music in the form of inspired musical “themes” into their music. Drawing to some extent on Orthodox ascetic mysticism, Medtner states that composers must constantly “tune” their inner “lyre” so as to be able to intone music’s “elementary meanings.”<sup>34</sup>

Medtner’s emphasis on inner mystical experience as the true content of art is directly prefigured by Bely’s definition of the symbol. This definition, heavily indebted to Solovyov’s trinitarian Sophiology, relies on a triadic structure wherein the unity of two opposites is expressed by way of a third thing.<sup>35</sup> To Bely, every symbol is a “triad” (“abc”) made up of three components: an “image of nature embodied in sound, color, and word” (“b”) which is manipulated so as to completely express a subjective “experience” (“c”)—this combination of outer image and inner experience together makes an “indivisible creative unity” (“a”), which takes on its own independent existence as a symbol.<sup>36</sup> As Bely sums it up, a “symbol is an image transformed by experience.” Symbolism in poetry is thus the expression of inner experience through the manipulation of images (typically of nature), words, and sounds—which thus come to embody those experiences. Like Medtner, Bely calls the inner mystical experience of the poet the “melodiousness” of the soul, or a

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<sup>33</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 8 (translation altered). “Только тому, кто дорожит этой связью, дается владение музыкальным «языком», и только путем священного охранения этой связи могло создаться и будет живо музыкальное искусство.”

<sup>34</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 2 (translation altered).

<sup>35</sup> For example, in Solovyov’s system Christ is the union of the Logos with Sophia.

<sup>36</sup> Andrey Bely, “Simvolizm,” in *Arabeski* (Moscow, Musaget, 1911), 245. This article was originally written as a lecture in 1909 and is accessible here: [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_14\\_1907\\_arabesky.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_14_1907_arabesky.shtml). “А поскольку символ есть образ, претворенный переживанием, постольку символисты указывают на тройственное начало символа; всякий символ есть триада “abc”, где “a” -- неделимое творческое единство, и котором сочетаются два слагаемые (“b” образ природы, воплощенный в звуке, краске, слове, и “c” переживание, свободно располагающее материал звуков, красок и слов, чтобы этот материал всецело выразил переживание)...”

“music-generated vision”—which must be given form by being clothed in words, sounds, and images:<sup>37</sup>

The Symbolist is one who involuntarily beholds the very inspiration of poetry in a music-generated vision; in this he coincides with the Romantic.

The Symbolist is one who encloses a music-generated phenomenon, this flesh of his song, in a strong word. And that is why he stands for the strong forged word with all his soul; this forged-ness of the word permits him to be a Classic.

The Symbolist is one who, for the strength and forged-ness of the word, will not surrender the wordlessness and namelessness of the melodies that sound within him—just as he is one who, in the name of these soulful stirrings, will not betray the beautiful sound of the word, taken on its own.<sup>38</sup>

The Symbolist carefully balance the Romantic’s deep attunement to the musical-mystical movements of the soul with the formal sophistication achieved through the mastery of Classical methods. A powerful mystical vision needs a “strong word” to be properly conveyed.

What is astounding, and heretofore unnoticed, is the great extent to which Bely here prefigures the main points of Medtner’s book, written over two decades later. Just like Bely, Medtner experienced mystical visions of music within his soul (what he called the initial or heavenly song) from which he acquired his thematic ideas. These must then be embodied in musical form and clothed in harmony—the forms and harmonies of which must be organically derived from the practice of the greatest Classical masters. Medtner’s refusal to abandon tonality emerges directly from Bely’s desire to “stand for the strong forged word with all his soul”:

Musical content is ineffable. Musical form is nothing other than musical content directed to our musical consciousness.... The ineffable content of music, indefinable through words,

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<sup>37</sup> I summarize Bely’s discussion of this topic in his crowning essay on Symbolism as an artistic method, the article “O simvolizme,” which he published in the first issue of Musaget’s magazine *Trudy i dni* (Jan-Feb 1912). This article is reproduced with editorial notes in Yu. K. Gerasimov, ed., *Literaturnye manifesty i deklaratsii russkogo modernizma: Nauchnoe uzdanie* (Pushkinsky Dom, 2017), 430-446. See especially 436-38.

<sup>38</sup> Andrey Bely, “O simvolizme,” in *Manifesty*, 438. “Символист--это тот, кто самое вдохновение поэзии произвольно видит в музыкой порожденном видении; в этом он совпадает с романтиком. Символист--это тот, кто музыкой порожденное явление, эту плоть его песни, заключает в крепкое слово. И потому-то за крепкое кованное слово он стоит всей душой; эта кованность слова позволяет ему и быть классиком. Символист--это тот, кто за крепкость и кованность слова не отдаст бессловесности, безымянности ему звучащих мелодий, как и тот, кто во имя этих волнений не предаст прекрасной звучности слова, взятой самое по себе.” Here Bely relies on the antinomial logic of Christological theology—in the person of Christ is combined someone one-hundred percent God (“Word”) with someone one-hundred percent Man (“Flesh”). Christ thus exists as the union of those two persons. This is the theological origin of Bely’s definition of the artistic symbol.



demands the most clear-cut form in sounds.... The content of Beethoven's symphonies, inexpressibly irrational to the point of intoxication, has become accessible to our musical consciousness thanks to the divine clarity, the precision of musical form.<sup>39</sup>

Artistic contents must be expressed in and through form—but what exactly are these contents? For both Bely and Medtner, the inner perturbations of the soul from which artistic content emerged were ineffably musical in nature. For Bely, this music was concretely expressed in the rhythms of poetry—in the movement of words and images rather than in themselves. For Medtner, intuited snatches of the soul's melody must be used as thematic material to be developed in compositions. Thus, the musical theme contains a glimpse of ineffable mystical experience, that shard of Eternity, the divine within the material. The artist cannot invent themes, but can only experience them in mystical visions. To facilitate this transmission, the artist must sit patiently, absorbed in silent contemplation like an ascetic: “Every artist learns primarily from themes that appear to him in silence. If silence does not reveal anything to him, then he learns nothing.”<sup>40</sup> Musical themes are theurgic—they embody that “higher,” divine meaning and thus spiritualize the musical language's mundane effable meanings. Medtner writes, that “the most primary, fundamental, supreme ‘meaning’ of music” is the theme, which is both the “kernel” of form and its “principal content.” The development of the theme is “the opening up of the kernel, as it were, into the form of the entire musical composition.”<sup>41</sup> And, here, Medtner has hit on a precise musical analogue of Bely's definition of the symbol. Like it, the musical theme unites form and content into an “indivisible creative unity” that exists in itself, distinct from either form or content specifically.

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<sup>39</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 123 (translation altered). “Музыкальное содержание есть несказуемое. Музыкальная форма есть ничто иное, как музыкальное содержание, обращенное к нашему музыкальному сознанию... Несказуемость музыкального содержания, неопределимость его с помощью слов, требует наиболее отчетливой формы в звуках.... Содержание же Бетховенских симфоний, несказуемо-иррациональное до безумия, стало доступным нашему музыкальному сознанию благодаря божественной ясности, четкости музыкальной формы.”

<sup>40</sup> Medtner, *Muse* 44 (translation altered).

<sup>41</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 43 (translation altered). “Составляя схему основных смыслов музыкального языка, я, конечно, не мог позволить себе поместить в ней самый первичный, основной, верховный «смысл» музыки — тему, являющуюся зерном формы, главным содержанием ее, и развитие темы, представляющее собой как бы раскрытие зерна, то есть формы всего сочинения.”

Medtner's position as a leading Symbolist composer (and Bely's attempt to forefront him as such in three articles on the composer) was forestalled in the contemporary public imagination and in later academic scholarship for three reasons, or what I identify as pervasive critical biases: The first is the Modernist Bias: As early as 1906 Medtner was dismissed by critics as being born fifty years too late, as a holdover from the nineteenth century. To such critics, his music offers no value to historiographical accounts prioritizing new developments of musical styles and compositional techniques. That this view still stands today is tellingly revealed by the manner in which Richard Taruskin managed to sneak Medtner into his monumental *Oxford History of Western Music* (complete with a score example!). In Taruskin's account Medtner appears as a representative of a *stile antico*—as part of a coterie of composers who persisted writing tonally to ensure popular success with audiences.<sup>42</sup>

However, Medtner most certainly did not stick to tonality out of a desire for popular success (which he never much had), but out of those deeply held beliefs about the religious basis of art shared among the Symbolists. Indeed, from Medtner's perspective, his firm commitment to tonality as the truly communal language of humanity cost him any chance of popularity among European audiences. Especially after his emigration in 1921, the reality was precisely the opposite: those modernists who had abandoned tonality were heavily promoted by modernist critics and programmed by conductors who wanted to attract audiences through novelty or notoriety. While audiences at large may have preferred to have the classics in their symphony subscriptions, if they *were* going to be subjugated to new music, then the latest modernist sensation was vastly preferable to a new tonal composition with no chance of *scandale*. Indeed, in 1925, Medtner's publisher Zimmermann, after stating that his payments will need to be dramatically reduced, wrote, "In

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 555-558.

introducing your music, we are currently suffering especially from the fact that the *current fashionable trends* in music still require *the most modern direction*,” and that in most countries, “all still stand for the direction of Stravinsky.”<sup>43</sup> Zimmermann then proceeds to “advise” Medtner that he should perform more, engage in more teaching, popularize his music in broader musical circles, consult with Rachmaninoff, and to stop sending him songs. To a composer who wrote in the “*stile antico*” and who did not already possess world-wide fame like his friend Rachmaninoff, there was effectively no available path to success in the European music “industry” without pursuing the latest modernist fashions. From Medtner’s perspective, it was precisely the modernists who betrayed their values, and music in general, by selling out to the box office, rather than those who persevered with the tonal language.<sup>44</sup> His case is a great counterexample to the thesis common in music historiography and promulgated here by Taruskin that those composers who stuck with tonality did it for the sake of popularity or commercial success, while the modernists who believed in their art suffered neglect.

Given that Symbolism is considered a modernist literary movement by present day scholars, Medtner could certainly be labelled as such. However, to the composer the word “modernism” denoted quite literally the exact opposite of what he understood true, Symbolic art to be: i.e., “modernist” music was secularized, individualized, commercialized music intended to appeal to changing tastes and fashions and devoid of a true relationship to the divine, collective foundations of music. As he defined the term in his book:

What is “modernism”? – The fashion for fashion.<sup>45</sup> “Modernism” is the silent agreement of an entire age to banish the muse, the former inspirer and teacher of poets and musicians, and in her place to recognize fashion as the absolute mistress and sovereign judge.<sup>46</sup> But since

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<sup>43</sup> Letter from Zimmermann to Medtner from which the latter quoted in a letter to Rachmaninoff from 15 Dec 1925. See Medtner, *Pis'ma*, 313-316. Emphasis added. Zimmermann’s company was suffering from the collapse of the German economy in 1923.

<sup>44</sup> There is a recent body of literature on the interrelation between modernism, commercialism, and fashion. In short, the fabled modernist disdain for popular audiences was often part of an elitist pose meant to draw a different kind of audience—high society.

<sup>45</sup> The Russian word for fashion, “moda,” is also the root of the word for modernism, “modernizm.”

<sup>46</sup> Here “mistress” is used in its older sense of a female master. Medtner understands “fashion” to be a female entity like the muse herself.

only that which is generated by fashion goes out of fashion, modernists find themselves eternal victims of her caprices and betrayals, victims forever condemned by her to epigonism. Fear of this epigonism compels the cowardly artist to run after fashion, but she cunningly never stops running, always leaving him behind.<sup>47</sup>

Medtner's feminine "Muse"—the "inspirer and teacher of poets and musicians"—is a goddess-like figure who has her roots in Solovyov's popularization of Sophia (Divine Wisdom) as an artistic muse. She is a divine-human figure (identified as female in the Old Testament Wisdom books) who instills in humanity the ability to participate in God's creation and guides the artist in the practices necessary for the spiritualization of artist material, enabling theurgic creation. The female figure of "fashion" is clearly based on the "whore of Babylon" in Revelation (and in the Wisdom books) who leads humanity astray. Medtner's condemnation of modernism was largely prefigured by similar arguments made by Bely and Emil in the first decade of the century.<sup>48</sup> Bely especially attacked those who advocated for the complete rejection of all past forms of art in favor of the creation of entirely new forms meant to force the spiritual evolution of humanity. As he wrote in a heated debate with Berdyaev from 1908:

If [Berdyaev] does not see signs of the union of spirit with flesh in living historical reality, his words are dead.... If heavenly truth is revealed to man at the price of renouncing the world, if it demands of us that we go into another dimension, we indignantly reject such a demand.... If Berdyaev were an artist, he would understand that what has been judged for millennia cannot be scraped out with a pen.<sup>49</sup>

The second critical bias which has dogged Medtner's legacy is the Secularist Bias: until recently, musicologists showed little interest in the heady mysticism and proliferating esotericism of

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<sup>47</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 100 (translation altered). Что такое «модернизм»? — Мода на моду. «Модернизм» есть молчаливое соглашение целого поколения — изгнать музу, прежнюю вдохновительницу и учительницу поэтов и музыкантов, и вместо нее признать моду, как неограниченную владычицу и верховного судью. Но так как из моды выходит лишь то, что ею же порождено, то модернисты оказываются вечными жертвами ее капризов и измен, жертвами, постоянно обреченными ею на эпигонство. Боязнь этого эпигонства заставляет трусливого художника бежать за модой, а она, коварная, не останавливаясь на бегу своем, оставляет его всегда позади себя.

<sup>48</sup> Emil Medtner began his polemical attacks on modernism in 1907 with articles in the *Golden Fleece* targeting Max Reger and Richard Strauss. The Medtners toured Germany in 1907 and were horrified by the latest works of those composers.

<sup>49</sup> Bely, "Kammenaya ispoved," *Russkaya mysl'* (July 1908). Accessed: [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_1908\\_kamennaya\\_ispoved.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_1908_kamennaya_ispoved.shtml).

late-Imperial Russia—even Scriabin was routinely dismissed as crazy or delusional, and his theosophical system was intentionally ignored. Similarly, Richard Taruskin dismissed Bely’s articles on Medtner as irrelevant for understanding the actual music precisely because of Bely’s conflation of music and religion.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Simon Morrison (as recently as 2019) dismissed Bely’s writings—specifically his first essay on Medtner and theurgy—as a “caricature of serious religious thought.”<sup>51</sup> To Morrison, Bely’s discussions of the symbol “become tangled” with “fantasies of transubstantiation, magical spells, and occult practices.”<sup>52</sup> Ada Steinberg claims that the word “music” for the Symbolists must mean something different than that heard in a concert hall, because “as soon as the Russian Symbolists touch upon the theme of religion in art, they immediately get onto music, and vice versa, when speaking of music, they cannot refrain from broaching the subject of religion.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, as the example of Medtner shows, one can understand music in generalized religious terms while simultaneously cultivating a profound understanding of the specificity of its craft. “Music” for the Symbolists was both the real art and a symbol for the religious language of the ineffable without contradiction. Clearly, many scholars of Russian literature and music seem unwilling to take the esoteric religious foundations of Symbolism seriously, or even refuse to engage with them at all—a considerable issue given the fact that the Symbolists themselves viewed their artistic creations as part of their religious philosophy, and expressive of mystical experiences.

The third critical bias is the Nationalist Bias: the difficulty of fitting Medtner into established narratives of the development of the Russian national style meant that he was often ignored as an actual German only incidentally living in Russia—or as a product of the “Germanic” music conservatories, and thus not worthy of scholarly attention. Such a fate also befell such popular

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<sup>50</sup> Taruskin, *Russian Traditions*, I, 781.

<sup>51</sup> Morrison, *Symbolist Movement*, 8. Elsewhere he describes theurgic Symbolism as a kind of “hallucination.”

<sup>52</sup> Morrison, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Ada Steinberg, *Word and Music in the Novels of Andrey Bely* (Cambridge University Press, 1982). This book contains some unfortunate errors in its description of Bely’s relationship with the Medtners.

composers as Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff in the middle of the twentieth century. Even during his own time, critics puzzled over exactly what makes Medtner's music "Russian" and often expressed puzzlement about why he composed in "Germanic" styles. The result was that Medtner earned the common epithet, "Russian Brahms." The Petersburg modernist critic Vyacheslav Karatygin even claimed in 1913 that no one occupied a "more isolated place" in contemporary Russian music than Medtner—due to his support of the "German Classical tradition."<sup>54</sup> From the very beginning of his career critics could not account for Medtner's place in Russian musical history, and modern scholarship has largely perpetuated this failure. My primary goal with the present study is to show that Medtner does deserve a place in Russian music history and that it is quite an important one.

The primary historiographical thesis of my dissertation is that Medtner was not only influenced by Russian Symbolism, but should be considered as the major musical member of their ranks. I substantiate this thesis from three different angles. Chapter One, "Symbolist Song: Nikolay Medtner, Andrey Bely, and Maria Olenina-d'Alheim," concerns the importance of art song for Medtner, the Symbolists, and in the history of Russian music at that time. The singer Maria Olenina-d'Alheim was credited as the first genuine, accomplished chamber singer in Russia by Mily Balakirev and Cesar Cui. She was the first in Russia to perform entire programs of lieder and gave sustained attention to specific composers and poets. Furthermore, she cultivated a novel performance style centered around affective declamatory singing and gesture, highlighting the meaning of the poetry and the nuances of the musical setting. Olenina-d'Alheim thus established the basic performance conditions required for the difficult, yet captivating songs of one of her greatest admirers—Nikolay Medtner—one of the few contemporary composers whose music she sang. I show how Medtner created a Symbolist style of song composition with an ear to the nuanced declamation of the poetic

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<sup>54</sup> Karatygin's review is reproduced in Flamm, *Medtner*, 305.

text, while simultaneously integrating his own vision of the poem's deeper meaning into the accompaniment by way of sophisticated thematic techniques typically associated with abstract musical forms. Another one of Olenina-d'Alheim's great admirers was Medtner's friend, Andrey Bely, who formed something of a cult around her and wrote about her several times (including in his first ever published article). The singer played a major role in Bely's early elaboration of his Symbolist theory and inspired him to dream of a type of religious mystery based not in theater or opera, but in song. Bely defined song as "the most Symbolic art" and maintained that Medtner's song settings and Olenina's performances were pinnacles of Symbolist culture—song lies at the very core of how Bely conceptualized Symbolism itself. Overall, I argue that song should be considered the main vehicle of Symbolist musical expression, due to the way in which it unites word and music—exemplified by Medtner's large corpus of song in which he articulated his mystical beliefs the same way his Symbolists colleagues did: through the musicalization of poetry.

Chapter Two, "Revealing Divine Sophia: Nikolay Medtner as Theurgist," explores Bely's writings on Medtner, especially his early essay "On Theurgy" from 1903. He makes Medtner out to be a "theurgist," i.e., someone who transforms artistic creation into a religious act—one capable of spiritualizing earthly reality by bringing divine elements down into the phenomenal world. Bely borrows his notion of theurgy from Vladimir Solovyov, who placed the concept at the center of his philosophy of the divinization of humanity. In this philosophy, humanity continues the creative work of God under the watchful supervision of Sophia—a divinely-human mediator who acts as a muse guiding human artistic creation and as the symbolic object of human art. For Solovyov and Bely, Sophia represents the perfect humanity of Christ, and what all humans must strive to become. Theurgy is thus the reconceptualization of all human artistic and cultural creation as religious work oriented towards God. I demonstrate how Bely interpreted Medtner's music in theurgic and Sophiological terms in his letters and essays. In particular, I am the first to note that within his essay,

“On Theurgy,” Bely offers an explicitly Sophiological reading of Medtner’s first published opus—arguing that Medtner reveals the Face of Sophia in his music. I also showcase how Medtner himself took up the mantle of theurgy, using the word himself to describe his music. In the first decade of the century, the composer explicitly worked on a “*Theurgische Tondichtung*” for piano quintet which attempted to harness the power of Christ’s words for music. While Medtner only completed his quintet in the late 1940s (having dropped the word “theurgic”), this should not be interpreted as his abandonment of the concept. Instead, as I demonstrate here, much of Medtner’s 1935 book draws directly on Bely’s theurgic and Sophiological conception of art as a mystical act.

Chapter Three, “East or West?: Uniting German Art and Orthodox Religion,” examines a crucial, yet productive, question that preoccupied Medtner and Bely and determined their artistic trajectory. Like many other Russian intellectuals of their day, they inherited the nineteenth-century debate between the Slavophiles and Westernizers over whether Russia should integrate into European modernity or, instead, embrace a Christian nationalism based on the communal Orthodoxy of the Russian folk. Yet, Medtner and the Symbolists chose neither of these options. Instead, following Solovyov’s lead, they placed a vision of universal Christianity at the core of their conception of artistic creation—a vision that demanded the union of East and West. They understood that Western art, music, and philosophy possesses a universal import which Russia could not ignore—while nevertheless elevating Russia as the last great reservoir of divine truth and mystical power in the face of a rapidly modernizing world. Bely’s philosophical and aesthetic writings are entrenched in German idealist philosophy, and he was a great lover of German music and culture; however, he believed that the contemporary West had largely destroyed the religious basis of art and replaced it with a cult of pure form. To both Bely and Medtner, Russia must rescue the cultural heritage of the West by uniting it with the mystical practices cultivated in the East. As an example, I explore Goethe’s importance for Symbolism from two angles. The German poet’s use



(along with Heine) of a poetic meter known in Russia as the *dolnik*—a meter more rhythmically free than standard syllabo-tonic verse but closer to traditional meters than purely accentual verse—was highly influential on Russian Symbolist poets and the latest developments in versification. The Symbolists sought to expand the metrical and rhythmic forms available to them and looked to the German canon for inspirational models. Bely described the cultivation of the *dolnik* as one of Symbolism’s premiere accomplishments and directly attributed its use to German influence. I demonstrate how Medtner’s settings of *dolniks* by Goethe, Heine, and Bely reveal his deep engagement with contemporary versification trends and his sensitivity to the shifting rhythms of chosen poems. This engagement with historical metrics allows me to illuminate Medtner’s idiosyncratic career trajectory and compositional choices. Furthermore, the Russian Symbolists used Goethe’s writings to express their own religious aesthetics. Medtner in particular shaped his mystical vision of art as the transfiguration and resurrection of life (what the Symbolists later called “*zhiznetvorchestvo*” or “life-creation”) through the selection and setting of Goethe’s poetry. Yet, his use of German poetry, combined with the fact of his German ancestry, curtailed Medtner’s public appeal and distorted his reputation among critics. He was branded as a proponent of that musical Germanism which Russian music had rebelled against. Nevertheless, I argue that this perception of Medtner as a pure Westernizer is incorrect—Medtner, along with other Symbolists, believed that Russia must embrace the humanly heights of Western culture and religion in order to restore it to its properly divine foundation—in the process enabling Russian culture to assume universal significance. Unlike the Westernizers, proper, this new Slavophilism rejected much of modern Western culture as too beholden to secular individualization and commercialism. Medtner’s art must thus be understood within the Symbolists’ multifaced Slavophile intellectual inheritance and not as a rejection of Russia.

## Chapter 1. Symbolist Song: Nikolay Medtner, Andrey Bely, and Maria Olenina-d'Alheim

Right here she stands and sings—in pale blue—the pale blue bird of Eternity. We have not felt such surprise for a long time—we rejoice. Now we are delighted. She hypnotized us. She has *transgressed* the boundaries of singing and has become more than a singer: she is a special kind of *spiritual guide*. She sang songs that no one else sings. She sang in such a way that we were constantly face to face with our own depths. She sang the very best songs—*songs from the deep*.

—Andrey Bely (1902)<sup>1</sup>

The greatest joy in the perception of a musical work is the unexpected encounter with forgotten images of eternity. If these encounters are in themselves only momentary, if the images of eternity are not in themselves eternal, then this instantaneous recollection, through the perception of music, is nevertheless of infinitely greater value than the instantaneous entertainment that makes us forget even more firmly what has already been forgotten.

—Nikolay Medtner (1935)<sup>2</sup>

Maria Olenina-d'Alheim's 1901-02 song recitals created a sensation in Moscow. This singer—the first genuine “chamber singer” in Russia—cultivated an intensely expressive style of declamatory singing capable of transforming simple lieder into vehicles of profound emotion.<sup>3</sup> Her performances of Schubert turned the venerable champion of Russian musical nationalism, Vladimir Stasov, to tears:

How could the soul not awaken in everyone—even the most indifferent, most hardened, or most ordinary person—when this incomparable Russian singer repeated with fiery rapture the great musical words of the great Franz Schubert: “My heart is yours, my heart is yours,

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<sup>1</sup> Andrey Bely, “Pevitsa,” *Mir iskusstva* 11 (Dec 1902). “Гдѣ мы?.. Откуда мы смотримъ и видимъ другъ друга?.. Только вотъ стоитъ и поеть она въ блѣдноглубомъ - блѣдноглубая птица Вѣчности... Давно мы не удивлялись и не радовались. Теперь мы восхищались. Она заипнотизировала насъ. Она *преступила* границы пѣнія и стала больше чѣмъ пѣвицей: она особаго рода *духовная руководительница*. Она пѣла такія пѣсни, какія никто не поет. Она пѣла такъ, чтобы мы постоянно были лицомъ къ лицу съ нашей глубиной. Она пѣла лучшія пѣсни--*лъши оттуда*.”

<sup>2</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 132. Translation altered. “Наибольшей радостью в восприятии музыкального произведения является неожиданная встреча с забытыми образами вечности. Если встречи эти сами по себе лишь мгновенны, если образы вечности сами по себе не вечны, то все же это мгновенное воспоминание в восприятии музыки представляет собою бесконечно большую ценность, чем мгновенное развлечение, заставляющее нас еще прочнее забыть без того уже забытое.”

<sup>3</sup> For an account of Olenina's career with extensive quotations from her notebooks and concert reviews, see Alexander Tumanov, *The Life and Artistry of Maria Olenina-d'Alheim*, trans. Christopher Barnes (University of Alberta Press, 2000).

and forever – forever!..” (“Ungeduld”). How could any listener that evening not be deeply moved when Madame Olenina-d’Alheim, herself deeply moved, sang Schubert’s dark, tragic words in his wonderful picture of the young man in love making his last will: “And when I am gone, bury me in a grave of green turf—my beloved loves the color green so much!..” (“Die liebe Farbe”).<sup>4</sup>

Stasov lamented how Olenina lived in Paris with her husband (the musicologist and occultist Pierre d’Alheim), thus depriving Russia of its greatest singer after Chaliapin. The d’Alheims gained fame for their dedication and earnest to the promotion of Russian music in France and Belgium through their joint lecture-recitals devoted solely to Musorgsky’s songs and arias. After these 1896-97 “conferences” she set her sights on her homeland. Yet, it seemed Russia was not ready for Russian song, and her friend, Mily Balakirev, urged her not to risk a concert tour there, claiming that Russian audiences would not be interested in song recitals or in Musorgsky.<sup>5</sup> Her voice was not suited for the operatic virtuosity in demand at the time, and her popularity was restricted to those who appreciated her intense vocal and gestural expressionism. Nevertheless, in late 1901 she realized her desire to perform in Russia and attracted what we today would be called a “cult following”—quite literally so in the account of an anonymous reviewer:

Madame Olenina-d’Alheim has succeeded in forming around herself a whole crowd of *inspired parishioners* here in Moscow; with each concert this crowd of parishioners grows more and more—the day is not far off when only those with antediluvian notions will be able to ignore the magic of her singing.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Stasov, “Po povodu kontsertov G-zhe Oleninoy-d’al’geim,” *Novosti i berzhevaya gazeta* 341 (Dec 1902). Accessed: [http://az.lib.ru/s/stasow\\_w\\_w/text\\_1902\\_po\\_povodu\\_concertov\\_oleninoy.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/s/stasow_w_w/text_1902_po_povodu_concertov_oleninoy.shtml). Slightly abridged from: “Еще бы душе не проснуться у всех, у самых равнодушных, у самых заскорузлых, у самых прозаиков, когда несравненная русская певица повторяла с огненным упоением великие музыкальные слова великого Франца Шуберта: «Тебе мое сердце, тебе мое сердце, и навеки — навсегда!..» (романс «Ungeduld»). Еще бы всем слушателям в тот вечер не быть глубоко потрясенными, когда г-жа Оленина-д’Альгейм, сама до глубины души потрясенная, произносила мрачные, трагические слова того же Франца Шуберта, в его чудесной картине влюбленного юноши, произносящего свое завещание: «И когда меня не будет, похороните меня в могиле из зеленого дерна, — моя возлюбленная так любит зеленый цвет!.. Не ставьте надо мною черного креста, не кладите на нее веселых цветов, моя возлюбленная так любит зеленый цвет!..» («Die liebe Farbe»).”

<sup>5</sup> See Balakirev’s letters to Olenina in Tumanov, *Olenina*, 85-96.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Stasov, “Po povodu.” “Т-же Олениной-д’Альгейм удалось создать вокруг себя, у нас в Москве, целую толпу воодушевленных прихожан; с каждым концертом все более и более растет эта толпа прихожан, и недалек тот день, когда только люди с допотопными понятиями будут способны отмахиваться от волшебства ее пения.” Emphasis added.

Among this enlightened crowd of “parishioners” in 1902 stood two young figures who were deeply affected by Olenina’s artistry and who would go on to become closely associated with her activities after she moved back to Moscow a few years later: Nikolay Medtner and Andrey Bely. Bonding over a mutual appreciation of Olenina’s singing style—one which emphasized the expressiveness and musical qualities of the poetic text—they each placed song at the center of their respective artistic practices. Bely elaborated his theory of Symbolism with references to Olenina, declared song to be the “most symbolic” art, and intentionally infused his poetry and prose with heightened melodiousness and rhythmic variety.<sup>7</sup> In his song compositions, Medtner sought to reveal the rhythms and intonations of the lyric in his rhythmically elastic, declamatory vocal parts, paired with fully developed accompaniments capable of providing an independent commentary on the poem.

Olenina’s appearances on the Muscovite stage at the beginning of the century had a profound effect on the development of Russian Symbolism. After her recitals in autumn 1902, Medtner praised Olenina in a letter to Emil, placing her in the company of his idol, the pianist Josef Hofmann.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile Bely dashed off a concert “review” (quoted above) that amounted to a description of mystical visions he experienced under Olenina’s spell. This was his first published article and contains core ideas which would recur in Bely’s writings over the next several years—namely the deification of Eternity and the idea that the eternal can be revealed and embodied in art. Here, the future celebrated modernist author of *Petersburg* was captivated by Olenina’s performances of Glinka, Schubert, Schumann, and Musorgsky. His description reads like the religious awakening of a young man suffering from existential despair:

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<sup>7</sup> See Andrey Bely, “Smysl iskusstva,” in *Simvolizm* (Moscow: Musaget, 1911), section VI. Accessible here: [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_08\\_1907\\_simvolizm.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_08_1907_simvolizm.shtml).

<sup>8</sup> Medtner, *Pis'ma*, 39. Hofmann was a key promoter of Medtner’s early music, especially of his first piano sonata. Medtner’s other youthful idol was Arthur Nikisch, under whom he performed Chaikovsky’s first piano concerto in 1902. Bely would also write in ecstatic terms about Nikisch in his 1904 essay, “The Mask” (*Mystical Essays*, 30-31). Emil wrote a short pamphlet entitled, *Meister Nikisch*, in 1921, shortly before the conductor’s death.

Old songs returned to us—echoes of forgotten but significant things (“*Echos du temps passé*”).<sup>9</sup> We rested, remembering our youth, inhaled the fresh “*aroma* of graceful roses” that flared up in the snow-white fog. Oh, how we understood the radiant velvet of these words [from Glinka’s famous romance “The sweetness of being near you”]:

“Unexpected, wondrous star  
 “You appeared before me  
 “And illuminated by life...  
 “Shine, show me the way,  
 “Lead to inaccessible happiness...”

...Only now, after a long series of years, does the meaning of Glinka’s romance grow before our spiritual gaze. And these days “*Without Sun*,” with their dull boredom of flat aimlessness, turning into the “*Songs and Dances of Death*”—hasn’t all this beseeched our hearts so that we may finally wake up to the restrained horror of Schubert’s and Schumann’s melancholy and from this horror call out to God?<sup>10</sup>

This impressionistic description glaringly reveals the extent to which Bely’s artistic formation, along with that of Medtner and Russian Symbolism at large, emerged from a deep, creative engagement with the great European cultural traditions of the *past*. Symbolism is now referred to by literary scholars as the first flowering of modernism in Russia, yet the movement was equally captivated by the eternal as by the purely novel.<sup>11</sup> They wanted, in Baudelaire’s famous formulation, “to distill the eternal from the transitory.”<sup>12</sup>

Bely experienced this distillation as a direct revelation of the eternal. Notice how Bely was struck not only by the music and the affective performance style, but by the selection and specific

<sup>9</sup> The French “*Echos du temps passé*” is the title of a collection of old troubadour songs by Jean-Baptiste Weckerlin (from which Chaikovsky took the melody for his famous children’s piece “Old French Song”—a piece Bely could easily have learned during his childhood piano lessons, hence the “old songs returned to us.” Here, as is often the case, one should take Bely’s rhetorical exuberant statements at their face value).

<sup>10</sup> Bely, “Pevitsa.” “Without Sun” is the literal translation of the title of Musorgsky’s song cycle “Sunless.” “Старыя пѣсни возвращались къ намъ—отголоски забытаго, но важнаго для насъ (“*Echos du temps passé*”). Мы отдыхали, вспоминая юность, вдыхал свѣжій “*аромат* граціозныхъ розъ”, вспыхнувшихъ въ бѣлоснѣжномъ тумане. О, какъ мы поняли свѣтозарный бархатъ этихъ словъ: “Нежданною, чудной звѣздою/ Явилася ты предо мною/ И жизнь освѣтила мою.../ Сіяй-же, указывая путь,/ Веди къ недоступному счастью”...только послѣ длиннаго ряда годовъ значеніе романа Глинки вырастаетъ передъ нашимъ духовнымъ взоромъ. А эти дни “без солнца”, съ тусклой скукой равнинной безпредметности, переходящія въ “пѣсни и пляски смерти”, — не запросилось ли все это въ наше сердце, чтобы мы окончательно проснулись къ сдержанному ужасу Шумановскихъ и Шубертовскихъ меланхолій и от ужаса воззвали къ Богу?...”

<sup>11</sup> For an account of Russian Symbolism that emphasizes is reverence for past accomplishment and creativity response to tradition, see Wachtel, *Russian Symbolism*.

<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, edited by Vassiliki Kolocotroni, et. al. (University of Chicago Press, 1998): 106.

ordering of the texts which spoke to the philosophical and religious questions that were currently preoccupying him. In his mind, the song texts formed a coherent narrative that he interpreted as the voice of “Eternity” speaking through Olenina-d’Alheim. A voice directly addressed to him and composed through the interplay of texts, music, and gestures:

When she is before us—this thin, tall woman in blue with intoxicated eyes—we know that we are being *notified*. With trepidation we receive signals “*from there*.” This is Eternity trumpeting: “*Wake up, wake up—the world has matured, the world is now radiant and airily luminous... Oh wake up and be embraced in the light of the world... Wake up!*”<sup>13</sup>

Olenina is then pictured as pale-blue and as a bird—images associated with the sky and thus operate as symbols of Eternity. She becomes his “spiritual guide,” and her songs are transubstantiated into messages from the “depths.”

For Bely, Eternity was something quite real. Or to be more precise, he understood art to be a vehicle through which divine Eternity could be made real, i.e. given physical being—this idea lies at the core of his Symbolist-religious poetics and recurs in many of his writings. Medtner would articulate similar ideas in his book, *The Muse and the Fashion*, published many years later:

The main themes of art are themes of *eternity*, existing in themselves. Artistic ‘discovery’ consists only in the individual disclosure of these themes and in no way the invention of a non-existent art.... The greatest joy in the perception of a musical work is the unexpected encounter with forgotten images of eternity.<sup>14</sup>

By describing Olenina’s recital through the juxtaposition of otherwise unrelated pieces and poems Bely tries to invoke in the reader a meaningful series of images, themes, and moods. He used this technique in all his literary and music criticism, generating the impression that all great products of culture are in secret discourse with each other regardless of space and time. Bely, along with the

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<sup>13</sup> Bely, “Pevitsa.” “Когда передь нами она—эта худая, высокая женщина въ голубомъ, съ опьяненными глазами—мы знаемъ, что насъ *извѣщаютъ*. Съ трепетомъ принимаемъ сигналы “*оттуда*”. Это трубятъ Вечность: “*Проснитесь, проснитесь: мѣръ созрѣлъ, мѣръ лучистъ и воздушно-свѣтлозаренъ... О, проснитесь и усложнитесь въ этихъ міровсѣтлыхъ объятіяхъ*”... “*Проснитесь*”...”

<sup>14</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 3 (translation altered). “В искусстве же главной реальностью являются темы. Главные темы искусства суть темы вечности, существующие сами по себе. Художественное «открытие» заключается лишь в индивидуальном раскрытии этих тем, а никоим образом не в изобретении несуществующего искусства.”

Medtner and other Symbolists, believed that all manifestations of “true culture” from any era and language are part of one large, organic totality and any individual texts may have hidden affinities with any other. And, as Bely implies here, culture bring its participants closer to the Divine through the incarnation of the Eternal within art and in one’s own life—a result of the mystical creative process called theurgy.<sup>15</sup>

Esoteric ideas also informed Olenina-d’Alheim’s innovative performance style. Her vision of the mystical union of creative artist, performer, and audience during song performance resounded amongst Russia’s Symbolist coterie. Olenina maintained that the performer must vacate herself in order to incarnate the work in her stead. This could produce a profoundly visceral effect on audience members sympathetic to artistic mysticism. As Alexander Blok put it after a 1903 Olenina recital, “[My wife] was completely shaken, and it had the same effect on mama. [...] Something happens to Olenina when she sings. It seems to me that she will not live much longer.”<sup>16</sup>

Over the next five years Olenina-d’Alheim toured Europe and Russia, building a celebrated international career before she and her husband moved back to Moscow in 1908. There they succeeding in realizing their mission to combine artistry and education through their “House of Song”—an organization that soon occupied a central, if noticeably elitist, position in Muscovite musical and literary life through its concerts, lectures, publications, and sponsored competitions (with Bely and Medtner on the judging panel).<sup>17</sup> The site of these activities served as an important place in which the Muscovite literary and musical elite could circulate amongst each other. For example, the future Soviet composer Nikolay Sizov (1886-1962), the brother of Bely’s close friend

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<sup>15</sup> Bely derived his understanding of theurgy from the philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov; it will be taken up as the main focus of the next chapter.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Tumanov, *Artistry*, 133. Blok was incorrect as Olenina would live to the ripe old age of 100.

<sup>17</sup> Olenina’s hatred of modern commercialism of any kind led her to refuse to sell tickets to concerts, which were thus only accessible to subscribers. Furthermore, her notion of the song recital as an intimate, mystical communion between artistic creator, singer, and audience restricted the size of the hall she was willing to perform in. See Tumanov, *Artistry*, 156-160.

and fellow esotericist Mikhail Sizov, was introduced to Medtner at an Olenina concert. Medtner then took him under his wing as a piano student and provided the conditions for his career to advance. In his memoirs of Medtner, Sizov notes that Olenina's concerts were "unfailingly attended" by the "Argonauts," Bely's youthful mystical collective (which included the Medtners).<sup>18</sup> Bely's later memoirs bear this out with his extensive accounts of Olenina.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Medtner's archive contains "many years" worth of Olenina-d'Alheim's concert programs, indicating his great interest in her performance activities.<sup>20</sup>

Olenina introduced a new type of chamber singing into Russia that deeply influenced both Medtner's own preferences and the very way in which he composed his songs. Indeed, his swift emergence as a preeminent song composer is unthinkable without the enormous contributions made by Olenina-d'Alheim to Russian musical culture at large. Many of Medtner's best songs were premiered and championed by Olenina because they were written in a musical style (prioritizing expressive poetic declamation) that conformed in every way to her artistic sensibilities and beliefs—because those were also Medtner's sensibilities and beliefs, formed through years of attending Olenina's recitals from the age of twenty-two. Bely's writings on Medtner, Olenina, and song in particular help to aid the reconstruction of this neglected history. In response to his overwhelming experiences at the d'Alheims' lecture-recitals, Bely formulated a conception of a musico-religious "Mystery" that was neither opera, nor drama, but song—which in his opinion represented the original synthesis of music and word. Bely made song a vital component of his Symbolist aesthetics, which formed the basis of his polemics against the competing notion of a Mystery achieved through Dionysian collective theater—one promoted by Vyacheslav Ivanov and (famously) by Alexander

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<sup>18</sup> Sizov, "Vospominaniya o N. K. Metnere," in *Stat'i*, 118. Medtner gave Sizov free lessons for years. Sizov also remarks how Bely was raised in a family that passionately loved Grieg—his mother sang his songs to the young poet, who would dedicate his first "Symphony" to the Scandinavian.

<sup>19</sup> See especially Andrey Bely, *Nachalo veka Berlinskaya redaktsiya* (Nauka, 2014), chapter "Dom pesn'." Accessible here: [https://imwerden.de/pdf/belyj\\_nachalo\\_veka\\_berlinskaya\\_redaktsiya\\_1923\\_2014\\_\\_ocr.pdf](https://imwerden.de/pdf/belyj_nachalo_veka_berlinskaya_redaktsiya_1923_2014__ocr.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Apetian, *Stat'i*, 311n1.



Scriabin. Indeed, with its ideal (yet achievable) union of music and word, song emerges as the Symbolist musical genre *par excellence*—especially since Scriabin failed to actually complete his Nietzschean vision of the transformative union of mankind through collective theater. Furthermore, Bely's formulations about music and literature clearly had a large influence on Medtner's own aesthetic thought and compositional practice, while his own musical and cultural tastes were developed through his interactions with the Medtner brothers.

Both Bely and Medtner shared a view of artistic creation as the renovation or rejuvenation of artistic techniques already present in existing forms, and not as complete break with the past. Medtner rejected the (musical) modernist fascination with new sonorities and harmonies for their own sake, and instead he pursued the possibilities inherent in voice leading and phrase construction, as well as in the tonal system itself. Unlike Scriabin, who would later pursue the musical expression of his mystical vision through new harmonies enabled by the breakdown of the tonality, Medtner viewed the tonal system as a symbolic language through which eternal truths and mystical experience could be expressed. He understood basic tonal elements like the interrelation of tonic and dominant to be divine in origin and, when employed properly (by a composer mystically attuned to the tonal language), were capable of spiritualizing music and thus generating an incantational effect on audiences. This view led Medtner to perceive deep, mystical significance in themes, forms, keys, and large-scale tonal motions, like the transformation of the minor mode into parallel major. Medtner's Symbolist embrace of tonality was thus not a product of innate conservatism, but instead emerged from the mystical belief that music could bring the transfiguring energies of the divine into the material world.<sup>21</sup> The resulting Symbolist musical style is characterized by the idiosyncratic employment of traditional tonal procedures that sound at once "classic" and unusual. Through an

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<sup>21</sup> The modernist breakdown of tonality was therefore understood to be an unfortunate consequence of increasing secularism and alienation in modern Europe.

analysis of Medtner's 1913 Pushkin setting, "Zaklinanie" (Op. 29/7)—championed by Olenina and one of his most famous—I illustrate his musical Symbolism in detail.

Unfortunately, however, musicological studies of the Russian Silver Age have been restricted to the fruits of the theatrical stage, opera and ballet—genres far from the refined lyric sensibilities of the Symbolists themselves. And, indeed, ballet was cultivated by Sergey Diaghilev and his friends in the *World of Art* movement as a specifically "antiliterary" (in Richard Taruskin's words) art form—"Literary things one reads. It is not necessary to hear them spoken on stage," as Diaghilev told a *New York Post* reporter in 1914.<sup>22</sup> This statement strikes against the very heart of Medtner's and Olenina's project to bring words to the (small) stage through song. And Bely would no doubt have been enraged at such suggestion, as he embraced the musicality of declaimed or sung poetry.

From the 1890s onward, Russia witnessed an incredible blossoming of song composition in addition to the beginnings of what would become a strong tradition of chamber singing first established by Olenina-d'Alheim. Many hundreds of poems, old and new, were set by composers that have very little name recognition today. Indeed, nearly the entire repertoire has been forgotten.<sup>23</sup> Medtner's 110 songs exhibit extreme nuance in their treatment of the texts themselves and otherwise display an inexhaustible variety of moods and forms; they certainly represent a pinnacle of this lost art.<sup>24</sup> By considering Medtner, Bely, and Olenina-d'Alheim together, the development of the art of song in the years before 1917 vibrantly unfolds across the domains of performance, composition, cultural criticism, Symbolist aesthetics, and religious mysticism.

### How Song Became (Chamber) Music

<sup>22</sup> Taruskin, *Traditions*, "Antiliterary Esthetics," 528-535. The Diaghilev quote can be found on page 532.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Alexander Grechaninov was one of the most significant composers of song (with over 250 settings, many to Symbolist poems), and yet few of his scores are easily accessible beyond specialist research archives and only a small fraction of his songs have been recorded.

<sup>24</sup> His main competitor in this arena was Rachmaninoff, but as Gerald Abraham (no particular fan of Medtner's) stated in his classic study of Russian song, "Rachmaninoff, with all his lyrical *elan*, never achieved anything as exquisite as the best of Medtner's songs." See Abraham, *Essays on Russian and East European Music* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 32.

Medtner's music is very difficult to sing. The vocal line is typically dissonant with the piano and is sometimes not the structural upper voice of the texture. There are many dissonant leaps and rhythmic subtleties to work through while the lungs are taxed with long phrases.<sup>25</sup> He often utilizes a wide vocal range (up to two octaves) and requires *pianissimo* in the upper reaches of that range. The vocal melody subtly interacts motivically and rhythmically with contrapuntal lines in the piano and thus requires the singer to hold the entirety of the music in her mind. And yet, in vain would be any attempt to find those components of virtuosic displays, like swift scales and arpeggios that allow the singer to show off an agile voice. Does this mean that Medtner did not know how to compose properly for the voice, just layering text over an abstract instrumental line? No, his declamatory vocal lines typically move at a steady syllabic pace, allowing for clear diction and subtle interactions between poetic and musical meter. Furthermore, most of his songs were first performed by his wife, Anna, who was actually a former violinist and not a professional singer, yet could tackle his rhythmic and intonational difficulties.<sup>26</sup> Clearly Medtner's songs require a different form of training and attitude towards song performance than might be considered typical.

This fact emerges clearly in Anna Troyanovskaya's recollections of Medtner's attempts to administer her singing lessons. Troyanovskaya was his patroness during the rough years of the civil war, after the Medtners lost their house to the new regime. She was the wife of the well-known art collector, Ivan Troyanovsky, and owner of a large house in the village of Bugry—a popular destination of musicians, littérateurs, and artists which would later become immortalized in Pyotr

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<sup>25</sup> This latter point was emphasized by Ekaterina Levental, the first singer to record Medtner's entire vocal output, in her liner notes to *Medtner: Geweibter Platz, Complete Songs Vol. 5* (Brilliant Classics, 2024). Interestingly, Levental states that only by carefully studying the text could she determine precisely how to maneuver through Medtner's long phrases without running out of breath.

<sup>26</sup> Sizov, "Vospominaniya," 120-124.

Konchalovsky's painting, "Dacha in Blue."<sup>27</sup> The dacha was normally used only as a summer retreat (since it was without amenities), but during the lean times of the civil war Troyanovskaya lived in it year-round with Nikolay and Anna Medtner. With only each other for company, both Annas worked hard learning full song cycles by Schubert and Schumann, with Medtner at the piano. He gave Troyanovskaya extensive singing lessons, and, in her memoirs, she describes his extraordinary emphasis on the most subtle details in the performance of lieder, along with his general vocal preferences:

I received the impression that Nikolay Karlovich was not interested in the voice as such [literally "vocal material" in the Russian], and he did not value massive voices with a broad sound. The grainy timbre of a large soprano even bothered him, and he said that with such voices the intonation was often unclear—an unforgettable sin from his perspective. From a singer, as well as an instrumentalist, he demanded musicality above all. His requirements for a chamber performer-singer boiled down to the following: 1) complete fusion of the voice part and the accompaniment in the auditory consciousness of the singer; 2) a living, breathing sense of movement, inherent in music as an art flowing through time, and hence very great strictness in terms of rhythm (how cruelly I was treated in this regard!); 3) complete fusion of the vocal part with the text, of the soundwave with the syllable.<sup>28</sup>

Medtner places great emphasis on rhythm, diction, and articulation as they are essential for the musical evocation of the poetic text and thus a key component of his Symbolist style. Unfortunately, many singers are trained to prioritize the rounding of vowels, beautiful legato, and the loud projection of the voice at the expense of those qualities Medtner desired. His desire for both accuracy and expressiveness caused him constant anxiety and despair over the performances of his songs. Of the three traits she outlined above, Troyanovskaya notes that, "Nikolay Karlovich

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<sup>27</sup> The Troyanovskys were involved with many artistic groups in Moscow, were friends of Serge Koussevitzky, and participated in Valery Bryusov's "Society of Free Aesthetics" along with Medtner and Bely. They eventually sold the dacha to Konchalovsky.

<sup>28</sup> Troyanovskaya, "Zhizn' N. K. Metnera v Bugrakh," in *Stat'i*, 139. "У меня сложилось впечатление, что Николай Карлович не интересовался вокальным материалом как таковым, он не ценил массивных голосов с широким звуком; рассыпчатый тембр крупного сопрано даже беспокоил его: он говорил, что в этом случае зачастую неясна интонация - грех, с его точки зрения, непростительный. От певца, так же как от инструменталиста, он требовал, прежде всего, музыкальности. Его требования к камерному исполнителю-певцу сводились примерно к следующему: 1) полная слитность партии голоса и партии сопровождения в слуховом сознании певца; 2) живое, дышащее чувство движения, присущее музыке как искусству, протекающему во времени, и отсюда очень большая строгость в отношении ритма (и жестоко же мне попало в этом отношении!); 3) полная слитность напева с текстом звуковой волны со слогом."

encountered these qualities among singers twice in his life: in Chaliapin and in Olenina-d'Alheim. He rated the latter very highly as a chamber singer; he once performed Schubert cycles with her as an accompanist—a rarity as Nikolay Karlovich usually accompanied his own compositions.”<sup>29</sup>

While Medtner did successfully perform with a handful of other aspiring chamber singers in the years before the revolution, the lack of a stable tradition of chamber singing in Russia was clearly felt, despite a one-hundred-year long custom of romance singing in the country.<sup>30</sup> By all accounts, Olenina-d'Alheim was almost single-handedly responsible for creating a song renaissance in Russia. She both resurrected the nineteenth-century Russian song repertoire and introduced to the public to several other European song traditions. Indeed, Bely writes in his memoirs that

The role of the d'Alheim couple—the husband as organizer of the House of Song, and the wife as the sole and unique performer of song cycles for the first decade of the new century—was enormous. They advanced the musical culture of Moscow. As one recalls, Olenina first appeared in 1902 and her concerts continued until late 1916 [*recte* 1918]—fourteen years of immense labor that resulted in the raising not only of public taste, but of musical literacy. [They] broadened our familiarity with song literature.... One imagines that nowhere in the capitals of Europe was the public offered such material...<sup>31</sup>

But how did the situation become so dire before this point? The problem was largely one of prestige. As the story goes, for most of the nineteenth-century, even all over Europe, songs were viewed with a certain disdain as a bourgeois parlor genre alongside the piano character piece. Thus, the ambitious young composers of the *kuchka* (“Mighty Handful”) set their sights on large-scale “public” genres—the opera and symphony—in order to seek acclaim and recognition. As a result,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. “Эти качества среди певцов Николай Карлович встретил в жизни два раза: у Шаляпина и у Олениной-д'Альгейм. Последнюю он очень высоко ставил как камерную певицу; он однажды выступал с нею вместе как аккомпаниатор — они исполняли циклы Шуберта. Это было редкостью: Николай Карлович аккомпанировал обычно только свои сочинения.” Troyanovsky's memoirs are drawn from those civil war years of 1919-1921. Medtner would go on to perform with a few great singers in exile, most notably recording a selection of his songs with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf right before his death.

<sup>30</sup> “Romance” is the Russian equivalent of “lied” or “melodie.” Medtner used the term in the titles of his first two opuses of Russian-texted songs, the Opp. 3 and 13, and its equivalent “lied” for his Op. 6 and 15 Goethe songs. After that he switched to word “Gedicht” (and its Russian equivalent “Stikhotvorenie”) for his songs, no doubt to emphasize the deep importance of the poetic text in his compositional approach.

<sup>31</sup> Bely, *Nachalo Veka*, 388. Translated and reproduced in Tumanov, 299. Bely goes on to list the extreme range of repertoire that Olenina introduced to Moscow audiences.

these genres became the prime drivers of the new Russian “nationalist” style—one emphasizing colorful orchestral effects and the use of folk material. And yet, all five members of the kuchka also composed a many songs throughout their careers, as did their hallowed predecessor Glinka (along with Dargomyzhky). Furthermore, the kuchka’s conservatory competitors, Anton Rubinstein and Pyotr Chaikovsky, were equally prolific. But, by the turn of the century, this great tradition had fallen into obscurity and disrepute as light “filler” genre to break up variety programs.

There are a few reasons for this. Commercially speaking, the development of a hungry domestic market for sheet music (the lifeblood of song composition) was late coming in Russia. The notion of a public recital devoted entirely to song was unheard of.<sup>32</sup> Imperial support of Russian music was largely confined to the theater and concert stage. Even the rise of a new class of bourgeois-merchant patrons in the 1880s—which had such an extraordinary impact on the future developments of music in Russia—failed to advance the cause of song. Take the example of Mitrofan Belyayev, the most important merchant-patron of the *fin-de-siecle*, who notably managed to dramatically increase the fortunes of chamber music to conform to his predilections. As Taruskin notes, Belyayev formed his musical tastes at a German school and, as a violist, was devoted to chamber music above all. Indeed, to the Muscovite composer Reinhold Gliere, Belyayev declared, “Chamber music is the highest form of music! It occupies the first place among all the other arts. After it comes symphonic music, then opera, and only then romances and all that sort of thing.” In the context of the kuchka’s legacy, this was a stunning reversal of priorities, with the former champion, opera, demoted not only below chamber music, but below symphonic music as well—with the romance last either way.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The tradition of public lied performance had emerged only in the 1870s in Vienna, becoming an important component of musical life elsewhere in the 1890s.

<sup>33</sup> Taken from Taruskin, *Traditions*, 60.

But wait! Isn't song itself a form of chamber music? After all, it literally is performed in an intimate "chamber" by a small number of performers and for a small audience. In his 1895 book on the Russian romance, Cesar Cui—the fifth member of the kuchka and the most prolific composer of song in Russian music history (a huge corpus nearly completely forgotten today)—writes of the wonders of chamber music as a means through which music lovers outside of the biggest capitals can experience high quality compositions. Indeed, Cui claims (and Belyayev would no doubt agree) that, "nearly all of the most brilliant composers expressed their deepest thoughts in chamber music—their strongest feelings, the most hidden movements of their souls."<sup>34</sup>

He then goes on to wonder why song is not considered a form of chamber music. His comments are worth quoting at some length, as they reveal the extent to which attitudes towards song differed from his day to ours, and even from his day (1895) to the years of the song renaissance that followed the d'Almeida's return to Russia in 1908 to establish their "House of Song":

Usually, under the rubric of chamber music, in the classical meaning of the word, we include music written for at least two *equal* instruments, as in a violin or cello sonata, or trios, quartets, quintets, etc. Also allowed are works written for one piano, but again only in the specifically "Classical" form of the sonata. In this exclusivity lies some unintentional, or even intentional, conservativeness—the result of a misunderstanding, because obviously chamber music [should] include all music that can be performed anywhere—in any room of a private apartment with only few performers. Is it logical to allow Chopin's sonatas on "chamber music" programs, but not allow his etudes, preludes, nocturnes—even the most brilliant ones? "Chamber music" should not be such a prim aristocrat and squeamishly avoid misalliance with her sisters, only because they are not in strictly classical attire. Both the majestic classical beauty of chamber music itself and the intimate charm of genre music [i.e. character pieces] would benefit from their mutual juxtaposition.

*An even greater injustice is the exclusion from chamber music of vocal music: romances, duets, and trios; all of which relate to opera and the cantata in exactly the same way as sonatas and quartets relate to symphonies.* Here a major, logical, voluntary deprivation occurs—there exist very few good operas, but a great many excellent romances. As a result of this ostracism, romances have to be performed in concerts given in large halls, where the most delicate of them, which are

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<sup>34</sup> Cesar Cui, *Russky romans* (St. Petersburg: Findeyzen, 1896), 2. "Почти все́ самые гениальные композиторы высказывали именно въ камерной музыкѣ свои самыя глубокія мысли, выражали самыя сильныя чувства, самыя затаенныя движенія своей души." Accessed: [https://imslp.org/wiki/The\\_Russian\\_Romance\\_\(Cui%2C\\_C%C3%A9sar\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/The_Russian_Romance_(Cui%2C_C%C3%A9sar))

often the best, lose a great deal. And how nice it would be, after stringed instruments, to hear a human voice; how refreshing and how mutually beneficial!<sup>35</sup>

For Cui, song is excluded from the ranks of chamber music due to its lack of “aristocratic” garb. Furthermore, the fact that songs do not typically feature two “equal” contributors—with the singer taking most of the credit (or blame) for the performance—renders it “suspect” from the perspective of chamber music proper. In this respect, Medtner’s dramatic increase of the importance and difficulty of the piano parts in his songs clearly indicates a desire to make them more suitable as chamber works. In his account, Cui also characterizes the divide between chamber music and not-quite-chamber-music as one of Classicism versus Romanticism. Classical genres like the sonata and string quartet are permitted in chamber recitals, but those myriad genres of solo piano music composed by the Romantics—which often contain great formal interest—lack the necessary “aristocratic attire” to be permitted into the small hall and must be banished, along with song, to more popular venues. Thus song, when performed at all, appeared in variety shows for the public

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2-3. Emphasis added. Abridged from: “Обыкновенно подъ рубрику камерной музыки, въ классическомъ значеніи этого слова, подводятъ музыку, написанную по крайней мѣрѣ для двухъ равноправныхъ инструментовъ -- въ формѣ сонаты -- скрипичныхъ и виолончельныхъ, въ формѣ тріо, квартетовъ, квинтетовъ и т. д. Допускаются еще и сочиненія, написанныя для одного фортепіано, но опять лишь въ одной опредѣленной „классической” формѣ сонаты. И только. Въ этой исключительности кроется нѣкоторое неумышленное, а можетъ быть и умышленное, консервативное, чтобы не сказать консерва торское, недоразумѣніе, ибо камерная музыка очевидно есть вся та музыка, которая можетъ исполняться гдѣ угодно, въ любой комнатѣ частной квартиры и требуетъ лишь немногихъ исполнителей. Логично ли допускать на программы „камерной музыки” сонаты Шопена, и не допускать его этюдовъ, прелюдій, ноктюрновъ, — быть можетъ, еще болѣе гениальныхъ? Не слѣдуетъ „камерной музыкѣ” быть такой чопорной аристократкой и брезгливо сторониться отъ мезалианса со своими сестрами, только потому, что онѣ не въ строго классическомъ нарядѣ. Отъ ихъ взаимнаго общенія выиграла бы и величаво классическая красота собственно камерной музыки, и увлекательная, интимная прелесть жанровой музыки. Еще большая несправедливость -- это исключеніе изъ камерной музыки музыки вокальной: романсовъ, дуэтовъ, тріо, которые къ оперной и кантатной музыкѣ относятся совершенно такъ же, какъ сонаты и квартеты къ симфоніямъ. Отсюда происходитъ крупное, ни начесть логически не основанное, добровольное лишеніе; потому что, если хорошихъ оперъ очень мало, то превосходныхъ романсовъ великое множество. Вслѣдствіе этого ostracизма приходится исполнять романсы въ концертахъ, дающихся въ большихъ залахъ, гдѣ деликатнѣйшіе изъ романсовъ, часто и самые лучшіе, много теряютъ. А какъ было бы пріятно, послѣ струнныхъ инструментовъ услышать голосъ человѣческій; какъ это было бы освѣжительно, и, опять-таки, какъ это было бы обоюдно выгодно!”



that took place in large halls.<sup>36</sup> The kind of details in which a chamber singer revels would, of course, be completely lost in such venues, and no doubt the most popular singers of the time performed in a more operatic style to fill the space. As Medtner complained, most singers' emphasis on projecting their voice loudly enough to fill an opera house resulted in endless performances filled with "unforgivable" errors in intonation, rhythmic accuracy, and diction.

By 1907, despite Olenina's initial concert tours (she still resided in Paris at the time), the situation in Russia was pretty grim, and many critics at this point refused to recognize her contributions. Medtner spent the year in Germany and enjoyed the fruits of the recent craze for *Liederabende*. In a letter to his brother Alexander (a violist turned violinist turned conductor), Medtner assessed the situation with his characteristic self-deprecation:

Now a few words about the singing here. I have always heard from everyone here that nowhere in the world do they sing as *disgustingly* as in Germany, and since for some reason, strange as it may seem, everyone considers themselves authoritative and competent about singing—and since I have never been able to get a taste for our own singing, I have decided once and for all that I understand nothing about singing. *True, one our own singers, d'Alheim, made a wonderful impression on me, but since no one wanted to recognize her as a singer, I continued to distrust my understanding [...]* The singers I have heard here are not celebrities at all, so when I speak of them, I can boldly say of the local school that I want to cry with delight.<sup>37</sup>

Standard notions of vocal "beauty" seemed incomprehensible to Medtner, who found himself at a loss when faced with the critical rejection of what he considered to be properly musical singing.

What apparently was "disgusting" to others brought him delight. This was due precisely to the fact

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<sup>36</sup> These programs would feature a very wide range of performers and genres. Even the notion of playing a group of pieces by the same composer was unheard of, as we will see. Olenina's insistence on always performing in small halls must be understood in this context.

<sup>37</sup> Medtner's letter to Alexander 17 Feb 1907, in *Pis'ma*, 89-90. Emphasis added. Bracketed ellipsis original. "Теперь два слова о здешнем пении. У нас я постоянно слышал от всех, что нигде на свете не поют так мерзко, как в Германии, и т[ак] к[ак] у нас почему-то такое, как это ни странно, в пении считают себя авторитетными и компетентными решительно все (даже и те, которые откровенно заявляют, что в музыке ровно ничего не понимают) и т[ак] к[ак] я никогда не мог войти во вкус отечественного пения, то я раз навсегда решил, что в пении ничего не понимаю. Правда, одна отечественная певица -- д'Альгейм производила на меня прекрасное впечатление, но так как никто не хотел в ней признавать именно певицу, то я продолжал не доверять своему пониманию [...]. Те певицы, которых я здесь слышал, вовсе не знаменитости, т[ак] ч[то] я, говоря о них, смело могу говорить: о здешней школе. Мне плакать хотелось от восторга..."

that he conceived of the voice as not a physiological marvel but as the most pure vehicle available for the expression of musical thoughts:

Of course, great composers, writing their vocal works, thought precisely about this kind of singing, thought about the voice as *the most perfect of instruments*—one which should be a conductor of their feelings, their experiences, and in no way treated it as an accessory of every animal...<sup>38</sup>

One persistent detail that recurs in reviews of Olenina-d'Alheim's recitals was the small size of her voice and its unsuitability for "proper" operatic singing. Her biographer, Tumanov, notes that most music critics, sympathetic or not, reported that Olenin's voice was small and unimpressive *as a voice*.<sup>39</sup> And yet, Cui wrote that she has a "rare ability to impart various timbres to her voice—sometimes metallic, sometimes gentle and caressing" and that "her technique is superb and resides in her splendid diction and phrasing."<sup>40</sup> After she achieved more widespread fame in Russia in the 1910s, critics became less concerned about vocal "beauty" and began instead to rave about her large variety of expressive timbres:

Her singing is amazing in its flexibility, mobility, and technique... In the singer's voice we can hear now a whisper, now death's chill voice from beyond the tomb, now the song of birds in a woodland thicket, now the exact sound of a flute—what the French describe as "*voix flûtée*"—and now the "mighty might and free freedom" of the song of the dark forest.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, her fans reacted strongly to the spellbinding range of vocal effects she could draw upon in service to the text. Emil Medtner's colleague, the philosopher Fyodor Stepun, said that she was neither first-class singer nor stage actress, but instead a "real 'priestess' of art in the full sense of this ample word." He further noted that, "despite the fact that [Olenina had] a very independent personality, on stage she produced the impression of a medium."<sup>42</sup> Corroborating this impression,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. "...конечно же, великие авторы, пища свои вокальные произведения, думали именно о таком пении, думали о голосе, как о *совершеннейшем из инструментов*, который должен быть проводником их чувств, их переживаний, и уж никоим образом не относились к нему, как к принадлежности каждого животного..."

<sup>39</sup> Tumanov, 122-23.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>41</sup> Anonymous 1915 review, quoted in Tumanov, 128-29.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Tumanov, 124, from Fyodor Stepun's 1956 memoirs. He goes on to claim that Pierre d'Alheim played an "enormous role" in crafting Olenina's stage persona as a "medium."

the critic Yury Sakhnovsky notes that by the end of her performance of Schumann's "*Die Lorelei*," Olenina was "reborn" as Lorelei, allowing listeners to perceive the fatal sorceress directly. To him, Olenina was the first singer to reveal the "profundity of Schumann's talent."<sup>43</sup>

Yet, her importance and originality did not only stem from her expressive talents, but also from how she revolutionized the song recital in Russia. As Cui noted in a review of one of her first Russian recitals in December 1901, Olenina innovated in four key areas (which I summarize here):

1. She performs the entire recital herself without the standard and expected intermixture of other soloists in the program.
2. She performs large groups of songs by the same composer, allowing for a "completeness of impression" of the composer's personality.
3. She sings everything from memory—Cui mentions that she sang forty songs in one evening, "which barely accounts for a quarter of her immense repertoire."
4. She is "an artist of conviction" who does not chase public fashions or material success; "sufficient to say that—*horribile dictu*—she sings Mussorgsky [who] has been particularly unsuccessful in St. Petersburg: his operas are forgotten [and] performers of songs are also no fans."<sup>44</sup>

These four innovative practices would turn out to be essential groundwork for the expansion of song performance and composition in Russia. Clearly any composer who viewed song as a serious art form would not want to compose songs for a singer who failed to meet these standards. Indeed, these basic standards made conceivable and realizable the sophistications introduced into song composition by Medtner and others like Rachmaninoff, Grechaninov, and Taneyev.<sup>45</sup>

Olenina's revival of the nineteenth-century Russian song tradition closely parallels the Symbolist's own revival of poets like Fyodor Tyutchev and Afanasy Fet who had fallen out of public favor due to their emphasis on lyricism and metaphysical content (as opposed to the socially engaged realism demanded by nineteenth-century critics). Olenina's devotion to Russian chamber

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<sup>43</sup> Tumanov, 124-25.

<sup>44</sup> Summary of Cui's review in Tumanov, 93-94. About Musorgsky's songs, Cui goes on to say that "Indeed, in his songs there is so little love (of ten songs performed by Mme Olenina, only one was a love song); moreover, they are so difficult rhythmically, so difficult in intonation, phrasing, expression."

<sup>45</sup> This is Gerald Abraham's list of the most notable Russian song composers of the early twentieth century. See Abraham, *Essays on Russian Music*, 31. In my opinion, Nikolay Cherepnin's songs also rank in this list.

singing and the Russian song tradition no doubt came about through the deep personal significance of fact that her grandmother was Anna Olenina—the “*krasavitsa*” celebrated by Pushkin and a student of Glinka. Yet, Olenina-d’Alheim also felt a deep attachment to the Russian peasantry (and her mannerisms were described as peasant-like by her contemporaries) which directly fueled her love of Musorgsky, whose music she felt most perfectly embodied the spirit of the Russian people.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Olenina fell under the spell of renowned peasant singer Irina Fedosova (1827-1899), especially her *prichitaniya* (lamentations) and *bylina* (folk epics). The intense expressivity required of the folk singer in these genres clearly had a great effect on Olenina’s development as a singer.<sup>47</sup> Fedosova made a legendary tour of Russia in the mid-1890s and was important in the promotion of folk practices that were by then unknown to the intelligentsia. Olenina describes one of Fedosova’s recitals as follows:

She sang some widow’s laments. The professor asked the audience to note that after each “couplet” she performed peculiar “*fioriture*” with her voice—“What ‘fury-turies’ are you going on about old fellow?” Fedosova retorted. “Those are tears and sobs.” After that she sang one of the old epic tales and also repeated it the following day but with a few changes in the nature description. [When asked about these changes] she said, “Yesterday it was dull, you see, and rainy. But today there is a bit of sun. And so the story came out different.”<sup>48</sup>

The influence of folk practices combined with Olenina’s near lack of formal voice training surely account for the unique performance style she cultivated later.<sup>49</sup> She would routinely include folk-song arrangements in her concerts, including the folksong arrangements of her brother Alexander Olenin and some of Stravinsky’s Swiss-period “neo-nationalist” creations.

While Medtner did not employ Russian folk sources in his own music, he demanded the kind of totalizing expressivity (in which the performer seems to transform into a medium) that

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<sup>46</sup> Specifically the opera *Khovanshchina*.

<sup>47</sup> In this sense, Olenina could be considered a unique part of the revival of folk arts occurring at the time, known as neonationalism, wherein artists sought to more deeply and completely incorporate folk practices into their own.

<sup>48</sup> Tumanov, 63.

<sup>49</sup> Olenina claimed that Fedosova “initiated her into the most secret, concealed parts of her performer’s gift. She taught me what singing is in *nature*, in human nature.” See Tumanov, 64.

Olenina learned from folk practice and which required the abandonment of traditional conceptions of vocal beauty. Perhaps as a result, Medtner was one of the very few contemporary composers that Olenina actually performed.<sup>50</sup> In this 1916 review of an Olenina recital, Medtner's "Zaklinanie"—one of her specialties and the subject of the analysis to come—is invoked alongside Musorgsky's "Trepak" (from the "Songs and Dances of Death") as a prime example of how Olenina employed various "ugly" timbres to mystically transport the audience:

When the artist introduces the names of Mussorgsky, Medtner, Borodin, or Schumann into her program and plunges into musical depths of passion and haunting spiritual specters, her voice undergoes miraculous transformations. Depending on the mood experienced, it can be sharply modified to its physical limits.... [Her voice] can become chesty with sounds that are hoarse and terrifying at moments of tragedy, in Medtner's "Zaklinanie" or Musorgsky's "Trepak," for instance. Olenina has yet another timbre, used predominantly in Musorgsky's cycles "Songs and Dances of Death" and "Sunless," which we could describe as mystically horrified. And here we reach the ultimate limit of artistry, stage play comes to an end and aesthetic masks fall away."<sup>51</sup>

Olenina continued performing Medtner into the 1920s in France. One eye-witness of these later recitals emphasized how she would flap her arms in her "strange dresses," with the result that, "she looked like a bird." Bely's mystical vision of Olenina as the "pale-blue bird of Eternity" clearly had a basis in reality! Our eye-witness continues: "It was very tragic and very impressive... when she did Musorgsky or Olenin or even Grechaninov [whom] she didn't like, or Medtner, it was really unforgettable."<sup>52</sup>

For his part, Bely continued to write obsessively about Olenina over the course of his life, even comparing her favorably to the great *basso* Chaliapin. She, along with Medtner, clearly instigated in him his love of German song cycles (which make many appearances in his writings). In his late

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<sup>50</sup> After she emigrated she did perform the songs of the younger French composers Darius Milhaud and Francis Poulenc (Tumanov 208).

<sup>51</sup> Tumanov, 128.

<sup>52</sup> Tumanov, 134.

memoirs he gives her a remarkable poetic portrait, in which, for at least small group of Russian writers and musicians, song finally achieves its due:

One was struck by her stature and the explosive glint of her sapphire eyes. In her intonations were the whirr of the spinning wheel, laughter, ravens' cawing, and tears. One song grew out of another, revealed in song. And significance and meaning grew. And for the first time we were caught unawares by a recognition that *Die Winterreise*, a cycle of songs, had a significance no less than that of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.<sup>53</sup>

Here, we have traced the flight of song from the lowest level of the prestige to the highest. In the recently published 1923 Berlin edition of his memoirs (before he made many distortions in the face of Soviet pressure), Bely points to another, quite different, facet of Olenina's significance for the pre-revolutionary Symbolists (in unfinished prose):

The performer of songs by Mussorgsky, Schubert, and Wolf always evoked a cry of delight among the "Argonauts"; such a complete performance of songs is unique; yes: whoever has not heard Olenina will not understand the chill of the blood under the sounds of [Title missing]<sup>54</sup> by Schubert or the contractions of the heart under the sounds of "To you I appeal" by Mussorgsky.<sup>55</sup> Everything she did worked: the sparkle of her huge, open eyes, the stunning shades of her voice... The concert was forgotten, it seemed that we were at a mystery.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, the notion of music performance as a religious mystery was at the heart of much of the Symbolists' discourse on the relationship between art, religion, and life. Bely, Medtner, and Olenina all had somewhat similar thoughts about the mystical import of music and song in particular that diverged from the more well-known views of Scriabin and to which we shall now turn.

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<sup>53</sup> Bely, *Nachalo Veka*, 390. Translated and reproduced in Tumanov, 301. Bely also reports that she acts, "just like a holy-woman. She chatters away, blinks like a bluebird; and she flutters her shawls; suddenly props herself up like a peasant *baba*; suddenly shrieks like a woman of the people!" (Tumanov, *ibid.*)

<sup>54</sup> The editors note that on the manuscript Bely refers to a poem by Wilhelm Müller, so the intended song is likely something from his favorite set, *Die Winterreise*.

<sup>55</sup> From his unfinished opera, *Khovanshchina*.

<sup>56</sup> Bely, *Nachalo veka Berlinskaya redaktsiya*, 424. "С д'Альгеймами был я и раньше в сношении; исполнительница песен Мусоргского, Шуберта, Вольфа всегда вызывала в среде «аргонавтов» почти вскрик восторга; такое законченное исполнение песен неповторимо; да: кто не слышал Олениной, тот не поймет холодения крови под звуками «(- -)» Шуберта, сжатий сердечных под звуками «К вам я взываю» Мусоргского; все в Олениной действовало: блеск разрывов огромных, раскрывшихся глаз, потрясающие оттенки ее ни на что не похожего голоса, может быть, вешего недостатками (для любителей «виртуозного», итальянского пения); «недостатками» действовала особенно М. А. Оленина; слушал концерты Шаляпина я; и я должен сказать, что Шаляпин в сравненьи с Олениной невероятно проигрывал; забывался концерт; представлялось, что мы на мистерии..."

### Song as Mystery

Bely spent much of the first decade of the twentieth century in fierce polemics with his fellow Symbolists about the exact nature of the relationship between art and religion, debating whether and how the two could join forces together in the creation of a “mystery.” Such collective creation would have profound transformative effects on the participants, the audience, and perhaps even humanity at large. Bely and the Medtner brothers opposed the idea of recreating Dionysian theater, promoted at the time by Vyacheslav Ivanov. This resulted in the factionalization of both Symbolism and the Muscovite musical scene that began around 1906 and became increasingly apparent after Scriabin’s return to Russia in 1910. From the beginning of their careers, Bely and Medtner elevated the solo song over the theatrical spectacle. For example, in his 1904 essay, “Window into the Future,” Bely discusses the idea of an artistic mystery centered on Olenina-d’Alheim and the intimate lieder recital. The basic argument is as follows: Nietzsche identified the fundamental importance of the union of poetry and music for the enactment of an artistic mystery, but failed to address the religious aspects underpinning such a union. Wagner himself tried to address this religious dimension head on with *Parsifal*—leading Nietzsche to abandon him and fatally turn to a positivistic view of the world. To Bely, then, Wagner was looking in the right direction but ultimately failed to achieve “true tragedy” in his operas due to their monumental complexity:

Tragedy that descends to the depths of mystery is inevitably connected with simplicity. In antiquity people would gather to pray before the statue of a god. But there is no true prayer at the present time. If the essence of mystery is religious, it will neither appear in opera nor in drama.... Because of the complexity of the means necessary to perform them, drama and opera weaken the immediacy of the stream gushing out of Eternity. Contemporary drama and opera threaten to collapse under the ever-growing complexity of stagecraft.<sup>57</sup>

Wagner failed in creating a truly transformative tragedy due to the rampant complexity of his music dramas, removing them far from the roots of mystery in prayer and weakening their capacity

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<sup>57</sup> Bely, *Mystical Essays*, 9-10.

to provide unmediated experiences of Eternity.<sup>58</sup> This remarkable rebuttal to Wagner and Nietzsche's vision of Dionysian drama emerged out of Bely's suspicions of theater as too beholden to money and fashion. What is the solution? Something that can reveal the spiritual potential of the unification of poetry and music while remaining simple: Song! He claims that the animated singing of a poetic text deepens its symbols and strengthens their power to express transcendent ideas: "The poetic symbol—made complex by the relation by the relation of music to it, transfigured by voice, and shaded by mimicry—expands immeasurably. The idea vividly emerges from the expanded and deepened symbol."<sup>59</sup> But these deepened symbols require more than a singer—someone capable of remarkable expressiveness, capable of crossing "the boundary between music and poetry." And, of course, that singer is Olenina-d'Alheim. Bely understands the emergence of Olenina to be of great spiritual significance for humanity, someone who represents the emergence of a new priesthood who and "are destined to unite life with mystery."<sup>60</sup> For Bely, the directedness and simplicity of song serve as a distillation and intensification of "the spiritual potential revealed in opera." Olenina is capable of expressing the Symbolic dimension of song and "unfurling before us the depths of the spirit." He concludes that "the complexity of the idea-symbols evoked by the singing of Olenina-d'Alheim makes her a servant of religion."<sup>61</sup>

Bely thought that true source of a poem's (mystical) meaning lay in the shifting rhythms and melodies of the text, rather than in the poetic images themselves. As is well-known in the scholarship, "rhythm" takes on a privileged position in Bely's theory of Symbolism—denoting both the musico-spiritual basis of creativity in the movement of the soul as well as its manifestation in the concrete rhythms of poetic meter.<sup>62</sup> Yet, to my knowledge, no one has surveyed the great extent to

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<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, Medtner argued in his book that Wagner actually succeeded in subjugating the sprawling complexity of his music dramas via thematic coherence.

<sup>59</sup> Bely, *Mystical Essays*, 10.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. He includes Arthur Nikisch and Vladimir Solovyov as other figures with such prophetic powers.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>62</sup> Bely's mystically-derived theory of poetic rhythm will be examined further in Chapter 3.



which song served a similar role in his aesthetic philosophy. For Bely, the melodies of the soul lie at the root of all creativity in life and art—song symbolizes the free, uncompromised expression of those soulful melodies. It designates the originary, integral form of artistic creativity before the arts became crystallized into a variety of independent forms.<sup>63</sup> In the lecture he gave at the first concert of Olenina's "House of Song" on November 6, 1908, Bely claimed that, "Song was the beginning of creativity in art. But now that creativity in art is more and more becoming the creation of dead forms, song is the first call to create living forms: it is a call to man, summoning him to become an artist of life."<sup>64</sup> Song is thus the ultimate Symbolist art because it unites inner experience (understood as rhythm and melody) with visible spatial forms, through the musicalization of the poetic image. In another essay from around the same time, Bely derives his triadic definition of the symbol as the self-sufficient unity of image and experience from his understanding of song:

Song gave birth to poetry and pure music... In song is contained the symbolic unity "a" of the triad "abc", where "b" is the visible image emphasized in the spatial arts, and "c" is the imageless experience emphasized in music. Therefore, relatively speaking, *music* is the most Romantic art (which was noted by both the Romantics and Hegel), sculpture is the most Classical art, and song is the most Symbolic.<sup>65</sup>

Thus the symbol itself is ideally and fully expressed through song—the art most capable of manifesting the ideal and eternal in its products.

Given the close association of his writings on Olenina and song and his development of the theory of Symbolism, it is difficult to tell which came first. Perhaps the powerful experiences he had at Olenina's recitals, where he vividly perceived the unity of word, music, and gesture in her performances, are the actual source of his theory of the symbol. Medtner also understood artistic

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<sup>63</sup> For an account of song as the primordial art from which all forms of human creativity emerged, see Bely, "Song of Life," in *Mystical Essays*, 33-49.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>65</sup> Bely, "The Meaning of Art," section VI, in *Symbolism*. "Песня породила поэзию и чистую музыку... В песне заключено символическое единство "а" триады "abc", где "b", т. е. образ видимости, подчеркнут в пространственных искусствах, а "c", т. е. безобразное переживание, -- в музыке. Поэтому, условно говоря, музыка -- наиболее романтическое искусство (что отмечали и романтики и Гегель), скульптура -- наиболее классическое искусство, а песня -- наиболее символическое."

creativity as the expression of music within the soul, which he understood to originate from divine song fully encompassing all the possible diversity of music and its meanings. He considered music to be a language capable of expressing meaning on its own without the need for an accompanying text; but, nevertheless, the act of uniting music and poetry greatly enhances its spiritual impact on the world. As Bely wrote in 1906, “If poetry burdens music with images, then conversely music, thanks to poetry and through poetry, is able to permeate the visible world.”<sup>66</sup>

For both Bely and Medtner, simplicity is an absolute requirement for art to possess any kind of spiritual force—song is superior to opera as a symbolic art for this precise reason. For Medtner, the general law governing all of music is the requirement that all complexity must be coordinated around a unifying simplicity—one that “unites all individual phenomenon of our art [and] governs the process of the artist’s creativity.”<sup>67</sup> The manifestation of this law in harmonic practice—for example, the resolution of the dominant (complexity) to the tonic (simplicity)—creates music’s “incantational” (“zaklinatel’naya”) power. The abandonment of tonality would result in the removal of music’s unifying center and thus would destroy its magical incantational power over the audience. Bely anticipates Medtner’s law of the coordination of complexity by simplicity in his 1906 essay on the composer’s songs, claiming that, “Medtner, employing the most complex techniques, is nevertheless brilliantly simple in his main themes. And this healthy, integral simplicity—simplicity through complexity—inseparably connects his work with the general mainstream of music, represented by geniuses like Beethoven, Schumann, and Wagner.”<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, Medtner, like with Bely above, also understands music to be a form of religious creativity rooted in the simplicity of ancient prayers—a manifestation of the all-

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<sup>66</sup> Bely, “The Principle of Form in Aesthetics,” in *Selected Essays*, 209.

<sup>67</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 12 (translation altered).

<sup>68</sup> Bely, Appendix A.

encompassing unity of divine song. The great composer is one who is capable of taking the simplest musical formulae and endowing them with deep spiritual significance:

To what incantatory general musical formula can such contrasting pages of music as the volcanic, stunning coda of the finale of the *Appassionata* [Beethoven] and the enchanting beginning of Chopin's A-flat major ballade be reduced? To the same formula: tonics and dominants, or dominants and tonics. Does this mean that these formulas exhaust the analysis of this music? No, any analysis begins with them and is comprehended and unified through them. Does this mean that Beethoven and Chopin had a tendency to think in primitive patterns? No, it only means that their genius had the ability, like that of ancient prayers, to spiritualize the simplest formulas, the most basic meanings of music. The fact that music's most basic meanings can be spiritualized points to their origins in that primordial, divine song.<sup>69</sup>

Truly inspired music forms a direct link with the divine song, descending down onto earth within the human soul. The human ability to convey meaning through music and thus have an incantational effect on others is only possible if the composer stays true to the song resounding in the soul and does not become deafened to it by the cacophony of the physical world. To Medtner, the rules of tonality have emerged from centuries of humanity's collective contemplation of this divine song, and, thus, modernist atonality is a rejection of the soul—a rejection of the divine basis of earthly life.

Fantastically, Bely also anticipates Medtner's entire religious philosophy of music in his 1906 article on Medtner's Goethe Lieder:

In joining with the great composers of the past, Medtner is separated from them by the chaos of the surrounding conditions of modernity. From chaos, as it were, he returns for the second time to the chastely creative sources of life and music. Pure music is *resurrected* in him, promising the unquenchable dawn of life. This glowing background gives Medtner's music a special transformative meaning. It is the good news; it is the promise "*of the dear and eternally familiar at all times.*"<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 47-8 (translation altered). "К какой заклинательной общемузыкальной формуле могут быть сведены, например, столь противоположные страницы музыки, как вулканическая потрясающая кода финала *Appassionata* и чарующее начало *As-dur'*ной баллады Шопена? Все к той же формуле: тоники и доминанты, или доминанты и тоники. Значит ли это, что этими формулами исчерпывается анализ этой музыки? Нет, он с них начинается и ими осмысливается, централизуется. Значит ли это, что Бетховен и Шопен имели склонность мыслить примитивными схемами? Нет, это означает лишь, что их гений обладал способностью одухотворять простейшие формулы, самые основные смыслы музыки, как их одухотворяли древние молитвы. Но это означает также и способность этих смыслов быть одухотворяемыми, указывает на их происхождение от той первичной песни."

<sup>70</sup> Bely, original emphasis. See Appendix A.

By separating himself from the chaos of modernity, Medtner can access the “chastely creative sources” of music, thus “resurrecting” pure music in his soul. The result is the music takes on hallowed “glow” and a “special transformative meaning”—the attributes that Medtner likely understood as “music’s incantational power.” In other words, the composer effectively makes incarnate in physical music the heavenly sounds in the soul which exerts a positive force on the world.

For both Bely and Medtner then, song is a religious mystery because of its theophanic power to reveal the eternal and the divine when the composer unites the mystical rhythms of the soul with visible poetic images. Neither believed that this religious mystery would apocalyptically end the world through the spiritual evolution of mankind, as Scriabin would set about to do in his own unfinished “Mystery.” Instead, they viewed music as a means through which humanity and the material world could become spiritualized, i.e. more divinely perfect. Song both serves as the ultimate origin of all music and as its most powerful symbolic manifestation on earth. This interpretation is further corroborated by Medtner’s friend Ivan Ilyin—a religious philosopher concerned with the development of universal Christian culture—who wrote about Medtner in terms very similar to Bely’s many years later in 1943 in Zurich:

I call Medtner a *seer*, because he perceives the musical contents that lie before him as *visions* and as *visions* he gives them to us. Visions not in the sense of ghosts or illusions. No, what he sings of as a [musical] theme is a *spiritual reality* that appeared to him in the form of a melody, and he, *brightly contemplating and clearly hearing it*, first gives it life, and then gives it to others. His world is Romantically boundless in content and Classically perfect in form.<sup>71</sup>

The d’Alheims also approached music in song through mystical terms. Bely sought advice on theosophy and related matters from Pierre, but the d’Alheims more esoteric and spiritualist interests

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<sup>71</sup> Ilyin, “Nikolay Metner,” in *Sushchnost’ i soeobrazie Russkoy kul’tury*, 396. Ilyin even adopts Bely’s basic idea that Symbolism effects the union of (inner) Romantic content with (outer) Classical form. “Я называю Метнера *провидцем*, потому что он воспринимает предлагающие ему музыкальные содержания как *видения* и как *видения* дарует их нам. Видения не в смысле призраков или иллюзий. Нет, то, что он воспекает как тему, есть *духовная реальность*, которая явилась ему в образе мелодии, а он, *светло созерцая и ясно слыша* ее, сначала дает ей жизнь, а потом дарит ее другим. Его мир романтически безграничен по содержанию и классически совершенен по форме.”

lend their mysticism a rather different slant. They viewed song performance as a kind of resurrection of the composer/poet through the physical body of the singer. In this way the performer acts as medium and is thus able to exert tremendous influence over the audience:

The performer's basic, primary feeling takes on the character of self-abnegation. In fact, his mission is one of incarnation. He must yield to the work performed and in his awareness he must live only in and through it. This sense of self-abnegation, as it increases, changes form and turns into spiritualization—a supreme elevation which, as it increases, becomes an active force of influence... It becomes clear to him [the performer] what comprises and sums up his *mediumistic mission*, and with what reverence he must accept the treasure entrusted to him by the artist-creator; how he must preserve it, trying to extract nothing from it for his own benefit; and how he must make the public accept this treasure in all its pristine eternity. [...] Here all feelings flow together in a full and final self-renunciation: the artist is dead to the world, and he lives in a constant, uninterrupted communion with the ideals of his great teachers.<sup>72</sup>

What is noteworthy is how little of this really contradicts Medtner's more explicitly Christian mysticism. Indeed, at this time Christian, occult, and theosophical ideas all intermixed and are difficult to distinguish. The Medtner's themselves were always skeptical of occult practices, and yet, Medtner's own account of music as a divine "incantation" ("zaklinanie") might appear to some as a form of occult magic (even if it is white magic).

No where is this permeable division between occultism and new currents in Russian religious thought better illustrated than in the feud that developed between Pierre d'Alheim and Emil Medtner. The d'Alheims hosted a popular salon in their house that was located right across the street from the Medtners. This salon served as a hotbed of musico-literary mysticism due to Pierre's theosophical interests and his love of interpolating lectures between individual songs in his wife's recitals.<sup>73</sup> This led to animosity between Emil Medtner and Pierre as these two leaders of Muscovite

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<sup>72</sup> From a "House of Song" bulletin article, written by Pierre d'Alheim in 1910. Quoted in Tumanov, 173.

<sup>73</sup> Bely's account in his unfinished Berlin version of *Nachalo veka*, 427: "The husband of the famous singer, Baron P. d'Alheim, sat with the program of the night; penetrating the consciousness of the listeners and working on the subconscious, he engraved amazingly psychological transitions from song to song, where the song, refracted by the previous and shaded by the following, grew, acquiring a completely unexpected meaning; where the gradation of songs revealed the fantasy of the whole, growing out of the fusion of songs, likened only to cosmogony, or the path of initiation, engraved in the consciousness by the work of d'Alheim."

literary life attempted to steer the Symbolist crowd in different directions. In Bely's later account, the rivalry reached a fever pitch due to Emil's hatred of d'Alheim's particular esotericism and his promotion of French culture. (D'Alheim was partly French and promoted French culture while Emil did the same with German culture.) Here Bely invokes Emil Medtner's characteristic tendency to view the world and its inhabitants through the characters of Wagner's *Ring*, with the House of Song as Nibelheim:

[Emil] found the Kabbalistic architectonics of d'Alheim's views intolerable, along with their difference in national approach to art. They tore apart the culture of Russia in different directions: to marriage with Siegfried and to marriage with Roland—but both claimed the wedding with the princess of Russia (Brünhilde).” The “Dom Pesni” [“House of Song”] was right across the street, mere feet, from the “Dom Metnerov” [“House of Medtners”].<sup>74</sup>

Emil had his own Wagnerian vision of a musical mystery—one that placed Nikolay at the center. Emil imagined his brother would take up where Wagner left off and compose grand theatrical works without deviating from art's Eternal laws (as he considered his mortal enemy Richard Strauss to have done). Such Dionysian works would unite ancient pagan myth with Christianity in a glorious synthesis of Western culture that would redeem humanity. Emil's vision of this Wagnerian mystery was formed under the influence of the Medtner brothers' 1912 trip to see *Parsifal* at Bayreuth.<sup>75</sup> As Emil described it in a letter to Margarita Morozova:

It was there [at Parsifal] that the greatness of Kolya [Nikolay] as a human became clear to me. In the solitary theater garden, where he quickly ran after the end of the [second] act, I experienced with him one of the strongest and most wonderful moments of my life. We were entirely alone. I could not speak a word. Gasping from the unbearable excitement, he

<sup>74</sup> Bely, *Nachalo veka Berlinksaya redaktsiya*, 427. Abridged from, “Эмилию Карловичу невыносим был абстрактный «монизм» объяснений д'Альгейма; ему, дуалисту (по Канту) и плюралисту (по Гёте), непереносна бывала каббалистическая архитектоника взглядов д'Альгейма, отличие в национальном подходе к искусству; была частью русский д'Альгейм, но ведь Метнер в «нерусском» был немец; д'Альгейм же Француз; и растаскивали культуру России в различные стороны; к браку с Зигфридом и к браку с Роландом; да оба претендовали на свадьбу с царевной Россией (Брунгильдой); и за нее поднимали мечи: «Дюрандали» и «Нотунги»; парадоксально: «Дом Песни» возник против дома, где обитал Э. К. Метнер; квартиру его называли тогда «Домом Метнеров» мы; так что окна квартиры д'Альгеймов глядели на окна квартиры Э. К.; и порой открывалась дверь: дома Метнеров, дома д'Альгеймов, и я, иль Петровский, Рачинский, Наташа Тургенева, Шпетт, перебежали из дома в дом; иногда же воинственно Метнер являлся отсиживать перед д'Альгеймом; «Дома» отделялись двадцатью лишь шагами... Беседами с П. И. д'Альгеймом мы все увлекались как подлинным продолжением концерта Олениной...”

<sup>75</sup> Ironically, this was the same performance of *Parsifal* that Stravinsky famously derided in his *An Autobiography* (Simon and Schuster, 1936), 38-9.

[Nikolay] spoke words that were unbelievable in their depth and appropriateness and, I repeat, I could not decide where there was more greatness: on the stage or here in the experience that was so congenial that Wagner, if he had arisen from the grave, would have welcomed Kolya as a brother.... This is the secret, brought about through art; this is the mystery of communion through art; this is true “theosophy.” I have in mind that transformation, that genuine ecstasy, which seized Kolya through *Parsifal*. How pitiful and humorous to me in that moment was Scriabin with his ecstasy...<sup>76</sup>

This vision of artistic mystery was predicated on the notion that great representatives of humanity formed a community of being across time and space through the creation of masterworks which both guided human culture and expressed its fundamentally divine nature. Unfortunately for Emil, Nikolay seemed unwilling to try his hand at Wagnerian music dramas or in the large scale symphonic forms that Emil loved. Instead, as we have seen, Medtner pursued his Symbolism in smaller, intimate chamber forms less conducive to mythogenesis. While Emil was enraptured by Wagner’s grandiose conflation of pagan myth with Christianity in *Parsifal*, surely Nikolay, with his composer’s ears, was ultimately more captivated by those divinely simple, yet endlessly varied, tonal formulae that appear throughout the celebrated *Bühnenweihfestspiel* (Stage-consecrating-festival-play).<sup>77</sup>

While Medtner had no intention of challenging the sorcerer of Bayreuth on his own turf and did not seem interested in the idea of writing for the stage, he did deeply engage with Wagner’s harmonic methods. Indeed, in his book, Medtner gives perhaps the most unusual interpretation of Wagner’s musical significance ever formulated:

Let us recall what Wagner said two years before his death when reading through Palestrina and Bach. The very same Wagner, who is usually quoted and remembered only as a revolutionary in music, was, in fact—with all his music, with all his harmony—someone who showed the deepest connection with Palestrina, and with Bach, and with all music, and with all of its laws, and, finally, with the fundamental meaning of harmony—the triad... “*O was ist doch solch ein Dreiklang! Alles verschwindet für mich dagegen; wenn er nieder eintritt, so ist es nach allem Toben, Wüten, Irren, wie die Rückkehr von Brahma zu sich selbst*”<sup>78</sup>...these words of Wagner, spoken by him after the composition of “Tristan” (*nach allem Toben, Wüten, Irren*), especially

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Emil Medtner to Morozova, quoted in Mitchell, *Orphans*, 123-24.

<sup>77</sup> For example, Medtner writes in his book that one of Wagner’s major achievements was “the infinite variety of interrupted cadences” he employed—an observation far removed from Emil’s concerns. See Medtner, *Muse*, 37.

<sup>78</sup> In Alfred Swan’s translation, “O, what a marvel, such a triad! I feel as if everything disappeared against it; when it sounds again, it is as if, after all the madness and anger and fruitless search, Brahma returned to himself.” Medtner, *Muse*, 108.

clearly answer the question: what is genuine (non-artificial) evolution [in musical composition]? The movement of evolution is an eternal encirclement, not an eternal movement away. It is the movement of life around eternity. Evolution means both forward and backward, higher and lower, and finally (quite contrary to the opinion of those who identify evolution with progress and love to use it to justify their continuous movement away from the center) it means both better and worse, equally.<sup>79</sup>

To Medtner, Wagner was no revolutionary, but a staunch upholder of the eternal laws of tonal harmony, as they divinely emanate from the simplicity of the triad.<sup>80</sup> Music does not evolve, it simply reveals different aspects of itself over time as humanity becomes more attuned to the divine song. In Medtner's view, the eternal is the true guide to human creative and religious aspirations: "The divine face of the Muse finds its true reflection only in the distant and quiet waters of the deep lake that is Eternity."<sup>81</sup> Medtner's definition of evolution as "the movement of life around eternity" reflects Bely's interpretation of Nietzsche's concept of eternal return as really the periodic "*recurrence of Eternity*."<sup>82</sup> Bely even depicts Eternity as a feminine goddess, as the object of the Symbolist's sacred

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<sup>79</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 107-108 (translation altered). "Вспомним, что говорил Вагнер за два года до своей смерти при чтении Палестрины и Баха. Тот самый Вагнер, который обыкновенно цитируется и вспоминается лишь как революционер в музыке, но который на самом деле всей своей музыкой, всей гармонией показал свою глубочайшую связь и с Палестриной, и с Бахом, и со всей музыкой, и со всеми ее законами, и, наконец, с основным смыслом гармонии трезвучием... «O was ist doch solch ein Dreiklang! Alles verschwindet for mich dagegen; wenn er wieder eintritt, so ist es nach allem Toben, Wuten, Irren, wie die Ruckkehr von Brahma zu sich selbst»... Эти слова Вагнера, сказанные им после сочинения «Тристана» (nach allem Toben, Wuten, Irren) особенно ярко отвечают нам на вопрос: что есть подлинная (ненамеченная) эволюция? Движение эволюции есть вечное окружение, а не вечное удаление. Это движение жизни вокруг вечности. Эволюция означает и «вперед», и «назад», и «вверх», и «вниз», и, наконец, (вопреки мнению тех, кто разумеет под ней прогресс и любит ею оправдывать свое непрерывное удаление от центра) она равно означает и лучше и хуже."

<sup>80</sup> Clarifying further his interpretation of Wagner's music, Medtner writes: "Wagner, who is most often pointed to as an exemplary revolutionary, was never one. His admiration for Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven was not a cold recognition of their merits. *It was a living cult, which shows us his deep connection with previous music.* His reform in the field of opera has nothing in common with musical revolution. As for his harmony, thematic construction, rhythm and, finally, his amazing development of themes (leitmotifs), here we observe only an individual illumination, a *brilliant spiritualization of the same musical meanings that were the basis of all music.*" Emphasis added. Medtner, *Muse*, 85 (translation altered). "Вагнер, на которого чаще всего указывают как на примерного революционера, никогда на самом деле им не был. Его преклонение перед Бахом, Моцартом и Бетховеном не было холодным признанием их заслуг. Это был живой культ, который указывает нам на его глубокую связь с прежней музыкой. Его реформа в области оперы не имеет ничего общего с музыкальной революцией. Что же касается его гармонии, тематического построения, ритма и, наконец, его изумительной разработки тем (лейтмотивов), то здесь наблюдается лишь индивидуальное освещение, гениальное одухотворение все тех же музыкальных смыслов, которые были основой всей музыки."

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 97 (altered). Medtner's statement proceeds from an interpretation of Goethe's poem, "Spiegel der Muse," in which the Muse is admiring herself in the deep waters of a lake and unconcerned by the mockery of the turbulent brook nearby. "Божественный лик Музы находит себе подлинное отражение лишь в далеких и тихих водах глубокого озера — Вечности..."

<sup>82</sup> See Bely, "Symbolism as a Worldview," in *Selected Essays*, 88.



love: “It is not by accident that the ‘Song of Songs’ opens with the One Countenance of the beloved—of beloved Eternity, the sole beloved of Nietzsche, the prophet of earth. Revelation shows us the same countenance in heaven as well: we call this countenance the bride.”<sup>83</sup>

Bely’s preoccupation with the Eternal in art saturated his very first published article, the review of Olenina-d’Alheim’s 1902 song recital quoted above. Disorientated by the mystical visions induced within him by the singer herself, he exclaims: “Who is this? What is this? Where are we?... Right here she stands and sings—in pale blue—the pale blue bird of Eternity.”<sup>84</sup> As Bely would explain in a letter to Emil Medtner written around the same time as this article, “pale-blue” occupies the penultimate stage in his eight-step color ladder (prior to the final stage of “colorlessness”) which represents the “internal ascent of the spirit from oneself to God.”<sup>85</sup> “Eternity” stands at the core of Bely’s and Medtner’s mystical Symbolism. It is simply another name for the divine source of life and art that can be embodied in otherwise transient artistic creations. In Bely’s system, which he derived from Vladimir Solovyov’s philosophy, the closer the artwork corresponds to the ideal, eternal forms, the more spiritualized it becomes. Through artistic creation, humanity can transfigure the fallen material world and eventually bring about the union of heaven and earth as foretold in Revelation. As Bely wrote in his 1904 essay, “Sacred Colors,” Christ is “Eternity incarnate” and, thus, “We must make Christ incarnate, just as He made Himself incarnate.”<sup>86</sup> For Bely, Christ is the ultimate Symbol of all true art, i.e. all art strives to make Eternity manifest on earth (replicating Christ’s incarnation).

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<sup>83</sup> Bely, “Song of Life,” in *Mystical Essays*, 47. The Sophiological basis of this idea will be examined in Chapter Two.

<sup>84</sup> Bely, “Pevitsa,” my translation. The “pale-blue” is part of Bely’s elaborate color symbolism derived from his extensive study of theosophy—the very same sources from which Scriabin derived his system aligning colors and keys, not from any kind of “synaesthesia” as commonly thought. See Bely’s “Sacred Colors,” in *Mystical Essays*, 65.

<sup>85</sup> Bely to E. Medtner, 30 Nov 1902. Letter #10 in *Andrey Bely—Emil Metner: Perepiska, 1902-1915*. At the time Bely was studying theosophy and goes on to explain that he has been recently informed by Pierre d’Alheim that there are really nine steps of color in the ascent of the spirit: “*Nine* will finally illuminate for us the path that we set out on from the world, and ‘*everything*’ will be illuminated by a single final light.” He clearly thus had personal contact with the d’Alheims from their first concert tour of Russia.

<sup>86</sup> Bely, *Mystical Essays*, 63.

This mystical preoccupation with Eternity as both the subject and object of artistic creation directly influenced the development of Symbolist poetics and especially Medtner's Symbolist musical style, which we will turn to now.

### Symbolist Music

Like Bely, Medtner describes the creative process as the incarnation of the eternal impulses of the soul in art. Not only does the artist work with eternal themes, “existing in themselves,” but is able to incarnate the “impulses of his soul” due to direct mystical connections between the artist's soul and the artistic creation:

The main themes of art are themes of *eternity*, existing in themselves. Artistic ‘discovery’ consists only in the individual disclosure of these themes and in no way the invention of a non-existent art. “He did not invent gunpowder”: these words of reproach encourage young musicians, instead of devoting themselves to direct thematic creativity, to invent all sorts of explosives and suffocating gases—the effect of which is equally destructive not only for art, but also for the inventor himself, since this dynamite destroys those invisible (but, nevertheless, quite real) conducting strands [“provoda,”] that connect the soul of the artist with art itself. *No matter how high and significant the impulses of his soul, they can no longer be incarnated [“voplotit'sya”] in art when these wires are torn.*<sup>87</sup>

This passage, from Medtner's 1935 book, is part of his polemic against musical modernism, which he felt had severed art from its foundations in religious creativity. While Symbolism is now considered the first modernist movement in Russian literature, participants certainly sought to restore their artistic practice to its assumed origins in religious creation. Modernism is often characterized by the fixation on the purely novel, yet Bely (with Medtner) defined Symbolism instead

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<sup>87</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 3. Translation altered. Emphasis added. “В искусстве же главной реальностью являются темы. Главные темы искусства суть темы вечности, существующие сами по себе. Художественное «открытие» заключается лишь в индивидуальном раскрытии этих тем, а никоим образом не в изобретении несуществующего искусства. «Он пороха не выдумал». Этот упрек побуждает молодых музыкантов вместо того, чтобы отдаваться непосредственному тематическому творчеству, изобретать всевозможные взрывчатые вещества и удушливые газы, действие которых равно губительно не только для искусства, но и для самого изобретателя, так как действие этого динамита разрушает те невидимые (но, тем не менее, вполне реальные) провода, которые соединяют душу художника с самим искусством. Как бы ни были высоки и значительны порывы его души, они не могут уже воплотиться в искусство при надорванности этих проводов.”

as the search for the eternal in the old and its resurrection into the new. In 1912 he penned a definition of Symbolism along these lines for his and Emil Medtner's magazine, *Works and Days*:

In living through the diversity of theory of the recent past, modernity is forced to seek organic wholeness; this wholeness is a reflection of the *eternal* on earth. We can either create this wholeness *anew*, or we can creatively perceive the *eternal in the old*. Both of those great artists who excite us, sages of the recent past, strove for this: Nietzsche and Wagner. Nietzsche strove for the first; Wagner strove for the second. And in the latter path we see more greatness.<sup>88</sup>

It is greater to (creatively) look for the eternal in the old than it is to create it anew. While Bely elsewhere also recognized the need for new forms of art and life that could free humanity from ossified expressive forms, he never imagined this would entail a direct break with the past. In fact he spent a considerable amount of effort studying past poetic forms, especially iambic tetrameter, examining how the meter could be renewed through old and new rhythmic practices. He frequently polemicized against those who sought radically new forms of expression that broke from past traditions, and instead sought to “concentrate entirely on the study of creative techniques within the limits of existing forms”—as Bely described the purpose of his own branch of Symbolism.<sup>89</sup>

There is a common misconception in the musicological literature that Symbolists in general were devoted to “the overthrow of tradition, the freeing of technique, and the dissolution of ‘form,’” as Taruskin put it in his attempt to assess the cultural significance of Symbolism during Scriabin's youth.<sup>90</sup> Yet, while these decidedly modernist ideals apply to some extent to the late music of Scriabin, their assertion as general principles mischaracterizes what many Symbolists, including

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<sup>88</sup> Bely, Introduction to Orpheus, *Trudy i dni* 1 (1912), in *Manifesty*, 552. “Изживая многообразие теории недавнего прошлого, современность вынуждена искать органической цельности; эта цельность может быть отражением *вечного* на земле; эту цельность можем или *заново* сотворить; или можем мы творчески воспринять *вечное в старом*. К этому стремились оба великие художники, мудрецы недавнего, нас волнующего прошлого: Ницше и Вагнер. К первому порывался Ницше; порывался Вагнер ко второму. И в последнем пути мы усматриваем более величия.”

<sup>89</sup> Bely, “Об итогах развития нового русского искусства,” in *Arabeski*. Accessible here: [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_14\\_1907\\_arabesky.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_14_1907_arabesky.shtml). Originally published in 1907. Bely showed disgust at those purporting to create radically new art works of the future to match the expected imminent radical transformations of mankind.

<sup>90</sup> Taruskin, *Traditions*, 437.

Bely and Medtner, were after, which was the exact opposite: the renewal of tradition, the careful deepening and manipulation of existing techniques, and the search for innovation within and through established forms. In a study of Bely's poetry, G. S. Smith concludes that, "Bely's verse exhibits certain innovatory features, but that these innovations were the result of the *redistribution of traditional elements of nineteenth-century resources rather than a departure from them*... Running counter to [Bely's typographical experimentation] is a tendency toward *traditional strictness of form*, expressed at its fullest in the use of iambic tetrameter and quatrinal stanza forms."<sup>91</sup>

Along such lines, Medtner thought that his task as a composer was to participate in humanity's eternal renewal of the fundamental laws of musical harmony and musical form—an act he felt was profoundly opposed to both modernist *and* conservative approaches to music:

The new is only a renewal of the "old." It rejects in the old only what had pulled it away from its center of gravity. But, in its return to the center it seeks formerly forgotten ways of encircling it.... We must not return to the former "old" practices of creativity – this would mean going down the path of fruitless imitation – but we are obliged to return to same discipline of harmony, with its fundamental laws of which the great masters were educated and which the young musicians educated today are apparently deprived of.<sup>92</sup>

Medtner's Symbolist style is predicated on this idea that the artist should creatively find the new in the old, should find new ways of expressing the eternal basis of music, and should reject those elements of traditional and modern practice which have lost touch with the eternal "center." The concrete result of this belief is that certain compositional parameters in Medtner's music are developed in depth while others are largely ignored. For example, Medtner exhibits great nuance and variety in phrase construction, rhythmic design, the contrapuntal derivation of harmonies, thematic development, and large-scale form. These features are emphasized at the near total *expense* of precisely the two most celebrated aspects of modernist music of the 1890s and 1900s: colorful

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<sup>91</sup> G. S. Smith, "Bely's Poetry and Verse Theory," in *Andrey Bely: Spirit of Symbolism* (Cornell University Press, 1987), 283. Emphasis added.

<sup>92</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 64 and 69 (translation altered).

sonorities (through novel orchestration and chord voicing) and “emancipated” vertical harmonies (i.e. those not justified by tonal voice-leading practices). Ironically, his intentional neglect of these two stylistic elements both limited his success with popular audiences (as the orchestra was the primary vehicle for the introduction of new music at the time) and spurred his rejection by modernist critics.

Medtner’s infusion of traditional elements of the tonal musical system with deep religious significance transforms his style into something specifically “Symbolist” rather than just antimodernist. He believed that the entire tonal system or “language” is symbolic insofar as it exists to communicate mystical experience and is itself an imperfect incarnation of the heavenly song. Music generated in conformity to its “eternal laws” thus garners the ability to become spiritualized, to become an incantation. Medtner cultivates specific tonal devices as musical symbols. As an overt example, he clearly imbues the parallel relationship between major and minor modes with great significance and the large-scale movement from minor to major is frequently used to symbolize the attainment of divine life or the ecstatic expression of sacred love. Musical themes themselves comprise the fundamental symbolic content of any piece of music as they are derived from the composer’s mystical vision of the heavenly music in the soul. For Medtner, his themes simultaneously contain within themselves all the keys to their development and, like pieces of the divine, act to spiritualize the music within which they reside. Medtner thus tries to fully realize or manifest these themes in his music by creating *sui generis* formal structures by cultivating a great deal of variety in the procedures of thematic development, recapitulation, and transformation.

One of the most important musical symbols in Medtner’s harmonic practice is the dominant chord itself. For context, consider Taruskin’s division of world of early twentieth-century Russian chromatic harmony into two large camps, based on the prolongational status of the dominant—one camp, the “Lisztian,” contained the kuchka, and was continued by Rimsky-Korsakov and his

students (most notably Alexander Glazunov and Anatoly Lyadov). Taruskin's places in his second "camp," the "Wagnerian," only one member, Scriabin:

[Rimsky-Korsakov], like all Russian composers but Scriabin, remained first and foremost a Lisztian. The difference between Wagnerian and Lisztian harmony is fundamental and easy to descry. Wagnerian harmony is essentially dominant harmony, prolonged at times to the breaking point and often prevented from resolving in conventional ways. However modified or attenuated, though, the driving force behind Wagner's tonal vagaries is the same dominant tension one feels in Beethoven's retransitions. Lisztian harmony, in contrast, with its circles of thirds, is harmony that seems at times to deny the existence of the dominant. And it was this quality, perhaps above all, that appealed so to Russian composers, who in other ways as well (as in their "modal" folk song harmonizations) tended to avoid or weaken the dominant function in their music.<sup>93</sup>

To the extent that these two camps existed, Medtner's membership is clearly in the "Wagnerian" circle with his fellow Muscovite, Scriabin. While the latter's earlier music was beloved by Medtner, Scriabin eventually turned toward the "Lisztian" by undermining the dominant with octatonic and whole-tone harmony in *Prometheus* and other late works.<sup>94</sup> Medtner, however, never abandoned a love for that "dominant tension one feels in Beethoven's retransitions," and that, coupled with his ceaseless rhythmic inventiveness and pervasive thematic development, well accounts for that sense of constant striving which so characterizes his music.

In his book, Medtner placed the dominant at the center of his Symbolist harmonic theory. As the "coordinate of the tonic and of tonality," the dominant functions as a genuine "symbol" with a dual capacity to point in two different directions simultaneously: it is the "symbol of direct gravitation towards the tonic, as well as the symbol of movement, i.e. a temporary departure from it."<sup>95</sup> As we will see, Medtner's "Zaklinanie" (to which we will soon turn) itself constantly strives for the dominant nearly the whole piece, finally attaining it at the end in order to produce the kind of gloriously climactic cadence on the tonic that both makes this kind of tonal music so satisfying,

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<sup>93</sup> Taruskin, *Traditions*, 296-97.

<sup>94</sup> See Taruskin, *Defining Russian Musically*, "Scriabin and the Superhuman," 308-359.

<sup>95</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 25-6.

while also affording Medtner a plethora of ways in which he can use harmonic and tonal processes to comment on the poetic text. Additionally, his highly personal harmonic palette is peppered with bizarre and unexpected resolutions of the dominant and of other seventh and augmented sixth chords. Such chords act as symbols insofar as the use of chromatic voice leading allows Medtner to use the same chord to either gravitate towards or move away from the tonic, generating semantic and functional multivalence.

Despite the fact that many critics first notice the difficulty and seeming independence of the piano accompaniment parts, Medtner's Symbolist song practice is marked by extreme attentiveness to poetic detail. Musical rhythms typically match or illuminate subtle shifts in poetic rhythm and other deviations from the meter. Instead of balanced musical phrases, he instead employs continually changing rhythmic patterns for each line of poetry. His phrase structures depart significantly from tonal models as they conform closely to the text, even to specific vowel patterns. The "independence" of the piano parts should instead be understood as attempts to illustrate the text through the procedures associated with "absolute" music like sonata practice. For example, the development and recapitulation of specific themes in the context of complex tonal designs grant such themes symbolic character in relation to the song text. In Christoph Flamm's words, "Medtner comments on the deeper meaning of the poems by introducing multilayer structures (somehow akin to the function of Wagner's orchestra)."<sup>96</sup> The preservation of the foundations of functional harmony was the key to Medtner's Symbolist style, as he employed familiar devices in new and unfamiliar ways—especially in the service of text setting.

As such, the goal of the following analysis of Medtner's song "Zaklinanie" ("Incantation"), one Olenina-d'Alheim premiered and championed, will be to highlight the kinds of harmonic, thematic, and phrase-structural innovations which comprised Medtner's unique Symbolist style, and

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<sup>96</sup> Flamm, "Musical Symbols," in *Nikolai Medtner*, 154.

to indicate the possible ways in which Olenina influenced his declamatory vocal style. Medtner considered “Zaklinanie” to be one of his most personally significant songs,<sup>97</sup> and it serves as a great example of how he manipulated and symbolized traditional tonal parameters. As a Symbolist, Medtner paid extreme attention to his texts, and so our analysis of his song must begin with the poem.

### Incantation

Pushkin alludes to the Romantic elegy by opening his poem with a melancholic description of a moonlit graveyard (see text below). Yet what at first seems like an apostrophe to the poet’s absent lover quickly transforms into an attempt to summon her ghost to him. The poet becomes captivated by his own subject matter and his tone becomes increasingly frenzied. In the second stanza he imagines the forms in which his lover might appear—as an apparition or as a corpse. Turning psychologically inward in the final stanza, the poet reveals his torments and the reason for which he wants to resurrect the dead: to declare his love and faithfulness. The title of the poem, “Zaklinanie,” is often translated as “Invocation” or “Incantation.” It is the noun formed from the verb “zaklinat’,” meaning to “cast a spell,” and is etymologically dependent on “klyatva,” meaning a “spell” in the sense of an “oath.”<sup>98</sup> The word indicates a form of magic stemming from the spoken word, unlike its English counterpart, “incantation,” formed as it is from the Latin “cantare” (“to sing”).<sup>99</sup> Indeed, Pushkin incorporates a “zaklinanie” directly into the poem through the use of a

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<sup>97</sup> According to the memoirs of Medtner’s English pupil Edna Iles. See Apetyan, ed., *Stat’i*, 174.

<sup>98</sup> <https://ru.wiktionary.org/wiki/клятва>. Its usage also extends to related concepts like a “conjuring” or an “exorcism.” The term “zaklinanie” plays a central role in Medtner’s conception of music as a capable of magical incantatory power.

<sup>99</sup> Many English terms related to magic follow a similar etymological path from the Latin for singing and song, e.g. enchantment and charm.



striking refrain: the words, “syuda, syuda!” (“come here, here!”), are repeated at the end of each stanza to bring to life the poet’s magical attempt to summon his beloved.

Alexander Pushkin, “Заклинание”	Pushkin, “Zaklinanie” (“Incantation”)
<p>О, если правда, что в ночи,          Когда покоятся живые,          И с неба лунные лучи          Скользят на камни гробовые,          О, если правда, что тогда          Пустеют тихие могилы, —          Я тень зову, я жду Леилы:          Ко мне, мой друг, сюда, сюда!</p> <p>Явись, возлюбленная тень,          Как ты была перед разлукой,          Бледна, холодна, как зимний день,          Искажена последней мукой.          Приди, как дальняя звезда,          Как легкой звук иль дуновенье,          Иль как ужасное виденье,          Мне всё равно: сюда, сюда!..</p> <p>Зову тебя не для того,          Чтоб укорять людей, чья злоба          Убила друга моего,          Иль чтоб изведать тайны гроба,          Не для того, что иногда          Сомненьем мучусь... но, тоскуя,          Хочу сказать, что всё люблю я,          Что всё я твой. Сюда, сюда!</p>	<p>Oh, if it is true that in the night,          When the living are resting,          And from the sky the moonbeams          Slide onto the gravestones,          Oh, if it is true that then          The quiet graves become empty, —          I call the shade, I wait for Leila:          Come to me, my friend, come here, here!</p> <p>Appear, beloved shade,          As you were before our separation,          Pale, cold, like a winter day,          Distorted by the last torment.          Come, like a distant star,          As a light sound or breath,          Or like a terrible vision,          It doesn’t matter to me: come here, here!..</p> <p>I call you not so as          To reproach people whose malice          Killed my friend,          Or to learn the secrets of the grave,          Not for that which sometimes          Torments me with doubt... but, yearning,          I want to say that I still love,          That I am all yours. Come here, here!<sup>100</sup></p>

For the three stanzas, Pushkin employs a form associated with the classical ode, where the stanzas are split into two quatrains with different rhyme schemes: (aBaB) followed by (cAAc).<sup>101</sup>

<sup>100</sup> My translation.

<sup>101</sup> Capital letters indicate feminine rhyme. Michael Wachtel states that the stanzaic form is “odd.” See Michael Wachtel, *Pushkin’s Lyric Poetry* (Wisconsin University Press, 2011), 205. Lower case letters indicate masculine rhymes and upper case feminine. The second quatrain of the third stanza breaks the pattern slightly by introducing a new rhyme for the inner part of the ring—(c-D-D-c).

The meter, iambic tetrameter, is the most common in Russian prosody (and the object of Bely's extensive investigations in his 1911 book, *Simvolizm*). To emphasize the opening apostrophe, Pushkin employs a common deviation from strict iambs by shifting the stress in the first foot to the first syllable: "O, esli pravda, chto v nochi"—the vocative "O" commands its own stress. The meter is disturbed by irregularly employed medial caesurae, which in the last stanza generates an excited, breathless quality. The ellipsis in the antepenultimate line ("Somnen'en muchus'... no toskuya") is an aporia, as the poet abandons explanations for desperate pleas of love—generating a massive upsurge of unmediated emotion that transforms the final quatrain into a genuine climax. Pushkin's poem—with its subtle manipulation of Classical forms combined with its extreme expressivity, its "decadent" subject matter, use of symbolic imagery, and incantational language—is in every way a proto-Symbolist poem (and one whose subject matter Bely reversed—the poet tries to rise from the grave—in his famous poem, "Zolotomu blesku veril," also set by Medtner).

Perhaps this explains why the Pushkin text was never used by Russian composers until Rimsky-Korsakov turned to it in 1882. Indeed, its idiosyncrasies and expressive effects would have been lost in the balanced lyrical phrases of a Russian romance. The poem actually received its first treatments in the 1860s by two non-Russian composers. One of these was Spanish singer-composer Pauline Viardot, who set a couple dozen Russian poems.<sup>102</sup> The other was by Nietzsche himself using a German translation.<sup>103</sup> Viardot's is a rousing and highly expressive piece that suits the poem, while Nietzsche's is an accomplished, yet generic piece in a more subdued early-Romantic lieder style. Of the latter, Medtner, upon finally acquiring the score in 1925, wrote revealingly to brother Emil: "Nietzsche's songs, despite a certain amount of amateurism, nevertheless provide an opportunity to see a subtle musical soul. [His setting of] Pushkin's "Zaklinanie" makes a curious

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<sup>102</sup> The score to this song is hard to come by, but here is recording: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_OpjFM4fV3s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OpjFM4fV3s). Ivan Turgenev fell in love with her and lived with the Viardots for years.

<sup>103</sup> Here is a recording of the Nietzsche by Fischer-Dieskau: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vffxOjFjJs>.

impression in its naivety. Also amusing is the invincible influence on it of that “alten sächsischen Weibes” (“old Saxon woman”), as he deigned to christen the greatest creator of songs, Schumann.”<sup>104</sup>

Taruskin, in his description of Musorgsky’s “melodic recitative” style as a form of naturalism—due to its attempt to incorporate the natural rhythms of Russian speech—succinctly sums up two aspects of the declamatory style which Medtner employs in the opening of “Zaklinanie” (Example 1.1):

The first is the manner of starting phrases with anacrusis [i.e. upbeats] of a full beat’s duration, even though this does not naturalistically reflect Russian speech patterns. It produces, rather, what one Soviet writer has called, “rounded intonational periods,” and its “natural model,” if such it be, is not conversational speech but the emotionally exalted tone Russians invariably assume when, even today and in casual surroundings, they recite poetry.... The other characteristic declamational device has been termed the “mute ending” (*glukhoie okonchaniye*): the naturalistic rendering of words that end on unaccented syllables, producing, typically, a pair of eighth notes (or a triplet) on a beat, with the beginning of the next beat void.<sup>105</sup>

By all accounts, Olenina’s singing style must have been an extreme version of the “emotionally exalted tone” that Taruskin’s Russians use to declaim poetry, and Medtner opens his setting to facilitate such a pose. The vocative “O” receives a full quarter note (half of the 2/4 bar), standing out from the otherwise even stream of eighth notes. While it is not on an upbeat strictly speaking, it certainly sounds like one at first, since the bass line’s entrance is delayed until the next beat. Furthermore, at the end of the first line Medtner employs the “mute ending” by giving the feminine ending’s “extra” syllable its own eighth note. This fact, combined with the lengthening of the “O”, results in the mute ending limping over into the fifth bar of the phrase. Thus, this already slowly

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<sup>104</sup> Letter of 4 Feb 1925. Medtner, *Pis'ma*, 290-91. In addition to Nietzsche’s philosophy, Medtner was influenced by Nietzsche’s artistic output. Medtner set five of his early poems as his Op. 19 and sought after Nietzsche’s (hard to find) scores. “Ницшевские песни сквозь известную долю дилетантизма все же дают возможность увидеть тонкую музыкальную душу. Курьезное впечатление по наивности производит пушкинское «Заклинание». Еще забавно непобедимое влияние на него «alten sächsischen Weibes»<sup>3</sup>, как он изволил окрестить величайшего творца песен Шумана...”

<sup>105</sup> Taruskin, *Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 221-22.

paced line thus continues for slightly longer than would be typical (i.e., four bars) conveys the feeling of expressive breathlessness, as the singer literally runs out of breath. The net result is a subtly disconcerting sense of imbalance fitting the poet's mood as he contemplates the graveyard.

Н. Метнеръ, Оp. 29 № 7.  
N. Medtner,

Andante tenebroso. (M. M. ♩ = 50)

Canto.

*fz* *p*

О, ес-ли прав-да, что вно-чи, Ког-да по-ко-ят-ся жи'-вы-е  
Ah, s'il est vrai que dans la nuit, A l'heure où dorment tous les hommes,

Piano.

*fz* *p* *sempre legatissimo*

*dimin.* *pp* *poco*

И съ не-ба лун-ны-е лу-чи Сколь-зятъ на кам-ни гро-бо-вы-е,  
Quand de la lu-ne les ra-yons Flot-tent au-tour des tom-bes mor-nes,

*dimin.* *pp* *poco*

Example 1.1: Nikolay Medtner, “Zaklinanie,” Op. 29, No. 7, mm. 1-11.

The voice part in the second system highlights Medtner's sensitivity to not only the poetic meter but also to the vowel patterning. The unusual phrase structure is a musical equivalent of *chiasmus*, as mm. 6-7 is a motivic variant of bars 3-6, while the end of the phrase (mm. 8-10), repeats the motivic fifth descent (Eb-Ab) of bars 1-2 a third lower. Here Medtner has picked up on the subtle vowel repetition between the poem's first and fourth line: compare “O esli pravda, chto v nochi” with “Skol'zyat na kamni grobovye.” The return of the opening motivic idea to set the fourth line emphasizes this inner vowel rhyme—explaining the otherwise unusual structure. At the end of this phrase, the voice descends into a low alto register, lingering on the F# below middle C (a

full two octaves lower than the final E which concludes the song's vocal line later on)—allowing an expressive singer like Olenina-d'Alheim to viscerally invoke the poem's imagery of moonlight enveloping the graves.

Medtner's emphasis on naturalistic declamatory techniques transforms two lines of iambic tetrameter, which should fit perfectly nicely into four bars of 2/4, into a bizarre five-bar phrase. To see just how bizarre this is, compare with Cesar Cui's 1895 setting of the same poem (Example 1.2). He uses the same declamatory stream of even eighth notes and grants the opening "O" a full quarter note (so as to invoke that "emotionally exalted tone"). Yet, Cui was smart—he realized that if he used common time (double Medtner's 2/4), the notes would spill over into the third bar. So, he found the perfect solution: to use 3/2 time! Now Cui had more than enough room to fit the text into an even number of bars, with the typical results expected of a composer more interested in symmetry than expressive effect.

The image shows a musical score for Cesar Cui's "Zaklinanie" (Op. 55, No. 6), measures 3-6. The score is in 3/2 time and D major. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line consists of two lines of text: "О, ес-ли прав-да, что вьно-чи, Ког-да по-ко-ят-ся жи-вы-е" and "И сьне-ба лун-ны-е лу-чи Сколь-зятъ на кам-ни гро-бо-вы-е,". The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as "p a tempo", "mf", and "pp".

Example 1.2. Cesar Cui, "Zaklinanie," Op. 55, No. 6, mm. 3-6.

Overall, however, Medtner's declamatory style represents a significant departure from the naturalistic recitative of Musorgsky and the *kuchka*. The subtle interplay between poetic and musical meter, so characteristic of Medtner's songs, can only occur through a somewhat even flow of syllables. The use of naturalistic, unmetrical speech patterns typical of Musorgsky's recitative and *arioso* would destroy this effect. Musorgsky's invoked these natural patterns through several techniques, including the use of a wide variety of rhythmic values in otherwise short phrases, alternation between duple and triple groupings, an abundance of short rests, rapidly changing dynamics, and constant small leaps. Rimsky-Korsakov's 1882 setting dates from the period when he was still under the influence of Musorgsky's naturalist recitative (Example 1.3). Here, the frequent rests and wide variety of note values (combined with the tendency to leave the downbeat vacant and the metrical changes) work together to create a free-flowing recitative style that, while certainly expressive, disrupts the sense of poetic or, for that matter, musical meter. Structured like an opera number, the free recitative yields to a slightly more regular *arioso* midway through the fourth system. While Rimsky's setting is certainly effective and its snappy rhythms break up any monotony that might result from regular tonic stress, its *recitativo* is very far from Medtner's declamatory style derived from the spoken declamation of poems.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> I emphasize this point because recitative and declamation are often conflated as the same thing.

Andante lugubre  $\text{♩} = 72$

О, ес-ли прав-да,

что в но-чи, ког-да по - ко - ят-ся жи - вы - е,

п с не - ба лун - ны - е лу-чи скользят на

кам - ни гро-бо - вы-е, о, ес-ли прав-да, что тог - да пу-сте-ют

Example 1.3. Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, “Zaklinanie,” Op. 26, No. 2, mm. 1-14.

Comparing Medtner’s piano part (in mm. 1-10) to Rimsky’s and Cui’s will reveal its remarkable strangeness. It is strange precisely because Medtner uses the traditional building blocks of tonal music in unusual ways. His idiosyncratic development of the potential inherent in voice-leading (the art of connecting harmonies linearly) and the extreme deviations he takes from Classical phrase models are particularly notable. Even though many modernist critics in Medtner’s lifetime

dismissed his music as a dead relic from the distant past, it is nevertheless clear that no nineteenth-century composer would ever do what he does in these first ten measures.

Including Rimsky-Korsakov and Cui, who themselves were no strangers to late-nineteenth century developments in chromatic harmony (indeed Rimsky was a cutting-edge pioneer of the possibilities inherent in the symmetrical division of the octave). Both of their pieces employ a sparse chordal accompaniment which crudely and simply exploits the expressive potential of chromatic effects. For example, in bar 2 Rimsky plops down an unprepared variant of the augmented sixth chord known as the “diminished third.” This is resolved properly to the dominant of Eb major in bar 6. In bars 9-13 Rimsky simply *repeats* his entire harmonic framework of the first eight bars but transposed into the key of C minor (the relative minor). This kind of “advanced” chromatic harmony, yet treated strictly via transposition and sequences, is characteristic of Rimsky-Korsakov and his pupils. Who together comprised the “Belyayev” school which dominated St. Petersburg musical culture until Rimsky’s death in 1908.<sup>107</sup> In bars 3-4 of his setting, Cui simply decorates a standard cadential progression with a chromatic predominant. In the next two bars he uses smooth chromatic voice leading to tonicize iv. This elementary treatment is only worth mentioning due to how different it is from Medtner’s, given that both composers employ a similar declamatory approach to the text setting.

In comparison, what leaps from the page in Medtner’s setting is the *linearity* of the texture and the subsequent increase in number of independent voices (of which the voice part itself is just one). The piano’s phrase is split into three sections that do not align with the voice’s two sections. Tonally, the first section opens with a tonic chord (C min) that unfolds outward in linear contrary

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<sup>107</sup> This is the tradition from which Stravinsky emerged after several years of serving as Rimsky’s most eager pupil. Medtner’s lack of conformity with this tradition is why he is often referred to a fundamentally “German” composer and why his music was never particularly well received in the Imperial capital. Cui lived on until 1918 but had long since lost any influence as a composer due to his break with Belyayev and Rimsky. He produces a steady stream of vituperative music criticism aimed at all and sundry.



motion to VI (Ab) in bar 3.<sup>108</sup> Medtner gives us a complete contrapuntal complex in the piano alone—but what, then, is the voice doing? It begins by moving in parallel motion in sixths with the bass, as if it and the bass are forming their own contrapuntal pattern! Indeed, we get the musical equivalent of *zeugma* as the bass participates in two different contrapuntal patterns simultaneously.<sup>109</sup> The resulting harmonies are entirely linearly derived, and it would be nonsensical to try to label them with roman numerals. The second line of the poem enters before the move to VI is completed, after which the piano pictorially drops out on the word “pokoyatsya” (“resting”).

The arrival of the minor dominant (G min) in bar 5 both completes the phrase and begins a circle-of-fifths sequence which momentarily tonicizes III (Eb) on the downbeat of bar 7. The circle-of-fifths sequence is the bread-and-butter of tonal harmony, and, yet, here Medtner places one smack-dab in the break between the two vocal phrases, complete with its own countermelody that is fully independent from the voice.<sup>110</sup> This circle-of-fifths ends on an Eb major chord right in the middle of the poem’s 3<sup>rd</sup> line, brightening the moonlight referred to in the text (“c neba lunnye”). The subsequent music proceeds by a 10-5 linear intervallic pattern between the outer voices of the piano part itself (as the voice descends into a middle voice).<sup>111</sup> The sequence goes awry on the downbeat of bar 9, where a chromatic Db appears in the bass before being wrenched up in the next bar to form a half cadence in the key of the dominant (G min). This passage is difficult to explain with traditional means.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> I take the V chord (G) on the downbeat of bar 3 as a step on the way to the VI chord, due to parallel motion in the right hand.

<sup>109</sup> Stravinsky would go on to use this technique in his neoclassical music, but in a freer and more dissonant manner.

<sup>110</sup> The countermelody (Ab- Bb-G) is an imitative rhythmic augmentation (like a drawn-out echo) of the tail motive that occurs at the end of each poetic line—Eb-F-D in the first two.

<sup>111</sup> Traditionally speaking, the voice part is taken as the structural upper voice in the analysis of songs. This is, however, frequently not the case in Medtner’s music and is a major indicative factor of his “chamber music” style of songwriting.

<sup>112</sup> One could take the bass movement from Ab to Db as implying F minor, an important key for the rest of the piece. Alternatively, one could read the bass from the Eb in bar 7 to the Db in bar 9 as outlining (through rising thirds) an augmented sixth (Eb-C#) in the key of G minor.

The most important innovation Medtner introduces into song composition is the full-scale importation of the techniques of “absolute” music into his song structures (recall Bely’s claim that “pure music is *resurrected* in him”). The use of thematic and formal processes typical of instrumental music are not an indication of lack of interest in tailoring the music to the text, but, on the contrary, provide additional parameters through which a poem’s imagery and moods can be expressed.<sup>113</sup> To demonstrate, let’s examine how Medtner treats the second quatrain of the first stanza (Example 1.4). As you recall, this music follows from the previous system’s half cadence in the key of the dominant and ensuing long rest. Here, Medtner abruptly returns to the tonic (mm. 12-15) with an exact repetition of bars 1-3 that then subsequently diverges. This move is reminiscent of his sonata practice wherein he returns to the main theme in the tonic at the beginning of the transition before modulating away. Such a repetition (especially in the same key) is unusual in through-composed songs and does not occur in Cui’s or Rimsky’s settings. Here, it serves to emphasize Pushkin’s own exact repetition of the opening line in line 5 (the only instance of repetition in the poem outside of the refrain).

О, ес-ли прав-да, что тог-да Пус-тѣ-ютъ ти-хі-я мо-ги-лы Я  
 Ah, s'il est vrai qu'à ce mo-ment Les morts par-fois à nous se mon-trent, Je

*fz p dimin. pp*

*fz p dimin. calando pp*

*Ad. - - \**

<sup>113</sup> Those critics, though, who were used to having the structure and significance of a song mostly contained within the voice line, complained about a sense of “contemplative objectivity” in Medtner’s songs—presumably meaning that “abstract” musical procedures concentrated in the piano part take too large a role in the illustration of the text. For Example, see Flamm, *Medtner*, 269.

Музыкальный фрагмент из произведения Николы Медтнера «Заклинание» (mm. 12-27). Фрагмент включает вокальную партию и фортепиано. Вокальная партия имеет русские и французские тексты. Фортепиано включает динамические обозначения (pp, f, ff) и указания на темп и динамику («poco a poco crescendo e agitato», «con moto agitato»).

Текст песни (русский):  
 ТѢНЬ зо - ву, я жду Ле - и - - лы: Ко мнѣ, мой  
 другъ, сю - да, сю - да!  
 мѣе, о viens o viens!

Текст песни (французский):  
 te voir, ma dou - ce Leï - la: Ma bien - ai -  
 mee, o viens o viens!

Example 1.4. Nikolay Medtner, “Zaklinanie,” mm. 12-27.

This time, however, the poet has a surprise in store, as instead of again mournfully contemplating the moonlit tombstones, he suddenly realizes that the ghosts (“shades” in poetic lingo) emerge from their tombs at night and that he can thus call to his dead beloved. Medtner illustrates this shift masterfully by beginning a new formal section (bar 18) at the seventh line with the words “Ya ten’ zovu” (“I call the shade”). The musical form thus cross-cuts the stanzaic form in a way that actually reflects the introduction of the poet’s subjectivity with the sudden and unexpected first use of the first-person pronoun, “Ya.” Not only that, but by introducing a countersubject in the bass, Medtner has the shade answer the poet’s call in a duet with a voice, as Bely would no doubt put it, “from the depths.” Here, Medtner’s skill at handling independent voices in counterpoint allows him to depict the sudden emergence of the poet’s subjectivity by conjuring the object of his desire as a second true voice in the piano’s left hand. The right hand’s thickly

voiced harmony acts as a barrier standing in between the two voices, an effect emphasized by the persistently repeated Ab “pedal” note. The shade’s voice tries repeatedly to break through this barrier by leaping up into the middle register, but fails to cross the right hand in this passage. In the final line the heretofore even declamation breaks down into violent cries culminating in the leap of a tritone (G-Db) that is also dissonant with the piano on the second “Syuda!” (Come here!).

After several attempts in which the shade’s voice lurches upward towards the poet, the second stanza builds up to a climax on the line “Il kak uzhasnoe viden’ye” (“Or as a terrible as specter”), as the poet urges his beloved to appear to him in any form necessary. Here, Medtner employs the procedures of sonata development sections in order to generate an exciting drama between the two voices—represented as themes. For the third stanza, Medtner recapitulates the opening theme in the tonic, with the shade’s countersubject now in duet directly below the voice in the piano’s right hand (Example 1.5).<sup>114</sup> It is important to note that these thematic processes involving exposition, development, and recapitulation are not typical of the song repertoire. For example, both Rimsky’s and Cui’s settings of this poem are completely devoid of such techniques. In those songs, the notes of the vocal line serve as expressive fodder for the voice and do not combine into themes (as in melodies which are repeated and varied within a coherent structure) at all.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Recall that the countersubject was not present in the original statement, only being introduced at bar 18.

<sup>115</sup> Instead, certain motives occasionally recur to provide some level of musical coherence.

*a tempo, sordamente*

Зо - ву те - бя не для то - го, Чтобъ у - ко - рять лю - дей чья зло - ба  
*Je ne veux pas m'en prendre au sort Dont le ca - price i - nex - o - ra - ble*

*pp legatissimo*

У - би - ла дру - га мо - е - го,  
*Vint l'ar - ra - cher à mon a - mour;*

*pp*

Иль чтобъ из - вѣ-дать тай-ны  
*Ni pro - fa - ner le grand mys -*

*diminuendo*

Example 1.5. Medtner, “Zaklinanie,” mm. 64-73.

Medtner’s recapitulation presents his themes in rapidly evolving canonic counterpoint with overlapping entries that serves not to show off some kind of “academic” technique, but instead to represent an increasingly ecstatic dance between the poet and his dead lover. This dance comes to an abrupt halt on the ellipsis in bar 80 (the sixth line of the final stanza), as the music takes one more breath before the final climax (Example 1.6). Unlike the others, in Medtner’s setting the poet’s maniacal incantations appear to succeed in raising the lover from the dead—depicted in a frenzied climax in which the piano left hand lurches up and over the right hand chordal “wall” while the music finally attains a functional root position dominant chord which cadences on a massive C major (the parallel major of the original tonic, C minor). This modulation brings the piece to close and symbolizes the journey the poet (and his lover) have taken over the course of the song.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>116</sup> See also Flamm’s brief comments on the bass melody at the end of the piece in Flamm, “Primet’,” *Nikolai Medtner*, 140-41.

ff *p dolente* cre - - - scen - - - do ,  
 - чусь... но тос - ку - - я Хо - чу ска - зать, что все люб -  
 - te... mais je brâ - - - le De te re - di - re que je

ff *p dolente* cre - - - scen - - - do  
 - лю я, Что все я твой.  
 t'ai me, Et suis a toi.

*molto agitato*  
 Сю - да, сю - да!  
 O viens, O viens!

*mf molto crescendo ed accelerando*

Example 1.6. Medtner, “Zaklinanie,” mm. 79-94.

Medtner’s triumphant attainment of C major at the end was only earned through a dark and protracted struggle dominating most of the song. It thus is not some simple expressive trick, but a fitting culmination of a narrative generated both through imaginative text setting and the use of thematic and formal procedures borrowed from instrumental genres. Here Medtner capitalized on the potential Symbolism inherent in the duality between minor and major—which effectively serve here as general musical symbols for tormented chaos and redemptive light, respectively. The

mystical musings found in Symbolist writings on the transcendent significance of such basic musical elements as mode thus cannot be taken as a sign of some lack of basic understanding of musical functions, but instead accord with views held by actual working composers of the time, like Medtner. For example, the composer's friend, Ivan Ilyin discussed this piece nearly three decades after its premiere in a 1943 Zurich lecture on Medtner's music. He identifies the same triumphant incantation, specifies the deep importance of key Symbolism, and recalls how audiences in Moscow were so transfixed by Olenina-d'Alheim's performance of the song that they unconsciously stood for the entire performance:

Many [of Medtner's] songs have a bewitching power; for example, the tragic "Zaklinanie" to the words of Pushkin (in which the voice of a lonely lover at night, in the moonlight in a cemetery, conjures his dead beloved to appear to him at least as a shade or a vision); the verses do not say whether she really appears: but the musical accompaniment says so. In Moscow, the performance of this song in the Great Concert Hall by a highly gifted singer [certainly Olenina-d'Alheim] and accompanied by Medtner himself, so astounded the audience that they rose from their seats and, without noticing it, listened while standing to the song until the end.

It is noteworthy that the finale of this piece is written in a *major key*, and more specifically in C major, for Medtner, like very few great classics, knows that a true tragedy leading to a truly transformative victory requires not a plaintive minor key, but a life-affirming, redemptive major. This is a note about the esoteric side of his work.<sup>117</sup>

Indeed, C major itself had a special spiritual significance for Medtner. He would often reserve it for hymns and more explicit invocations of religious feeling. In the memoirs of his niece, "Fistya" Tarasova, she mentions how Medtner would always end his working sessions with a C major cadence, which his dog Flix learned to recognize as the sign of an impending walk, and which

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<sup>117</sup> Ivan Ilyin, "Nikolay Medtner—kompozitor i providets," in *Suchshnost' i svoeobrazie Russkoy kul'tury* (Russkaya kniga, 2007), 396. "Многие песни обладают завораживающей силой; например, трагическое «Заклинание» на слова Пушкина (в котором голос одинокого влюбленного в ночи, при лунном свете, на кладбище заклинает умершую возлюбленную явиться ему хотя бы как тень, видение); в стихах не говорится, является ли она на самом деле: об этом говорит музыкальное сопровождение. В Москве исполнение этой песни в Большом концертном зале высоко одаренной певицей, которой аккомпанировал сам Медтнер, настолько потрясло слушателей, что зал поднялся с мест и, сам того не замечая, стоя дослушал песню до конца. Примечательно, что финал этой вещи написан в *мажоре*, а конкретнее—в до мажоре, ибо Медтнер, как очень немногие великие классики, знает, что подлинная трагедия, ведущая к подлинно преображающей победе, требует не жалобного минора, а жизнеутверждающего, избавительного мажора. Это к слову об эзотерической стороне его творчества."

would inevitably invoke a chorus of barks. Medtner, as a musical joke, commemorated this daily event with his “Pantheistic Cantata for three voices (with piano introduction and barking dogs on the word ‘walk’”—in C major.<sup>118</sup> As I showed earlier, the word “zaklinanie” itself carried great significance for Medtner’s religious philosophy of music. He believed that only a composer sufficiently attuned to the origins of music in divine song can transform musical materials into “incantations.” It is likely that Medtner thought of the conjuring of the dead lover from the grave as a metaphor for how he “conjures” the eternal elements of musical art (signified most strongly by C major) into physical form. Unlike in any other setting “Zaklinanie,” Medtner’s ensures that the poet’s incantations finally succeed in the end—clearly the significance of this text extended beyond simple aesthetic appreciation. As Bely would put it, “pure music is *resurrected* in him, promising the unquenchable dawn of life.”<sup>119</sup> For Medtner and the Symbolists, the act of setting a text meant something more than illustrating the words—it meant embodying in some sense the ideas “behind” the words, which inevitably concern the religious basis of artistic creation itself and its incantatory power. In the next chapter, we will examine more thoroughly the theurgic basis of this belief.

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<sup>118</sup> Tarasova, 49-50.

<sup>119</sup> See Appendix A.



## Chapter 2. Revealing Divine Sophia: Nikolay Medtner as Theurgist

Symbolism is poetry's recollection of its original, primordial tasks and means.... The poet remembers that his calling is to be a religious organizer of life, an interpreter and strengthener of the divine link with existence, a theurgist.... Poetry strove to become an incantatory magic of rhythmic speech, mediating between the world of divine essences and man.... Truly, the lyre's charms formed stones into city walls, and it is no mere allegory to say that rhythms were able to heal ailments of the soul and body, to grant victories, and to quiet internecine strife.

—Vyacheslav Ivanov (1910)<sup>1</sup>

"*Joy returns*"—you want to say, delving into the meaning of these musical themes. The presence of unspoken aspirations makes Medtner's music a part of those aspirations arising in the realm of the new religious consciousness of our day. In Medtner's music these [religious] aspirations seem to be liberated from the dogmatic forms and images that violate us. I would like to declare in passing that all the best that has arisen in my thoughts and experiences owes much to Medtner's music, which truly heals the soul with potions known to it and only to it.

—Andrey Bely (1906)<sup>2</sup>

We seem to have lost faith in the *artistic miracle*, that is, faith in the ability of the material element itself to be transfigured through the spirit, through inspiration.... Let us recall the bottomless depth of the triad in the opening theme of the *Appassionata*'s first movement and the stunning tragedy of the diminished seventh chord at the end of the development!!

—Nikolay Medtner (1935)<sup>3</sup>

In 1901 the "dawns" changed. The twenty-one year old mystic, Andrey Bely, tried to capture this joyful sense of a new, musical epoch in the experimental prose-poems he called Symphonies. He also sought out others who had also noticed the changes in the sun. Those who accepted that the

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<sup>1</sup> Ivanov, "Testaments," in *Selected Essays: Vyacheslav Ivanov*, translated by Robert Bird (Northwestern University Press, 2001), 41-42.

<sup>2</sup> Bely, "Metner," The review was originally published in the Symbolist/modernist journal, *The Golden Fleece*. See Appendix A for original text and complete translation.

<sup>3</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 139 (translation altered). "Мы как будто утратили веру в художественное чудо, то есть веру в способность самого элемента преобразаться через дух, через вдохновение. Эта вера диаметрально противоположна вере в средство, то есть в определенную рецептуру средств, свойственную модернистам. Они говорят: трезвучие или уменьшенный септ-аккорд устарели и не действуют больше, а потому надо изобретать новые аккорды... Вспомним же бездонную глубину трезвучия начальной темы *Appassionata*-ы и потрясающий трагизм уменьшенного септаккорда в конце разработки ее 1-ой части!!"

new dawns of spring were incomparable to anything that had come before were gleefully welcomed into his inner circle:

In relation to the trends of 1901 (which I wrote about in my first *Symphony*, that *these were incomparable days, that a special spring stood over Moscow*)—in relation to these trends were built relationships with people; those who accepted the “*dawns*” of this incomparable, unique spring were “*ours*,” and those who did not accepted the dawns were not “*ours*” (for me, S. M. Solovyov, A. Petrovsky, E. K. Medtner and N. K. Medtner, M. S. Solovyov and others turned out to be “*ours*” in Moscow).<sup>4</sup>

Bely’s “knights” of the dawns included Sergey Solovyov (1885-1942), childhood friend and fellow Symbolist poet who would later become a theologian and Catholic priest—and who in 1901 invented the pen name “Andrey Bely.”<sup>5</sup> He and his parents effectively provided a second home for Bely and introduced him to the mystical philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov (Sergey’s uncle). Then there is Alexey Petrovsky (1881-1958), Bely’s best friend at Moscow University. Both were studying the natural sciences but soon their relationship became characterized by lively discussion of a wide range of topics from Classical Russian literature to the religious sources of life.<sup>6</sup> Petrovsky would soon abandon himself to the study German mysticism, eventually falling in with the Theosophist Rudolf Steiner, whom Bely called “the Doctor” after he became life-long disciple in 1912. Eleven years earlier, Petrovsky had gleefully introduced Bely to one his best friends and mentors from childhood, Emil Medtner. Almost immediately the two felt the presence of a special bond, and Emil became Bely’s closest confidant—a fact reflected in their voluminous correspondence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bely, *Vospominanie o Bloke*. Accessed: [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_1923\\_vosp\\_o\\_bloke.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_1923_vosp_o_bloke.shtml). “По отношению к веяниям 1901 года (о них я писал в моей первой “Симфонии”, что *это были ни с чем не сравнимые дни, что весна над Москвою стояла особенная*), -- по отношению к этим веяниям строили мы отношения к людям; принявшие “зори” ни с чем не сравнимой весны были -- “*наши*”, а не принявшие -- не были “*нашими*” (“*нашими*” для меня оказались в Москве А. Петровский, С. М. Соловьев, Э. К. Метнер и Н. К. Метнер, М. С. Соловьев и другие).”

<sup>5</sup> On S. Solovyov and his relationship to Bely, see Magnus Ljunggren, *Poetry and Psychiatry* (Academic Studies Press, 2014), 10-17.

<sup>6</sup> See the last part of Andrey Bely, *Na rubezhe dvukh stoletij*, for an account of his university days with Petrovsky. Accessed: [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_0010.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_0010.shtml).

<sup>7</sup> *Andrey Bely, Emily Metner: Perepiska, 1902-1915*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017).

During a meeting at an Arthur Nikisch rehearsal in spring 1902, Emil's improvised commentary on Nikisch and music's cultural significance deeply impressed Bely (still a university student), who recalled in his Berlin memoirs that, "I understood at once: he is a friend in our aspirations. There is something esoteric in him in relation to the banality of *'this age.'*"<sup>8</sup> Emil dazzled Bely with his musical "conducting"—i.e. his creative ability to relate musical themes to topics in literature and philosophy through a form of improvised lecture. His biographer Magnus Ljunggren surmises that Bely (who purportedly slept with a copy of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* under his pillow) might have taken Emil as "something of a Zarathustra figure, a herald of new religious truths that he himself had thus far brooded upon in monastic solitude."<sup>9</sup> In turn, Bely bowled him over with his first published work, titled—*Symphony (the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Dramatic)*. Emil, who moonlighted as a newspaper critic of new trends in Russian literature in order to supplement his daytime income as a censor,<sup>10</sup> became one of Bely's earliest champions and celebrated the attempt to heighten the musicality of language: "Musicality (not only in the sense of sonority and metrics) is now becoming a property of the verbal arts to the same degree as picturesqueness, dimensionality, and pictoriality [i.e., elements from the visual arts]; thoughtful artists, regardless of their specialty, clearly realize that a complete revision of aesthetics is necessary."<sup>11</sup>

However, Emil was actually quite critical of the notion of the *union* of music and literature, claiming that the "internal, essential difference between the arts," renders such attempts impossible.

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<sup>8</sup> Bely, *Vospominanie o Bloke*. Accessed: [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_1923\\_vosp\\_o\\_bloke.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_1923_vosp_o_bloke.shtml).

<sup>9</sup> Magnus Ljunggren, *Russian Mephisto* (Stockholm, 1994), 15.

<sup>10</sup> And some poets sent their work to him in Nizhny Novgorod, rather than to the Moscow or St. Petersburg censor. Crucially, in this way E. Medtner was able to approve Alexander Blok's poetry collection *Verses About the Beautiful Lady* in 1904 without it being subject to cuts or distortions.

<sup>11</sup> Emil Medtner, "Simfonii Andrey Belogo," *Pridneprovsky kray* no. 2022-2023 (15-16 Dec). Section II. Accessed: [http://az.lib.ru/m/metner\\_e\\_k/text\\_1903\\_simfonii\\_andreya\\_belogo.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/m/metner_e_k/text_1903_simfonii_andreya_belogo.shtml). "музыкальность (не только в смысле звучности и метрики) становится таким же *качеством* произведений словесного искусства, как живописность, рельефность, картинность; вдумчивые художники, независимо от своей специальности, ясно сознают, что необходим полный пересмотр эстетики."

He argues that Bely fails to justify the title “Symphony,” and it should rather be called a “suite.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, to Emil, the “Symphony” as a literary form has “no future, but many of its techniques will be developed and strengthened in the strong hands of the author himself in other works.”<sup>13</sup>

Bely’s early experiments in enhancing the musicality of prose and poetry arose well before his acquaintance with Emil, who is often depicted in the scholarly literature as single-mindedly obsessed with music, or even as a “musicologist.” In fact, he had little technical knowledge of music and held keen interests in literature, religion, and what might be called the philosophy of culture.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the real reason why Emil loved Bely’s Second Symphony was because of its *mystical* content and its “prophetic gaze”:

The material of the Second Symphony is extremely rich. It could be called both philosophical and mystical; and, since this material is set against a backdrop of everyday reality and even of current events, it is not without journalistic and even polemical fervor. One cannot help but recall the following words spoken by Ibsen in one of his celebratory speeches: “I think that poetry, philosophy, and religion will one day merge into a new category, into a new life force, of which we who are alive now cannot form a clear idea.”<sup>15</sup>

Now *that* is the kicker—merging literature with religion and philosophy. That was the idea that brought Bely and Emil Medtner together, not the idea of reproducing symphonic form in literature. Indeed, in Bely’s Symphony, Emil thought he perceived a special mystical theme—what he called in

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. “Будущности ”*симфония*” не имеет, но многие приемы ее разовьются и укрепятся в сильных руках самого автора в других его произведениях и будут схвачены и привиты другими писателями.” Bely would go on to do just that, but would also try to push to the limits in his later fourth Symphony the kinds of symphonic organizational structures first explored in earlier symphonies.

<sup>14</sup> This fact is especially apparent throughout his correspondence with Bely—music itself was simply not discussed much and he would frequently deny any expertise in the subject. Emil tried to take composition lessons from his brother Nikolay but gave them up after some time. The two brothers began living together most of the time in 1906, which allowed Emil to take more advantage of his brother’s knowledge. His later antimodernist articles targeting Richard Strauss and Max Reger (from 1907 on) should be understood as part of a broader cultural agenda rather than a purely musicological one.

<sup>15</sup> Emil Medtner, “*Simfonii Belogo*,” section V. “Материал второй симфонии крайне богат. Ее можно было бы назвать и философическою, и мистическою; а так как она разыгрывается на фоне ближайшей повседневной и даже злободневной действительности, то она не лишена публицистического и даже полемического задора.

Невольно вспоминаются следующие слова, высказанные Ибсеном в одной застольной речи: ‘Я думаю, что поэзия, философия и религия сольются некогда в новую категорию, в новую жизненную силу, о которой мы, ныне живущие, не можем составить себе ясного представления’” The editor’s footnote mentions that the Ibsen quote comes from a speech given in Stockholm on 24 Sep 1887. Along with Nietzsche, Bely would later consider Ibsen to be a major “Western” Symbolist.

his review the “theme of Eternity,” one not conceptualized in “the form of cold abstraction... but in living symbols, the voice of which, even when heard only once, sounds invariably, eternally—not only in the head, but also in the heart.”<sup>16</sup> Eternity’s motif, for Emil, is manifest in a string of six neuter adjectives that appears in full form fairly late in the Symphony but is hinted at throughout: “*impossible, tender, eternal, dear, old and new at all times.*”<sup>17</sup> Of this “theme,” Emil writes that it is “the most enchanting motif of the Symphony; an attentive reader already senses its approach a few passages in advance. Verbally the motif changes, and its musical essence is heard between the lines.”<sup>18</sup>

But there was a deeper reason why Emil was so affected by the theme of Eternity. As it turns out, he thought he heard its presence in another work composed about the same time he encountered the Symphony: his brother Nikolay’s first Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 5—specifically the first movement’s second theme. The joy at identifying the mystical connection between the two works was “terrible and sweet at the same time” and he devised a plan to test his hypothesis. Anxiously waiting all summer, he was finally able to introduce Bely to his brother in the fall (due to the Russian habit of fleeing to country estates in the summer) and get him to innocuously listen to the sonata. As Emil wrote in his diary from 16 September 1902:

When Kolya [Nikolay] began to play his sonata for Bugaev [Bely], I, who had been tormented all summer by the analogy between the two themes, watched Bugaev... After the first appearance of the [second] theme, he became thoughtful, but when it appeared again, he jumped up and looked at me with such horror, as if he had seen a double... There was no end to his surprise and admiration... Bugaev said that much in his own “Symphony” became clear to him thanks to this melody...<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., section VII. “‘Невозможное, нежное, вечное, милое, старое и новое во все времена’ -- вот самый чарующий мотив симфонии; внимательный читатель чувствует его приближение уже за несколько отрывков; словесно этот мотив изменяется, а его музыкальная суть слышится между строк...”

<sup>17</sup> “Невозможное, нежное, вечное, милое, старое и новое во все времена,” as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by the editor of Emil Medtner, *Simfonii Andrey Belogo*, footnote 8. “Коля <...> сочинил за это время между прочим сонату, в которой вторая тема первой части является основным мотивом ‘Симфонии’ Бугаева. Это есть радость страшная и уютная в одно время, общая и интимная... Когда в позапрошлый раз Коля начал играть при Бугаеве эту сонату, я, все лето промучавшийся аналогией между обоими темами, наблюдал за Бугаевым... После первого появления этой темы он задумался, но когда ей пришел черед явиться снова, он вскочил и взглянул на

Emil's mystical ability to find such correspondences enticed Bely into a closer relationship. He became a regular visitor to the Medtners beginning in the fall of 1902. Here, Emil would engage in his characteristic musical “conducting” where he would freely associate “themes” from composers like Beethoven and Schumann with his favorite literary and philosophical authors—Kant, Goethe, Wagner, and Nietzsche.<sup>20</sup> He would sit with the two younger artists and have Nikolay play musical excerpts which would launch Emil into the comparison of musical themes with literary themes and characters.

But for Emil and Bely, nothing could top that original discovery of “Eternity's theme” in Nikolay's sonata and Bely's Symphony (in their correspondence they refer to it frequently as “our” theme). Wondering how both his brother and Bely found the “same” Eternal theme, he asks: “Didn't Eternity herself whisper her motif to both of them?”<sup>21</sup> In this question, though, lie the keys to understanding their shared approach to art and mysticism: in both Bely's six neuter adjectives and Medtner's musical theme, Eternity's motif was rendered into physical form—not “in cold abstraction” but in “living symbols.” The idea that the eternal could be given life in art, that the divine could be brought into the physical world, was the central component of Bely's rapidly developing theory of artistic mysticism. And, as he defined it, “the incarnation of Eternity is theurgy.”<sup>22</sup> He took this term from Vladimir Solovyov's religious philosophy, which he had been

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меня с таким ужасом, как будто он увидел двойника... Удивлению и восхищению его не было конца... Бугаев говорил, что ему многое выяснилось в 'симфонии' благодаря этому мотиву...”

<sup>20</sup> While Bely emphasized Emil's preference for German writers in his memoirs, it should be noted that at this point, Emil carefully read and appreciated many Russian authors—the many accounts of him as solely interested in German culture are simply incorrect. In his correspondence with Bely, it is clear that he kept up with the latest Symbolist and religious journals and early on showed much interest in the neo-Christian writings of Dmitry Merezhkovsky.

<sup>21</sup> Emil Medtner, *Simfonii Andrey Belogo*, Section VII. “Вскоре после прочтения этой симфонии я слышал одно музыкальное произведение одного молодого композитора, произведение, еще не выпущенное в свет, быть может, даже еще не законченное автором, игравшим мне его вчера. Одна из тем этого произведения до странного напоминала мне ‘невозможное, нежное, вечное, милое, старое и новое во все времена.’ Я предложил композитору прочесть неизвестную ему вторую симфонию, а затем просил его сыграть свою, никому пока неведомую вещь, неизвестному автору симфонии... Оба согласились со мною... Не шепнула ли им обоим свой мотив сама Вечность?”

<sup>22</sup> Bely, *Mystical Essays*, 60.

studying obsessively since 1900. And, within a year of meeting Nikolay Medtner, Bely would be heralding him in print as a true “theurgic” composer.

Theurgy is spiritualization of the *physical world* via creative acts performed by free *human* agency. A theurgist is an artist-mystic capable of creating divine art on earth, in concord with God’s wishes. Art becomes imbued with the living presence of the divine. This perceptible presence of the “Eternal” within transient material artworks results in the spiritualization of matter. Ultimately, the creation of art and life become merged, leading to the deification of humanity. This could be imagined as a long-term process, or, in a more prophetic sense, as a step towards the establishment of heaven on earth as foretold in the Book of Revelation. The theology of Christ’s resurrection and concordant attainment of an incorruptible, spiritualized body is the basis for the conception of theurgy as the transfiguration of physical being. For Solovyov, Bely, and Medtner, resurrection was not only the cornerstone of their mystical Symbolism, but also a power artistic symbol that features prominently in their creative work.

The theurgist does not work alone. To Emil, “Eternity” operated as a divine figure “whispering” her motifs to Bely and Medtner—guiding them like a Muse to ensure the success of their artistic goals. This vision of Eternity as a guide, as an intercessor or mediator between humanity and the divine, sits at the very core of Solovyov’s thought—he calls her “Sophia,” the Greek term for “wisdom.” Solovyov claimed to have three visions of Sophia and these mystical visions formed the foundation of his religious aesthetics. She is the (usually feminine, but not always) personification of Divine Wisdom whose purpose is to guide humanity on its path to union with God. To Solovyov and his Symbolist disciples—who were anxious to keep their theurgic Sophiology within the bounds of Orthodox Christianity—Sophia is not her own divinity, but a part of God. Indeed, she is often conceptualized as Christ’s perfect humanity, his Flesh, or simply as Christ himself. It is important to keep that in mind when one considers the enormous amount of

other names under which she can appear, which originate from various traditions: e.g., from German Romanticism (e.g. Goethe's "Eternal Feminine"), from Gnosticism (The Bride of Christ, the World Soul, the Holy Rose, Achamoth), from the bible itself (Sophia, Mary, the woman clothed with the sun, the Bride of the Lamb), and from those originating from mystical visions (Solovyov's "She," Alexander Blok's "Beautiful Lady," or "Her"). Much of what the Symbolists wrote is permeated with cryptic references to Sophia in her many forms, and it requires some "initiation" into Solovyovian thought to recognize them.

The Symbolists were primarily inspired by their own mystical visions of Sophia, and she readily appears within their artistic and philosophical writings as both the object of sacred love and as a Muse—the figure who teaches artists to create in accordance with God's will and to remain true to the divine origins of art (this is how Medtner refers to her in his book). But she is also more than a teacher—she is the object of artistic creation. The goal of artist is to prophetically reveal her "Face" ["Лик"]<sup>23</sup> so that art becomes religious creativity, i.e. theurgy. As Bely summed it up at the end of his seminal 1912 article, "On Symbolism":

Remaining an artist, only an artist, I begin to search for the Face of the goal of art. And having found this Face, I already know that the Face of this goal is the One who leads humanity through centuries and worlds. And the voice of poetry is only an instrument that carries the echo of the One Voice, so I understand that without this Voice, all the sounds of art are thundering brass and clanging cymbals.... As theurgy, Symbolism fights for the artist's right to see with his own eyes and capture the Face of the very goal of art, so that we too may understand: the Face of the goal is the One Face of Life.<sup>24</sup>

For Bely and others, Sophia is the ultimate symbol—with so many faces that she can appear everywhere; yet in Russian Sophiological theology she remains part of Christ.

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<sup>23</sup> Boris Jakim chose to translate this word as "countenance" when it appears in his volume of Bely essays. For example, see page 92 of Bely, *Mystical Essays*.

<sup>24</sup> Bely, "O simvolizme," in *Manifesty*, 444-45. "Оставаясь художником, только художником, начинаю искать я и Лик цели искусства. И найдя этот Лик, я уже знаю, что Лик этой цели Тот Самый, Кто ведет человечество сквозь века и миры. И голос поэзии лишь инструмент, проводящий отзвук Единого Голоса; так понимаю я, что без этого Голоса и все звуки искусств медь гремящая и кимвал звучащий.... Как теургия символизм борется за право художника увидеть воочию и запечатлеть Лик самой цели искусства, чтоб и мы поняли: Лик цели Единый Лик Жизни."



Due to the feminine personification of Sophia-Wisdom in the book of Proverbs (and the name's feminine grammatical gender in Russian), Sophia was often depicted in Russian iconography as a woman with a blindingly red "Face." (see image below).<sup>25</sup> This icon of Sophia, in the Novgorod style, depicts her as Christ's wisdom in the center as a flaming red feminine angel on a throne. She is flanked one side by the Mother of God with Christ as an infant in the medallion and on the other by John the Baptist. Above her is the adult Christ—thus all the different types of Christ icons are brought together in this icon and unified through Sophia.<sup>26</sup> This type of icon was present in many churches throughout Russia by the late nineteenth century.



Figure 2.1. Sixteenth-Century Icon of Sophia-Divine Wisdom from the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod, Russia (Public Domain, via Wikimedia commons).

<sup>25</sup> See Judith Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, 55-59, for a detailed account of Sophia's iconographical history.

<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to Kornblatt, *Sophia*, 58, for this summary.

Solovyov developed his conception of Sophia in both his philosophy and in his mystical writings and poetry. The Symbolists were especially influenced by the latter. In his seminal account of Russian religious aesthetics, Viktor Bychkov emphasizes Solovyov's decisive influence on the Symbolists and divides up his philosophy into four especially important components:

[1] The development of the philosophical theory of "positive all-unity," [2] the understanding of art as mystical "free theurgy" transforming the world on the path to its spiritual perfection, [3] the notion that "eternal ideas" can be expressed artistically, and [4] the mystical vision of Sophia as a cosmic creative principle (his Sophiology) all formed the basis of many directions of aesthetic philosophy in the early 20th century. In particular, they significantly influenced the theorists of Russian Symbolism and the entirety of neo-Orthodox aesthetics, of which he himself was the founder.<sup>27</sup>

"Positive all-unity" designated Solovyov's metaphysical notion that the world is both wholly unified and infinitely diverse. The basic idea that unifying simplicity can and must be achieved in and through diverse complexity lies at the core of Medtner's own musical aesthetics. Of the four fundamental ideas Bychkov identifies, theurgy and Sophia are the most frequently misunderstood or outright ignored, especially in musicological work on Symbolism.<sup>28</sup> The main reason for scholarly confusion over Symbolism's basic ideas is the fact that it was part of a broader revival of lay religious philosophy and Orthodox mysticism which began in the nineteenth century and reached full expression after 1905 due to relaxations in censorship rules. Symbolists held close relationships, personally and ideologically, with major names in Russian religious thought like Pavel Florensky,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., chapter II, second paragraph. "Разработанная им философская теория «положительного всеединства», понимание искусства в духе мистической «свободной теургии», преобразующей мир на путях к его духовному совершенству, концепция художественного выражения «вечных идей» и мистическое узрение Софии как космического творческого принципа (его софиология) легли в основу многих направлений эстетических исканий начала 20 века. В частности, существенно повлияли на теоретиков русского символизма и на всю неоправославную эстетику, родоначальником которой он сам и являлся."

<sup>28</sup> The best introduction to Sophia is Judith Kornblatt's *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov* (Cornell University Press, 2009). V. V. Bychkov's *Russkaya teurgicheskaya estetika* (Ladimir, 2007) is an exhaustive treatment of theurgy in all its manifestations.

Nikolay Berdyaev, and Sergey Bulgakov,<sup>29</sup> who could also be considered theorists of Symbolism insofar as they investigated how the everyday, material world could be spiritualized through theurgic creativity guided by Sophia.

Solovyov and the Symbolists drew heavily from Christian scripture and theology in their theoretical essays and literary works; indeed, first time readers of Bely and Vyacheslav Ivanov might be surprised at the endless stream of bible quotes marshalled in support of their points. They also drew on the Russian Orthodox monastic tradition, borrowing certain concepts from hesychastic mysticism—in which the mystic employs certain contemplative prayer techniques to achieve “*theosis*,” [deification] or mystical union with God.<sup>30</sup> However, Ivanov emphasizes that the “true artist” must be able to descend back down from such mystical heights, so as to “preserve strict precision in the communication of what he has seen and forbids himself even the slightest degree of invention, meticulous in his concern that his creation wholly corresponds to his experience.”<sup>31</sup> The artist must become a mystic, but one who remains firmly rooted to the ground and to the rules of his or her artform so that the religious content can be successfully conveyed to others.<sup>32</sup> As Patrick Michelson has shown, mystical practices associated with monastic asceticism became disarticulated from the idea of achieving ascetic “feats” and thus were able to permeate Russian culture more broadly.<sup>33</sup> For example, Bely rooted his conception of theurgy within mystical Christian asceticism—

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<sup>29</sup> Bely was close friends with Florensky (who was a mathematics student of Bely’s father) and frequently polemicized with Berdyaev. Florensky created a Sophianic theory of the icon and wrote on the visual arts among many other topics. Berdyaev made theurgy central to his philosophy of the creative act as the existential purpose of humanity. Bulgakov was closer to the Medtner and presided over N. Medtner’s conversion to Russian Orthodoxy in the 1930s. In exile, Bulgakov wrote several books attempting to unite Sophiology with Orthodox dogma.

<sup>30</sup> On deification, see Ruth Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought* (Oxford, 2019). She discussed the Merezhkovskys, Berdyaev, Bulgakov, and Florensky, along with their patristic and immediate predecessors.

<sup>31</sup> Ivanov, “On the Limits of Art,” in *Essays*, 71.

<sup>32</sup> As I show in Chapter 3, Medtner developed this view of artistic creation as the manifestation and communication of religious experience many years later in his book.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Lally Michelson, *Beyond the Monastery Walls* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2017). See especially chapters four and five.

as the ability of humans to continue Christ's "religious work" on earth by imbuing their creations with God's "miraculous power":

Meanwhile, the words spoken by Christ, the apostles, the prophets, possess not only power, but also *miraculous* power, capable of raising the dead, stopping the sun; and the word of the prophets, *crushing the rocks*, about which the Lord said to Isaiah: "Comfort, comfort my people...." [These words of the prophets] are not only an appeal to the Lord, not only a clear *vision*, but also the ability for *clear, that is, radiant religious work—theurgy*. The presence of this touch of theurgy determines the miraculousness of some exceptional artistic passages found in secular writers, for example, in Dostoevsky, Gogol, Goethe. Because in every prayer there is a possibility of receiving the miraculous power of God, every voice that cries out in the wilderness to the Lord, every voice that sings clear-sighted praise of the Lord, is theurgic.<sup>34</sup>

Bely penned these lines in 1903 in the same essay, "On Theurgy," in which he declared Medtner to be a "composer-theurgist"—propelling the composer into the center of Russian Symbolism as a religious-artistic movement.<sup>35</sup> Here Bely offers a Sophiological reading of Medtner's recently published album of piano works, the *Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1. But, the essay cannot be considered in isolation, as it was the culmination of months of excited engagement with Medtner's music that Bely expressed in letters to Emil and in his memoirs (and even in a few poems). As we have seen, his first encounter was with what would become the F-minor Piano Sonata, Op. 5. This piece is the most significant early point of intersection between Bely's thought and Medtner's music—it was here that Bely first heard Eternity's theme of the dawn manifested in music.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, the sonata was not finished until later in 1903, and, thus, Bely's plans to write about it could not be realized at the time he was drafting "On Theurgy" in July of that year. Nevertheless,

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<sup>34</sup> Bely, "О теургии," 371. "Между тем слова, сказанные Христом, апостолами, пророками, обладают не только силой, но и чудодейственной силой, способной воскрешать мертвых, останавливать солнце; а слово пророков, дробящее скалы, о которых Господь сказал Исании: «Утешайте, утешайте народ мой...» Тут уж не только обращение к Господу, или не только ясное видение, но и способность ясного, т. е. лучезарного религиозного делания — меургии. Присутствием этого налета теургии определяется чудодейственность некоторых исключительных художественных мест, встречающихся у светских писателей, например у Достоевского, Гоголя, Гёте, потому что во всякой молитве заключена возможность получения этой чудодейственной силы Божией, всякий глас, вопиющий в пустыне ко Господу, всякое прозревающее хваление Господа — теургично."

<sup>35</sup> Originally published in Merezhkovsky's *New Path* 9 (Sep 1903): 100-123. This was the second large theoretical article he had published.

<sup>36</sup> The theme of the dawn was probably the most significant "theme" or symbol in Bely's work. He refers to the theme of the dawn in a variety of ways. Of the many dozens of examples in Bely, *Mystical Essays*, see p. 80, "the dawn voice of the muse [Sophia]," pg. 87, the "face shining with the dawn," and pg. 91, the "dawn petals of the eternal rose."

Bely's Sophiological interpretation of the second theme of Op. 5's first movement provides the context for his published discussion of Medtner's music in the essay.

We will first examine Bely's comments on the Op. 5 sonata itself, before turning to his published commentary on Medtner's Op. 1 album. Bely argues that Medtner occupies a privileged position among all artists of the day, insofar as the composer successfully reveals Sophia in his music. He also credits Medtner with revealing to him the second major theme (after the "dawn") that Bely would explore in his work from then on: the "snowstorm." Medtner's snowstorm theme was, in Bely's mind, nearly as important as Solovyov and his theme of the dawn—the dawn represents Sophia's heavenly visage while Medtner's snowstorm represents her emergence from earthly chaos. At the end of the chapter I will examine the Medtner brothers' reactions to Bely's ideas—as Emil's recently published correspondence with Bely shows, the brothers readily accepted the characterization of Nikolay as a theurgist. Indeed the composer independently pursued the goal of musical theurgy, and in the years following Bely's article worked on a "theurgic" sonata that soon became a "theurgic fantasia" for piano quintet.<sup>37</sup> Medtner also continued evoking snowstorms and dawns in his music and used a variety of other imagery associated with Sophia. He thus actively participated in the Symbolist "knighthood" for Sophia and helped to creatively develop Solovyovian artistic mysticism in music. By properly explicating Bely's heretofore misunderstood music criticism, I argue that Nikolay Medtner should be considered the preeminent Symbolist composer during its heyday as a movement.

### Dawns of Sophia

In October 1902, Emil departed from Moscow for Nizhny Novgorod to take up a job as government censor, and Bely began reporting his thoughts, readings, and activities to Emil in

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<sup>37</sup> This work was left unfinished until the end of his life, when he finally managed to complete it in the late 1940s.

considerably lengthy letters. Bely continued to visit Nikolay regularly after Emil's departure. They were of similar age and the composer was immediately welcomed into the club of those who could hear the "dawns." When visiting, Bely would often bring his friend Petrovsky along, and together they would express admiration of Medtner's music in extravagantly religious terms (Medtner would frequently become embarrassed and even angry at the immodest praise). Bely especially valued the budding composer as someone who had the power to manifest the sound of the dawn within actual sounding tones:

In 1901[-1902], many listened to the dawns: E. K. Medtner traced the theme of dawn in musical themes taken from Beethoven to Schumann—and from his brilliant brother N. Medtner, who brought out the sound of dawn in his first sonata in F, written in 1901-1902.... We, the youth, tried to connect the sound of dawn with the dawns of Vladimir Solovyov's poetry; Solovyov's quatrain was a slogan for us:

Know then, that today the Eternal Feminine,  
In an incorruptible body, comes to earth.  
In the unfading light of the New Goddess,  
the Sky has merged with the watery abyss.<sup>38</sup>

"She" is the world soul, united with the Word of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

Bely's slogan for his club of the dawns held great significance for the broader Symbolist movement, being one of the most oft-quoted verses. The author, Vladimir Solovyov, was not only a philosopher but a poet as well, and in his poetry he expressed his mystical experiences of Sophia directly. In this 1898 poem entitled, "*Das Ewig-Weibliche* (A word of admonition to sea demons)," Solovyov describes being chased by demons who are trying to kill him, but, fortunately, the Eternal Feminine descends down to earth (undoing the separation of earth and heaven from Genesis) to protect him. At the end he mocks the male sea-demons by saying they should not fight woman—a

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<sup>38</sup> From Vladimir Solovyov's poem, "*Das Ewig-Weibliche* (A word of admonition to sea demons)."

<sup>39</sup> Andrey Bely, *Vospominanie o Bloke*. "В 1901 году многие зорям внимали: Э. К. Метнер прослеживал тему зари в темах музыки: от Бетховена к Шуману; и далее к своему гениальному брату Н. Метнеру, вынужденному звук зари в своей первой сонате си-моль [F-minor], написанной в 1901--1902 годах. З. Н. Гиппиус именно в это время писала свой яркий рассказ, где градация зорь пробегает пред нами; а мы, молодежь, -- мы старались связать звук зари с зорями поэзии Владимира Соловьева; четверостишие Соловьева для нас было лозунгом: Знайте же, Вечная Женственность ныне, В теле нетленном на землю идет. В свете немеркнущем Новой Богини Небо слилось с пучиною вод. "Она" -- мировая душа, соединенная со словом Христа."

light touch of irony that Solovyov used to make his mystical poetry more palatable to the general public (a technique Bely would employ frequently as well).<sup>40</sup> The crucial point here is that the Eternal-Feminine [i.e. Sophia] does not remain detached from earth, but, instead manifests in and through the perfection of earthly forms: the very next stanza reads, “In all ways that the earthly Aphrodite is beautiful, the joy of homes, and woods, and seas,—the unearthly beauty [Eternal Feminine] will replace it, but purer, stronger, with more fullness of life.”<sup>41</sup> As Solovyov expert Judith Kornblatt notes, “This Divine Sophia, with her paradoxical ‘imperishable body’ and ‘unfading light,’ will reverse the demon’s actions and *transfigures rather than debases nature*, making earthly beauty, ‘purer, stronger.’”<sup>42</sup>

Solovyov’s poem is effectively a corrective to another equally influential but much more famous verse from the bitter end of the bizarre and fantastic second part of *Faust*. Goethe ends his play with the famed octet spoken by the “Chorus Mysticus” high up in the mountains:

Alles Vergängliche Ist nur ein Gleichnis; Das Unzulängliche, Hier wird’s Ereignis; Das Unbeschreibliche, Hier ist’s getan; Das Ewig-Weibliche Zieht uns hinan.	All that is transitory Is only a likeness [image]; What lies beyond Here is made manifest; What is indescribable Here is accomplished; The Eternal Feminine Draws us up high. <sup>43</sup>
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Prior to this invocation of the Eternal Feminine [*Das Ewig-Weibliche*], Faust had dropped dead trying to drain the sea to better the lives of his people, while blissfully envisioning their happiness. The experience of such bliss causes him to lose his wager with Mephistopheles, who claims victory and Faust’s soul along with it. However, his demons are driven away by rose petals dropped on them by

<sup>40</sup> This commentary on the poem is drawn from Judith Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia*, 79-81.

<sup>41</sup> For a full translation of the poem, see Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>43</sup> My translation. See also Kornblatt’s in Ibid., 76-77.

angels, who make off with Faust's soul and bring him to heaven. Mary (the *Mater Gloriosa*) grants Gretchen's [Faust's tormented lover from Part I] wish to lead Faust's soul into heaven's higher realms.<sup>44</sup> Symbolist writers often quoted Goethe's verse directly to show their lineage from the German author who was considered the father of Symbolism. However, Goethe's lines, when incorrectly taken in themselves as representative of the thinking of Russian Symbolists, has been the source of some confusion about what the Symbolists were after: the famous first and last couplets seem to imply that the physical world is an insubstantial transience and that only by transcending this world—through the Eternal Feminine—can one find eternal value.

Solovyov's directly addresses this issue in his poem by having the Eternal Feminine come to earth, to humanity, to transfigure and spiritualize the material world. Indeed, Kornblatt notes that in his unpublished manuscript, *The Sophia*, Solovyov intentionally mistranslates Goethe's poem so that the final line reads "draws us in" rather than "draws us up."<sup>45</sup> As such, Solovyov's Sophia is not a copy of Goethe's *Ever-Womanly*. Indeed, the Russian philosopher was critical of his German predecessor for ascribing to the Eternal Feminine a transcendent, fantastic nature that is separate from everyday human life and artistic creation. Referring to the "Chorus Mysticus," Solovyov writes—

The heavenly powers and "das Ewig Weibliche" appear from above, and thus from without, rather than revealing themselves from within the content itself.... Just as a ray of light plays on a diamond, creating pleasure in the viewer but without in any way changing the material basis of the stone, so here the spiritual light of the absolute ideal, refracted through the imagination of the artist, illuminates the darkness of human reality, *but in no way changes its essence*.<sup>46</sup>

Sophia's divine light of the new dawn must be harnessed to transform reality, not simply illuminate it. But this is no miracle for which humanity must patiently wait, instead it is the goal of the daily

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<sup>44</sup> Bely also occasionally employs *Mater Gloriosa* as a name for Sophia.

<sup>45</sup> Kornblatt, *Sophia*, 77.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Kornblatt, 78, emphasis added.



work of the artist, the theurgist—"In its final task, real art must incarnate the absolute ideal not in imagination alone, but in deed itself. It must spiritualize and transubstantiate our real life."<sup>47</sup>

Goethe's *Ewig-Weibliche*, by only drawing us up and not coming down to inhabit earth, fails to reach the full incarnate reality of Solovyov's vision of Sophia.

In these early years, Bely was deeply immersed in Solovyov's philosophy and mysticism, whose influence upon everything he wrote at this time is overt and obvious. Bely spent many pages explaining Solovyov's ideas to Emil, who responded enthusiastically.<sup>48</sup> These explanations often included references to those artworks which were deeply important for both. In a letter from January 1903, Bely expressed his own interpretation of Medtner's sonata and especially its second theme. Not only did the composer bring to life the "sounds of dawn," but he heralded the coming of Sophia in music just like Solovyov did in poetry:

If the second theme can be interpreted, among other things, as the coming *approach of the Eternal Feminine, the Mystical Rose*, the Soul of the World (Chaldean legend): "*Know then, the Eternal Feminine is now coming to earth in an incorruptible body*" (Solovyov),<sup>49</sup> then our attitude to it is mystical and loving.<sup>50</sup>

Bely was not the only Symbolist poet deep in the thrall of a Sophia cult. Indeed, his Petersburg colleague, Alexander Blok, had been writing hundreds of poems with overt and obscure references to Sophia for years. Blok was Bely's principal poetic "competition" in the first decade of the century and Emil Medtner's favorite of the modern lyricists.<sup>51</sup> Like that of his second cousin, Vladimir Solovyov, Blok's early verse is clearly the product of frequent and intense mystical visions

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Emil was much more practical than Bely and occasionally showed signs of worry that Bely's frequently shifting obsessions with a diverse range of mystical and theosophical traditions would negatively impact his artistic productivity (which proved true when Bely gave himself to Anthroposophy in 1912, delaying the completion of *Petersburg* and resulting in the abandonment of many other planned Symbolist projects). Nevertheless, Emil was clearly interested in the actual content explained to him, taking up many ideas in his responses to Bely. Emil would later make the translation of German mystical texts an important part of his Musaget publishing house under the imprint "Orpheus."

<sup>49</sup> Solovyov's poem, "Das Ewig-Weibliche."

<sup>50</sup> Bely to EKM, 4 Jan 1903, letter #16 in *Perepiska*.

<sup>51</sup> Blok, Bely, and N. Medtner were all about the same age.

of Sophia, which he calls the “Beautiful Lady” among many other names. Bely was deeply drawn to him as a kindred spirit and made Blok the next member of his “dawn” collective. Important for our purposes, is that Bely perceived the theme of the dawn in both Blok’s highly musical love poetry and in the second theme of Medtner’s F-minor Piano Sonata. In his 1923 memoirs, he declares an equivalence between Medtner’s sonata theme and one of Blok’s most famous and influential poems:

N.K. Medtner (later a composer), then a young man, had just pulled out of the warm dawn air the huge, blazing theme of his sonata, which, when put into words, naturally expresses exactly what Blok’s poem, written on June 4 in the silence of Shakhmatovo (near Moscow), expressed.<sup>52</sup>

Since the music supposedly expresses the same idea as the poem, “when put into words,” it thus makes sense to start with the words. Here is Blok’s poem with a translation by Boris Jakim—it begins with an epigraph taken from a poem by Vladimir Solovyov, before proceeding to what is, in essence, an anxious mystical vision of an unnamed “You”:

Alexander Blok, “Predchuvstvuyu Tebya”	Blok, “Presentiment of You” <sup>54</sup>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>И тяжкий сон житейского сознания Ты потряжешь, тоскуя и любя. В. СОЛОВЬЕВ</i></p> <p>Предчувствую Тебя. Года проходят мимо — Всё в облике одном предчувствую Тебя. Весь горизонт в огне — и ясен нестерпимо, <i>И молча жду, — тоскуя и любя.</i></p> <p>Весь горизонт в огне, и близко появление, <i>Но страшно мне: изменишь облик Ты,</i> <i>И дерзкое возбудишь подозренье,</i> <i>Сменив в конце привычные черты.</i></p> <p><i>О, как паду — и горестно, и низко, Не одолев смертельные мечты!</i> Как ясен горизонт! И лучезарность близко. <i>Но страшно мне: изменишь облик Ты.</i><sup>53</sup></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Yearning and loving, you will shake off The heavy dream of everyday-life consciousness. Vladimir Solovyov</i></p> <p>I have a presentiment of You. The years are passing by But I have a presentiment of You in the same single image. The whole horizon is on fire—and unbearably clear; And I wait silently—“yearning and loving.”</p> <p>The whole horizon is on fire, and Your coming is at hand, But I am terrified that You will change Your image, That You will provoke an impudent suspicion By altering, in the end, Your usual features.</p> <p>Oh, what if I fall—sorrowfully and low— Without overcoming the deathly dreams! How clear the horizon is! The radiance is at hand. But I am terrified that You will change Your image.</p>

<sup>52</sup> Bely, *Vospominanie o Bloke*. Accessed: [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_1923\\_vosp\\_o\\_bloke.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_1923_vosp_o_bloke.shtml). Shakhmatovo was Blok’s familial estate. He wrote the poem in 1901. “Н. К. Метнер (впоследствии композитор), тогда молодой человек, вынул только что из разогретого воздуха зорь заревую огромную тему сонаты, которая, обложив ее речью, естественно выражает то именно, что выразило стихотворение Блока, написанное 4-го июня в безмолвии Шахматова (под Москвой).”

<sup>53</sup> I have italicized those lines which have five iambic feet like the epigraph, instead of six.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Blok, *Poems of Sophia*, translated by Boris Jakim (Sematron Press, 2014), 52-53. The epigraph is from Vladimir Solovyov’s poem, “Why are words needed? In the azure boundlessness...”

The poetic subject feels the imminent arrival of “You,” seen so clearly in visions and dreams, but suddenly becomes worried that “You” will arrive in a form different than imagined. The subject might then even fail to recognize this “You” of his dreams, despite the clear “radiance” of the horizon. The time is ripe, after so many years of presentiment, for the arrival of “You,” who will lift away the “heavy day-dream of every-day consciousness” and presumably reveal the deeper essence of things to the poet. Blok emphasizes the dream-like state of this consciousness by employing his signature poetic technique of varied repetition of entire phrases. Like a dream, the horizon is either “on fire” or is “unbearably clear” or both at the same time. The poem is constructed of phrases repeated in new contexts or combinations, but with the poet always obsessively returning to the same image.

In certain respects Blok’s poem is conventional—in the original Russian each of the three quatrains carries the normal AbAb rhyme scheme (alternating feminine and masculine rhymes). The meter is iambic and begins with six feet per line but slips into the pentameter of the inscribed Solovyov poem (italicized lines). The distribution of five-foot lines is not regular or periodic, and, in fact, Blok carefully aligns the shifts in meter with a corresponding shift in mood. Lines in which the subject expresses fear and yearning are in the pentameter, while lines describing the radiant horizon and the mystical feeling of presentiment are in hexameter. The “balanced” hexameter corresponds to the dream-like, hopeful mystical experience while the subjective feelings of doubt and fear are reinforced by the dropping of a foot, knocking the meter off-balance. Blok’s metrical play thus helps to musically reinforce the shifting mood and perspective. The repetition of whole phrases further reinforces the metrical structure, which crisscrosses the stanzaic structure and creates a kind of dynamic “inner” form that conflicts with the outer “conventional” form marked by the rhyme scheme. As should be clear, these kinds of innovations, in which the conventions of traditional

Russian poetic form are manipulated for expressive ends, can only work when those conventions and constraints are preserved to a high degree and not undermined through too much experimentation.

I have gone to such lengths to describe Blok's formal processes, because these are precisely the same kinds of formal innovations that we find in Medtner's music. On the surface Medtner employs seemingly conventional tonal harmonies and forms, just like Blok uses iambic feet and a traditional rhyme scheme. Upon closer acquaintance, however, the inner structure of Medtner's phrases and their constitutive harmonic progressions are often unlike anything a nineteenth-century composer would ever do. To illustrate, let us examine the structure of the "huge, blazing theme" that Medtner "pulled out of the warm dawn air":

Example 2.1. Medtner, Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor, mm. 34-42 (Second Theme, antecedent phrase).

In this first sonata in F minor, Medtner employs a conventional expositional structure wherein after the primary theme, the music modulates to the key of minor dominant (C minor) for the second

theme. The first sixteen bars fit neatly into an expanded parallel period wherein both eight-bar sections begin with the same melody. The first eight bars, the *antecedent phrase*, (Example 2.1) ends with the conventionally expected *half-cadence* on the dominant (G major). In its character the second theme is substantially more lyrical and melodic than the turbulent first theme. Nevertheless, the theme has a melancholic, plangent quality due to its modal character (no leading tone [B natural] until the last bar) and the initial scalar descent. The swift *marcato* accompaniment contributes an undercurrent of obsessive restlessness deriving from the proceeding music that is somewhat at odds with slow lyricism of the melody itself.

But things become “weird” on the level of the phrase structure. Outwardly, the fact that the phrase is a nice round eight bars would seem to indicate academic conventionality. However, Medtner did not undergo academic training at the conservatory—a fact that particularly pleased Medtner’s early admirer, the great pianist Josef Hofmann, who thought that he would not have composed this sonata *had* he studied composition (Hofmann would go on to perform the sonata in Europe and America).<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the structure of these eight bars does not correspond to any kind of standard phrase model. Most apparent is the fact that the phrase itself is not subdivided into even divisions. The first bar-and-a-half contains the *basic idea*, prolonging the tonic. This is followed by a

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<sup>55</sup> Medtner’s father Karl reported the details of Hofmann’s opinion of the sonata in a letter of 28 Nov 1902 to Emil: “...Since there is no time to write to Kolya [N. Medtner], I would like to tell you about his interesting visit to Hofmann. He went to see him at 4 o’clock and returned at 6:12 in an extremely cheerful mood. Hofmann first talked to him, sometimes in German, sometimes in Russian, treated him to tea, showed him a drawing of his newly invented automobile, talked about his patents for his various inventions, and then asked him to play the Sonata, which he had already heard once at Koreshchenko’s on an old and useless instrument. Then Kolya played him his Sonata on a Bechstein concert grand, and, when Kolya had finished, he asked him to play the Sonata two more times, listening with great attention, and finally expressed his complete admiration for this work. He said that he constantly received piano works from almost all contemporary composers, both Russian and from other countries, that he had accumulated whole piles of them, and that he therefore had the right to say that Kolya’s Sonata represents the most significant phenomenon of all the modern piano pieces known to him [...] He praised the Sonata extremely: “*Sie ist wie aus einem Guß*” [“It was cast from one piece”]—was his characteristic saying. When he learned that Kolya had not studied the entire theory of composition, he said: “*Das ist gut, sonst hätten Sie vielleicht diese Sonate nicht geschrieben*” [That’s good, otherwise you might not have written this Sonata]. He asked Kolya to be sure to have the Sonata copied out and to deliver a copy to his impresario in Moscow for forwarding to him as soon as possible, and if the 2nd and 3rd parts were ready, to send them too.... After hearing the Sonata three times, Hoffmann began to play it himself, in places, of course, and when Kolya was surprised at his memory, he said: “*Das was mir gefällt, behalte ich sehr schnell*” [What I like, I remember very quickly]. See Medtner, *Pis’ma*, 41n11.

two-bar *contrasting idea* that begins midway through bar 36 and ends midway through bar 38, visiting subdominant harmony while maintaining prolongation of the tonic. The next two-and-a-half bars develop the contrasting idea over a circle-of-fifths progression. Suddenly, on the downbeat of bar 41 the basic idea returns (transposed up a fifth)—blossoming directly out of the contrasting idea. This now serves a cadential function taking us to the expected half cadence in bar 42.

It is hard to overestimate the originality of what Medtner does in this phrase: the basic idea is brought back as a continuation of what was originally the contrasting idea. This is no symmetrical arch-like phrase, instead it amounts to a complete reinterpretation of the basic idea itself within the phrase structure. Like in the Blok poem above where short phrases are repeated in different contexts within the poem, altering their meaning and perspective, Medtner repeats bits of phrases in such a way that they take on entirely new form-functional meanings. It is as if Medtner reveals to us that the initial basic idea was actually all along the ending of the contrasting idea. But since the contrasting idea itself naturally follows the basic idea, the result is some kind of complex circular form all enacted in only eight bars. But Medtner goes further than this: in the left hand of bar 42, he brings back the basic idea again in yet another form-functional role: here it serves as a post-cadential linkage to the start of the next phrase. This time he transposes it to scale degree 6 so that it will nicely land right on the tonic to begin the next eight bar phrase (Example 2.2).

Example 2.2. Medtner, Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor, mm. 43-51 (Second Theme, consequent phrase—arrows show intrusions of primary theme material).

On a larger level, this next eight-bar phrase acts quite conventionally as a *parallel consequent* to the first phrase because it starts again with the same basic idea and ends with a *perfect authentic cadence* in the tonic—the strongest type and stronger than the half-cadence which ended the antecedent phrase. Once again, however, things get weird when you look a little closer. The first four bars here (mm. 43-46) are nearly identical to the corresponding bars (35-38) in the antecedent phrase. In the next four bars, however, Medtner creatively unusually introduces the characteristic motives of the primary theme directly into the second theme as two *counter-subjects* (See Example 2.3 for original primary theme). In the left-hand we hear the primary theme's basic idea, and in the right-hand's bottom voice we hear the primary theme's contrasting idea—all simultaneously while the second theme's contrasting idea is developed in the top voice.



Example 2.3. Medtner, Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor, mm. 1-6 (Primary theme).

Medtner has completely saturated the texture with thematic material—it has become completely contrapuntal, albeit not through any kind of “academic” polyphonic form. This whole contrapuntal complex is repeated sequentially twice, each time up a step (mm. 47-49), before Medtner breaks the sequence to bring the phrase to a close by cadencing on the tonic (mm. 49-50). Notably, however, the second theme’s basic idea is not brought back at the end like it was in the antecedent phrase. Instead, the incursion of primary theme material takes over, as if blocking the second theme from realizing itself; the momentum subsequently fizzles out rather than driving towards a marked cadence in the dominant key area. Here Medtner enacts the characteristic conflict of a two-key sonata—between the primary and secondary themes—during the exposition of the second theme itself. The Symbolism behind the turbulent primary theme throttling the lyrical blossoming of the second theme seems obvious.

That Medtner must have a thought of his themes in such symbolic terms is further indicated by how he treats the second theme in the coda. Here he unites it with a rhythmically augmented version of the primary theme to form a new theme distinct from both. Leading up to the coda, Medtner whips up the music into fast flurry of notes evocative of the wind or perhaps a snowstorm. From this stormy figuration, the new combined melody emerges as accented notes within it. The



effect is tremendous—the new melody sounds like a distorted echo of the previous music heard through howling of the wind [Example 2.4, the descending sixth at the start of the second theme is marked with arrows, it seamlessly follows an augmented statement of the primary theme].

Example 2.4. Medtner, Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor, mm. 197-210 (Lead-up to coda and its beginning).

The story of the second theme does not end here. By November 1902, Medtner managed to finish the sonata's finale and, there, strove to further expand the symbolic significance of the theme by subjecting it yet another transformation. He brings it back in the parallel major in full chordal garb [Example 2.5]. Stripped of the primary theme's restless presence, the theme is reborn as a radiant hymn. This is in Medtner's "dithyramb" style—what he called exalted hymns of praise often accompanied by bell sounds. When he heard it, Bely was ecstatic—it was this thematic

transformation that put the idea into his head to write an article on his friend's music (so as to promote it to his fellow Symbolists):

The third part [NB: the finale]<sup>56</sup> of the sonata (in major) is amazing: the second theme receives such flexibility (it, purified, is not afraid of a variety of paths), that with all its depth it becomes universal: the musical space of the finale is literally saturated with it, and only scraps remain from the first theme (here its role is over). As soon as Nikolai Karlovich's album comes out, I will try to write something about it (of course, not from an absolutely musical point of view, because here I am a layman) in "*World of Art*."<sup>57</sup>



Example 2.5. Medtner, Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Finale, 75<sup>th</sup> system (Second Theme in parallel major).

Summing up, both Blok and Medtner use similar formal methods in their respective media. Within the confines of inherited conventions, phrases and themes are scrambled around in a series of new contexts and juxtapositions—thus forcing a constant process of reinterpretation based on the changing position of these themes and phrases within the form. This procedure is underscored by the use of irregular rhythmic subdivisions of phrases or shifts in meter. I would argue that this kind of formal innovation lies at the heart of practical Symbolist technique, as the themes and phrases treated in this manner accrue a sense of permanence and overdetermined significance that

<sup>56</sup> At this point Medtner had not yet finished what would eventually become the slow third movement, with the finale becoming the fourth movement.

<sup>57</sup> Bely to EKM, 17 Nov 1902, letter #8 in *Perepiska*. Bely's planned article would eventually become "On Theurgy" and be published in *New Path*. "Третья часть сонаты (мажорная) поразительна: 2-ая тема получает такую гибкость (она, очищенная, не боится разнообразия путей), что при всей глубине своей становится всеобщей: музыкальное пространство 3-ей части буквально напитано ей, а от первой темы остаются лишь обрывки (здесь ее роль кончена). Как только выйдет альбом Николая Карловича, я постараюсь написать о нем что-нибудь (разумеется, не с абсолютно музыкальной точки зрения, ибо здесь я - профан) в '*Мире Искусств*'."

thrusts their presence beyond the bounds of the poem or piece of music. Medtner's musical themes thus take on a concreteness or independence that invites interpretation. Indeed, poetic symbols for the Russians were more often than not hefty, "embodied" symbols that constantly reappear and make their presence known, rather than vague fleeting things. This distinction must be what Bely had in mind when he summed up the significance of Blok in his 1923 memoirs:

To understand A. A. Blok is to understand that, for him, everything is an elucidation of the sound *of dawn*, and is thus completely real; for him concreteness colors our time; and the emergence of Blok's poetry from the philosophy of Solovyov is an emergence of *the fact of dawn* into concreteness; into *the embodiment of the Eternal* in life: the Symbolists understood this; the allegorists and decadents did not understand.<sup>58</sup>

Clearly, the Symbolists considered their symbols to be real embodied things that hopefully contained a piece of the divine within them. As such, they could feel possessive over their precious symbols, endowed for them with immense significance.

Both Emil and Bely were jealously protective of the second theme of Medtner's sonata—what they called "ours." Indeed, they linked this theme with actual embodied people. As mentioned, Bely perceived the theme of the dawn to be embodied by Margarita Morozova, who served as the inspiration behind the female love interest of his Second Symphony, named "Fairy Tale," which Emil linked to Medtner's second theme. Furthermore, in her memoirs, Morozova herself writes, that "[Medtner's] second theme, especially beloved by Andrey Bely, merged the image of his 'Fairy Tale' with the image of Goethe's Nymph, which inspired Medtner."<sup>59</sup> In his later settings of Goethe's texts, it is clear that Medtner views the classical nymph figure as a kind of earthly divinity who offers comfort and guidance to humankind.<sup>60</sup> Thus, in their conflation of sacred and earthly love, both Bely

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<sup>58</sup> Bely, *Vospominanie o Bloke*, "Stikhi o prekrasnoy dame." "Понять А. А. Блока -- понять: все есть для него объяснение звука *зари*, совершенно реальной; конкретностью окрашено для него наше время; и выход поэзии Блока из философии Соловьева, есть выход в конкретности *факта* зари; в *воплощения* Вечного в жизнь: это поняли символисты; аллегористы и декаденты, -- не поняли..."

<sup>59</sup> Morozova, "Metner," in *Nezabytye*, 23-24.

<sup>60</sup> See Flamm's commentary and analysis of Medtner's setting of Goethe's *Einsamkeit*, Op. 18/3 in Christoph Flamm, *Metner*, 171-74. He states that for Medtner, the Muse and the Nymph appear to be synonyms.

and the Medtner's associated Sophia and her alter-egos with both divine and earthly femininity (or the divine in the earthly).

Following Solovyov, Bely viewed relationships with women ultimately as a symbol for the relationship of Christ and Sophia ("All love is a symbol of this symbol—at its peak intensity, every symbol reveals the image of the Bridegroom and the Bride").<sup>61</sup> In Bely's correspondence with Emil Medtner, they both worried how other people might perceive Medtner's sonata theme—especially given its association with femininity. Thus, in one of the most bizarre passages of his correspondence with Emil Medtner, it suddenly occurred to Bely that the regular audience might interpret the sonata's theme as expressive of the "wrong" kind of femininity—not as the dawn sun but as the seductive moon:

The greatest horror sometimes lies in the fact that suddenly your brother's second theme will sound to others *like lunarity, like sleepwalking* ... This is horror. The horror of the double of the second theme. If your brother's second theme is worldly, then the double, *pretending to exist*, is also worldly. If the second theme is rose-colored, delighting in the dawn, then its double, pretending to exist, suddenly terrifies *as the moon*.<sup>62</sup>

Soon, Bely's fear of the dark moon obscuring the radiant dawn would become a different kind of reality as he faced personal tragedy: the beloved parents of his childhood friend Sergey Solovyov—who supported his early dreams and aspirations—both died. Not long after this terrible event, Bely's own father would pass away. The tragedies forced him to approach the dawns differently—instead of naive harbingers of Sophia's coming, Bely learned to seek the dawn through the dark chaos of night—in his writings he would now emphasize an extra, necessary dimension of tragedy and chaos that the theurgist must embrace in order to obtain a deeper understanding of

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<sup>61</sup> Bely, "Sacred Colors," in *Mystical Essays*, 60-61. Here he quotes Solovyov on marriage, "the male sees his natural complement—the woman—not as an object of external observation; rather, he sees her idea, what she is primordially called to be... a being capable of being deified."

<sup>62</sup> Bely to ЕКМ, 11 Dec 1902, letter #12 in *Perepiska*. "Самый главный ужас заключается иногда в том, что вдруг 2-ая тема Вашего брата зазвучит для иных *лунностью, лунатизмом* ... Это - ужас. Ужас двойника второй темы. Если 2-ая тема Вашего брата - мировая, то и двойник, *прикинувшийся*, тоже мировой. Если 2-ая тема - розовость, восхищает зорею, то двойник ее, прикинувшись, внезапно ужасает *луню*."

Sophia. Solovyov's verse about the imminent coming of Sophia: "Know then that today the imperishable body of the eternal feminine comes to earth" yields to a new slogan, with which he concludes the analysis of Medtner's album in his essay, "On Theurgy":

You are all-radiant, like a polar flame,  
A bright daughter of dark chaos.<sup>63</sup>

### Snowstorms of Sophia

On July 18, 1903, Tsar Nicholas II, leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, and many thousands of pilgrims converged on the small town of Sarov to witness the canonization of Serafim of Sarov (1754-1833) and the uncovering of his relics the following day. Reports of miraculous happenings flooded the newspapers. In the days leading up to the event, Andrey Bely—who had become a fervent acolyte of Serafim—witnessed bizarre atmospheric events to which he ascribed mystical significance. Bely looked to Serafim to help him find joy in his suffering, and he imagined that the opening of relics would produce profound effects on the world, perhaps even raise the dead from their graves. He eagerly wanted to attend the proceedings with Alexey Petrovsky, but, nevertheless, chose to stay at home with his widowed mother and to await reports of miracles from Petrovsky. After the all-important day had come and gone, Bely set down his somewhat disappointed impressions in a letter to Emil Medtner:

On 11 July a kind of general cleansing discharge of the atmosphere began. There were thunderstorms of a *terrifying* nature, and then, while the ceremonies were taking place, there was a kind of quieting down. Afterwards was the same thing, but on the nineteenth, there took place... a rupture... of some sort... I read about miracles, I say aloud "*thank God*," but in my soul—sorrow, sorrow... Perhaps I expected something grand (the resurrection of the dead, a catastrophe), but everything apparently went off *all-right*... just a little bit middle of the road... I don't know what I was expecting, but I am sad.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> The final couplet of Vladimir Solovyov's poem, "On Saimaa in Winter," as quoted by Bely in "O teurgii," in *Manifesty*, 385. See also Boris Jakim, trans., *The Religious Poetry of Vladimir Solovyov* (Semantron Press, 2014), 65.

<sup>64</sup> Bely to Emil Medtner 25 July 1903, adapted from John E. Malmstad's translation in "Andrey Bely and Serafim of Sarov," *Scottish Slavonic Review* 15 (1990): 61 (Part 2). See also Bely-E. Medtner, *Perepiska*, I, letter #39.

The discovery of Serafim's relics at the beginning of the year and the subsequent debates over his true worthiness to be deemed a saint set off what we would now call a "firestorm" across Russian print media. To an entire generation of young Russian intellectuals, like Andrey Bely, who grew up in the rational-minded, secular culture of the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia, Serafim represented a mystical breath of fresh air—the promise of long forgotten spiritual power rooted in ancient Russian monastic traditions that could be harnessed for artistic creation, religious experience, and even as a source of national power for Russia herself.

Indeed, Bely's father was a famous mathematician who studied in Germany with Karl Weierstrass, and like most professors at Moscow Conservatory, regarded the new "decadence" in literature with suspicion and disdain. And so, in his teenage years Bely learned to hide his intensive study of literature, philosophy, and mysticism from his family—only able to share a love of music with his mother, a pianist. Pulled in two different directions, Bely studied the sciences at university by day while reading Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and the Christian mystical philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov by night.<sup>65</sup> Serafim—known for miraculous feats of monastic asceticism like standing on a rock for a thousand days with his arms outstretched, talking to wild animals, and living with nothing but a single icon of the Mother of God—deeply impressed Bely to such an extent that he would stay up all night long secretly praying to Serafim for countless hours.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, in a 1904 essay that would have horrified his (late) father, Bely placed prayer itself at the center of his theurgic vision of artistic creation:

As we approach the absolute, we gain knowledge of ideas. Knowledge of an idea is life-giving. In art, ideas are a source of delight. When they are transformed into symbols which leads us to goals, art touches religion....Prayer is the condition that transmutes sorrow into

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<sup>65</sup> Solovyov was the uncle of Bely's close friend Sergey Solovyov, and his meeting with the philosopher shortly before the latter's death in 1900 was a crucial formative experience. See Bely, "Recollections of Vladimir Solovyov," in *Mystical Essays*, 77-86.

<sup>66</sup> Malmstad, "Andrey Bely and Serafim of Sarov," *Scottish Slavonic Review* 14 (1990): 36 (Part 2). As Bely wrote to E. Medtner, even Petrovsky "only vaguely suspects" his hours-long prayer sessions in front of Serafim's icon.

joy. Rapture is the rejoicing in ideas. Prayer irresistibly brings ideas into the soul. In prayer, the peaks of art merge with mysticism. The union of mysticism with art is theurgy.<sup>67</sup>

In his lengthy letters to Emil Medtner, Bely regularly invokes Serafim alongside detailed accounts of his latest studies of theosophy (of the kind that would Scriabin would study later on), his ecstatic experiences listening to Nikolay Medtner's music, and Solovyovian musings on theurgy and Sophia. Bely sometimes associated the saint with Nikolay's music and with the image of the snowstorm as a signifier both of death and joyful rebirth. Recalling the recent late-winter funeral of the Solovyovs and how Serafim granted him the ability to endure the tragedy with joy, Bely wrote of the deeply personal significance of the snowstorm in this 29 March 1903 letter to Emil:

Those were the days of blizzards, full of noise and whistling—rushing and sweeping by, blotting out the boundaries between life and death. We endowed this sweet snowy music with all the significance which it contained: Nikolay Karlovich's "Snowstorm," [Op. 1, no. 5] our own subtly illuminated, new Christian chaos with shafts of azure—His Dear voice from beyond the storm. They were joyful days. Heaven had come closer. I rejoiced over the Solovyovs' grave. Serafim passed by somewhere quite close to me. And it rushed and rushed, sweeping by, howling and raising blizzardly raptures.<sup>68</sup>

Bely endowed the snowstorm with the deepest significance—as a symbol of Russian winter, of Serafim and Christ, and of the inner mystical "music" that he sought to give expression in his literary works as well as Medtner's actual music. For Bely, Medtner succeeded in "illuminating" the snowy chaos with "shafts of azure"—joyfully revealing the voice of Christ through the storm.<sup>69</sup>

Serafim famously called every visitor, "my joy" ("Моя радость") and Bely scholar John Malmstad states that the word "joy" is a code for Serafim in his writings.<sup>70</sup> Here and in many place Bely ascribes in Medtner's music a deep sense of joy with religious connotations—most clearly in his 1906 article on Medtner's Goethe Lieder quoted above: "*Joy returns*—you want to say, delving into the meaning of these musical themes," and that, "all the best that has arisen in my thoughts and

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<sup>67</sup> Bely, "Sacred Colors," *Mystical Essays*, 59.

<sup>68</sup> Translated by Malmstad, "Serafim," 39 (Part 1). See Bely to EKM, 19 Mar 1903, Letter #23 in their *Perepiska*.

<sup>69</sup> Since Bely viewed Sophia as part of Christ, he would sometimes simply refer to the latter instead.

<sup>70</sup> Malmstad, "Serafim."

experiences owes much to Medtner's music, which truly heals the soul with potions known to it and only to it." It would seem that Bely felt the same religious joy listening to Medtner as he did when praying to Serafim—both served as the spiritual balm Bely seemed to need during this year of personal tragedy and swiftly burgeoning fame.

Indeed, at moments of wavering faith in his own mystical beliefs in the impending coming of Sophia or of Christ himself, Bely would turn to Medtner's music as he did to Serafim. At his worst moments even his theurgic ambitions were silenced, as he wrote to Emil in the dark days of spring 1903:

I am deeply disappointed (I admit—this is between us) in Solovyov, and in Merezhkovsky, and in everyone who influenced me. With me are only Nietzsche, Serafim, and Christ. The weight of the burden is on my shoulders. No one will share it. I will bear it silently, without shouting and appealing *in the name of anything*. I feel that a period of silent sailing has come for me, or even total *silence* itself. Now I am going to Nikolai Karlovich's concert. I expect to receive an abyss of pleasure.<sup>71</sup>

In that concert (26 March 1903), Nikolay gave a full evening recital including some selections from his *Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1.<sup>72</sup> This recital likely redoubled Bely's desire to write an article on Medtner's music—the "silence" did not last long—and he would soon turn towards writing about the Op. 1 in explicitly theurgic and Sophiological terms. His faith in those who influenced him had been quickly restored, it would seem. The fifth piece of Medtner's collection bears an inscription from Lermontov's poem, "Metel' shumit" ("The blizzard is roaring") wherein the sounds of funeral bells can be heard through the howling of the blizzard. Notably, the extant program for Medtner's recital did not include this particular piece, testifying to Bely's deep knowledge of the set from time spent with Medtner personally. In "On Theurgy" Bely developed this image of the snowstorm and

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<sup>71</sup> Bely to E. Medtner, 26 March 1903 (Letter #25). "Я глубоко разочаровался (признаюсь - это между нами) и в Соловьеве, и в Мережковском, и во всех, кто на меня влиял. Со мной только Ницше, Серафим и Христос. Тяжесть ноши на моих плечах. Никто не разделит ее. Буду же и я нести ее молчаливо, без криков и вызваний *во имя чего бы то ни было*. Чувствую - настала и для меня полоса *молчаливого плавания*, а порой и *умолчания*. Сейчас иду на концерт Николая Карловича. Ожидая получить бездну наслаждения."

<sup>72</sup> Concert #15 in Flamm, *Metner*, program on page 576.



associates it with Sophia, distinguishing the deathly storms of mid-winter from the snowstorms of early spring. It is the latter he hears in Medtner's music: "the howling of the blizzard no longer sounds like cries of anger, but like the first sacred, springtime glorifications of Eternity ... a confirming sign of hope, sounding to us in the retreating chaos with such sweet coziness."<sup>73</sup>

Bely's praise of his composer friend was not the result of quickly fading youthful ardor—indeed, the ideas formed during this time of his early twenties would provide the mystical bedrock of his later, more complex philosophy. After his 1906 article on the Goethe Lieder, he returned to Medtner's music in a third article, entitled "Snowy Arabesques," in 1910. Here, he revisits several of the ideas from his 1903 "On Theurgy," positing again that Medtner's music itself is intrinsically related to the snowstorm—indeed Bely perceives the presence of snowy arabesques in the music's very texture:

Medtner's melodies are not immediately heard by the ear; first our ear encounters the richly varied development of his musical themes: the thoughtful night puts on a veil of snow; and—images fly: snowy flames and swords piercing the heart, a silver current of screaming swans. Medtner's music is *snony arabesques*: but underneath them is a single, thoughtful night. Medtner's themes at first seem dissolved in development; and the melody seems to exist only for the sake of harmony; but, when we look closely at the harmonic complexity, this complexity is made up of arabesques of snowy lace; in each curve of the lace, then, is an arabesque—single and unchanging.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the difficulties of the poetic language, Bely appears to be pointing out how Medtner often forgoes a homophonic, melody-and-accompaniment texture for one of more contrapuntal sophistication, wherein individual lines retain motivic significance (i.e. the "harmonic complexity" is made up of "arabesques of snowy lace"). The fact that Medtner's melodies are often not "immediately heard by the ear" (due to the thematic complexity) gives the music an evocative shadowy depth that rewards careful attention. The themes only become apparent to the listener on

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<sup>73</sup> Bely, "O teurgii," 385.

<sup>74</sup> Bely, "Snezhnye arabeski." This article was not published in Bely's lifetime and was later published in *Sovetskaya muzyka* 3 (1990), accessible here: <https://mus.academy/articles/snezhnye-arabeski>. The quoted Russian text appears on page 121.

repeated acquaintance—something also true of Bely’s own work, as he warned his readers in the preface to his *Fourth Symphony: A Goblet of Snowstorms* (1908). Here, Bely explains that his Symphony must be carefully studied multiple times in order for its themes to emerge. This is due to the fact that he explicitly used musical techniques in its construction:

I have attempted most of all to be precise in the exposition of the themes, in their counterpoint, coherence, and so on... I attempted to introduce a structure of phrases and images such that form and images were predetermined by their thematic development and, as much as possible, make image subordinate to the mechanical development of the themes.<sup>75</sup>

Bely dedicated his fourth Symphony to N. K. Medtner “with great admiration,” and declared that it was he “who inspired the theme of the Symphony.”<sup>76</sup> Bely confirms that Medtner was the first to reveal to him the theme of the snowstorm—all the way back in Medtner’s Op. 1.<sup>77</sup> He writes here that the snowstorm theme came to him in 1903 as a symbol depicting “sacred love”—just like the theme of the dawn. To Bely, sacred love is a bridge between humanity and the divine. It is love directed towards Eternity—the incarnation of which is theurgy. The primary way to symbolize sacred love is through the symbolization of Sophia and her divine-humanity. Sophia is guiding humanity to achieve truly theurgic art, and Bely writes in a letter to Emil that once theurgy is attained, the delights of purely aesthetic art (i.e. “art for art’s sake”) will fade away into nothingness:

No matter what summit *aesthetic* art reaches, it will no longer satisfy us with *the final sweetness, the final freedom* that theurgic, religious art gives, i.e., the art *of relating through Her, the speedy Intervessor and Helper, to God*; such art is already a religion, and every religion obliges us to something infinitely greater, to embrace life, to *a holy cause*, to calls for *prayer*. I do not demand limitations for art, I only bow before every work of art, and before Her or before Christ I *fall prostrate*.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 268-69.

<sup>76</sup> See Bely, *The Symphonies*, trans. Jonathan Stone (Columbia University Press, 2021), 267.

<sup>77</sup> Medtner also included snowstorm effects in two Pushkin settings composed in 1903-04: Op. 3/2 and Op. 13/1.

<sup>78</sup> Bely to EKM, 4 July 1903, letter #37 in *Perepiska*. “Какой бы вершины эстетическое художество ни достигало, оно уж не утолит нас окончательной сладостью, окончательной свободой, которую дает теургическое, религиозное искусство, т. е. искусство *относиться через Нее, скорой Заступницы и Помощницы, к Богу*; такое же искусство есть уже религия, а всякая религия обязывает нас к бесконечно большому, охватывает жизнь, к *святому делу*, к *молитве* взывает. Я не требую ограничения искусству, я только преклоняюсь пред всяким художественным произведением, перед Ней же или перед Христом я *падаю ниц*.”

Furthermore, at this point in time, Bely believed that Sophia herself may actually be soon coming to earth as a kind of emissary to prepare for Christ's own second coming. Due to this belief, he began to perceive indications of Sophia's coming as veiled symbols within poetry of the past. In "On Theurgy" he analyzes the "veiled" appearance of Sophia in Lermontov, while perceiving her presence more directly in Medtner's music—behind the snowstorms.

### "On Theurgy"

Bely's essay is divided into six sections, of which the fifth is on Medtner's music. Written in June-July 1903 for Merezhkovsky's journal *New Path*, it reflects the mystically optimistic mood he cultivated as a reaction to the recent tragic deaths he endured. Prior to this point, Bely's interest in theurgy was part and parcel of his interest in an extremely wide range of mystical, theosophical, and philosophical traditions. His decision to place theurgy at the center of his emerging Christological philosophy of aesthetics (what his "Symbolism" ultimately was) would motivate much of the massive glut of essays that would soon follow in the next decade. Interestingly, the poet Valery Bryusov (the organizational leader of Russian Symbolism) criticized Bely's essay as a "schoolboy exercise" and that "its existence does not exclude the need to say and write about the same thing again."<sup>79</sup> Bryusov's criticism seems to be a reaction to the unusually forthright clarity of the article (for Bely) and its methodical presentation. In any case, Bely certainly would go on to write about the "same thing again" as he built up his theory of Symbolism into an imposing philosophical edifice.

"On Theurgy" showcases the astounding range of thinkers Bely had managed to absorb in his twenty-three years. Most influential are Solovyov, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, but equally

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in the editor's note to Bely's "O teurgii," in *Manifesty*, 389. Recall that this was only his second large essay on Symbolism.

important to his argument are quotations drawn from various Symbolist poets, from Lermontov, and from both testaments of the bible. It also must not be forgotten that like his friend Alexander Blok, Bely was, in essence, a religious mystic.<sup>80</sup> As we know from his letters to Blok, Morozova, and Emil Medtner, alongside his latter unpublished “notes for an autobiography,” since at least 1898, Bely routinely underwent profound, ecstatic mystical experiences that directly informed his creative writing.<sup>81</sup> In his essays, these mystical experiences are often described in vivid detail—indeed, Bely often presents such experiences as physical facts upon which to base arguments and ideas. This also partially explains why he felt a strong need to develop a theory of art that could adequately account for an artist’s mystical experiences. Solovyov had defined theurgy as “the union of mysticism with art”—a definition which Bely repeatedly employed.<sup>82</sup> During the first years of the new century, his mystical visions (of the dawns and the snowstorms) were so intense and formative that he would revisit them in his prose writings for the rest of his life.

It was in such a mystically receptive state that Bely first experienced Nikolay Medtner’s music in the winter of 1902-03. The music had a powerful physical effect on him. As he wrote to Emil, “I recently visited Nikolai Karlovich, who amazed me to death with the rapturous joy of the finale of his sonata. This is an unprecedented phenomenon, worthy of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony (true). I was not myself all day and, it seems, offended Nikolay Karlovich with stupidly immoderate praise.”<sup>83</sup> At this point Medtner was (naturally) hardly known to the general public and Bely wanted to help promote him in Symbolist and religious-philosophical circles. He could not fulfill his plan to write about the sonata, as it was still unpublished as of summer 1903. Instead Bely turned to Medtner’s *Acht Stimmungsbilder* [“Eight Mood-Pictures”], an album of piano miniatures drawn from

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<sup>80</sup> John E. Malmstad summarizes Bely’s many mystical experiences in “Serafim.”

<sup>81</sup> Indeed, many of the incredible visions that populate his essays seem to have been actually experienced in real life.

<sup>82</sup> Bely, *Mystical Essays*, 59. From his 1904 essay, “Sacred Colors.”

<sup>83</sup> Bely to E. Medtner, 30 January 1903 (#18).

youthful material begun as early as 1896.<sup>84</sup> It was partially premiered only in January and March of 1903 and published the next month.<sup>85</sup> In any case, Bely's narrative reading of Medtner's album—which refers to the specific pieces in the order in which they appear—expands upon the Sophiological ideas and imagery that he used in his private discussions of the sonata's second theme, reviewed above. The narrative itself should not shock anyone with familiarity of Bely's writings. In summary, the poetic subject cries out to God, finds the life-giving light of prayer in the despair of night, and, striving through chaos rather than turning away from it, finally perceives the Face of Sophia *within* the snowstorm, and celebrates the new dawn through the “chaotically joyful” song and dance of snow flurries. All of these images are linked to specific gestures or characteristics in the music. This Sophiological reading, with its attendant symbols of the dawn, night, chaos, and the snowstorm, places Medtner's music at the very center of the religious *and* artistic concerns of the Symbolists in 1903.

In the musicological literature Bely's essay has received some attention, no doubt due to its discussion of real music and its programmatic title—tantalizingly suggesting that therein one might learn what theurgy is and how it relates to real artworks. And Bely tries to oblige by offering one of the most well-organized and easy-to-read pieces he ever wrote, complete with several clear definitions of theurgy. And yet, the essay has not elicited much sympathy by those scholars who, interested in music and Symbolism more broadly, try to account for it. Indeed, the conclusion is swiftly reached that Bely must have conceived of music so generally or idealistically that it did not really matter which particular piece of music he bothered talking about. As Richard Taruskin concluded, in Bely's writings on music, “we shall search in vain for any specific insight into its

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<sup>84</sup> Ironically, this same title was used for a set piano miniatures by Richard Strauss (Op. 9) composed in 1884. Strauss would soon become the Medtner's *bete noire* for his modernist emphasis on colorful orchestration and harmonic extravagances.

<sup>85</sup> Flamm, *Medtner*, 358-59.

powers.”<sup>86</sup> Simon Morrison calls the essay, “the most perversely intriguing Symbolist rumination on music,” but complains of the same problem Taruskin had, i.e., that the Symbolists cared only about “*Musik*, the metaphysical experience, as opposed to *music*, the art or craft of composition.” They both accuse Bely of giving too little musical detail, rendering the essay unhelpful for the investigation of compositional practices or in assisting with hermeneutical approaches.<sup>87</sup> After reading the essay, neither scholar is any closer to understanding what makes Medtner’s Op. 1 theurgic, and Morrison simply throws in the towel. He turns to a passage from an unpublished doctoral dissertation for a solution to the puzzle—unfortunately what he quotes is nonsensical.<sup>88</sup> Even Rebecca Mitchell, a historian well versed in Symbolist literature, makes no effort to explain Bely’s Sophiological interpretation of the music, simply noting that he “celebrates the ability of Nikolay’s music to overcome the ‘division’ of modern life.”<sup>89</sup>

The reasons for this failure to come to grips with the essay are two-fold. The most obvious one is that the entire religious-philosophical framework within which Bely worked is unfamiliar to most scholars, even to some specialists of Russian Symbolist literature (who often refuse to engage with Bely’s mystical “trappings” despite the fact that his entire oeuvre cannot be understood otherwise).<sup>90</sup> Unsurprisingly, confusion over what the word “theurgy” means reigns supreme,

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<sup>86</sup> Taruskin, *Traditions*, 437.

<sup>87</sup> Morrison, *Symbolist*, 8-10.

<sup>88</sup> The passage by Ryan Rowen appears on Morrison, *Symbolist*, 9. Rowen accounts for the “theurgic” nature of the first piece by claiming the key of four sharps (E major) represents the cross and the use of triplets represents the trinity. I know of no evidence to suggest Medtner ever understood triplets to represent the trinity; indeed, it is hard to imagine a working composer could invest something so common with such a lofty meaning. Medtner did have a sort of key Symbolism, but the most “divine” key was C-major due to it having no accidentals. Keys extremely distant from C major, like E-flat minor (a favorite key), could also gain symbolic meaning due to their distance. However, either way, E-major likely had no significant meaning for Medtner, and there is certainly no evidence to suggest that it would.

<sup>89</sup> Mitchell, *Nietzsche’s Orphans*, 130. It must be said that in this essay, Bely does not talk of overcoming a “division” of modern life, although, as an interpretation of his apocalyptic thinking, it is not unreasonable. Mitchell makes no mention at all of Bely’s Sophiological interpretation of Medtner’s music.

<sup>90</sup> One of the most prominent examples of this in Russian literary studies is Leonid Livak’s *In Search of Russian Modernism* (2018), wherein he repeatedly claims that Bely’s essays on Symbolism are incomprehensible and that modern day scholars should stop using the term “Symbolism” in favor of “modernism.” To Bely and many others during the first decade of the century, “modernism” was largely a pejorative term indicating valueless products of the secularized, commercialized, individualistic West.

magnified by a typical lack of attention paid to Sophia and her centralizing importance. For example, Richard Taruskin, in his seminal work on the cultural contexts that informed Stravinsky's early career, defines "theurgy" as "a divine agency of revelation and prophecy and a path to a transcendent metaphysical truth."<sup>91</sup> This definition is misleading as theurgy (to the Symbolists) is a mystical creative act undertaken in the real world by real human agency. As such, theurgy is governed just as much by the rules and traditions of human culture as it is by prophetic intuition. In Bely's words from the section of his essay dealing with Medtner, the theurgist must be "ordained" within the "mainstream of humanity's spiritual culture," which "supports and nourishes the creator with the consciousness of communal goals and communal paths shared with the greatest spiritual leaders of culture."<sup>92</sup> When Taruskin instead writes that the theurgist desires "the overthrow of tradition, the freeing of technique, and the dissolution of 'form,'" he is clearly not drawing from Bely's essay (which he does cite). Morrison simply dismisses Bely's theurgy as part of what he considers to be "the Symbolist caricature of serious religious thought."<sup>93</sup> But, to reiterate my basic claim: Symbolism cannot be understood as anything other than religious thought (that took itself very seriously).<sup>94</sup>

The second reason why Bely's essay has evoked such bewilderment has to do with the issue of prestige—or, Medtner's lack of it. The simple fact that Bely praised Medtner as his theurgic composer of choice, itself condemned the essay in the eyes of musicologists—to whom Medtner has long been a non-entity. With no justification, Taruskin states that Bely's "improbable focus" on Medtner could "only puzzle a musician."<sup>95</sup> His amusingly written dismissal of the composer is based

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<sup>91</sup> Taruskin, *Traditions*, I, 437.

<sup>92</sup> Bely, "O teurgii," 382, my translation.

<sup>93</sup> Morrison, *Symbolism*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Mitchell has a discussion of Solovyov's theurgy on pages 32-33 in her *Nietzsche's Orphans*, although without the presence of Sophia—a crucial component of Solovyov's mystical thought.

<sup>95</sup> Taruskin, *Traditions*, 781, 437. Taruskin does not show any specific knowledge of Medtner's music in this text.

entirely on Medtner's reputation, his absence in the traditional Russian music historiography, and an ensuing assumption of insignificance:

Consider Andrey Bely, who alone among the theurgic Symbolists possessed some technical knowledge of music, and who was the one most inclined self-consciously to preach (and even, as in his verbal "Symphonies," to practice) formal correspondences between poetry and the art of tones. Bely, it turns out, had no interest at all in the poet-musician whom Vyacheslav Ivanov called "the ultimate artistic genius of our time." [i.e. Scriabin] ... If it astonishes us that he chose as a paradigm an innocent, early, and innocuous set of character pieces (*Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1) by Nikolay Medtner, the poor man's Rachmaninoff, that only goes to show that for a theurgic Symbolist even a tepid piece of music was warmer than a hot poem.<sup>96</sup>

Surely Bely should have written about Scriabin instead if "kindred theurgic spirits inevitably recognize each other"? To Taruskin, the answer is clear—they do not.<sup>97</sup> This leads him to dismiss Bely's statements on music as irrelevant nonsense or as motivated by personal loyalties. The fact that Ivanov began writing about Scriabin only after his death in 1915 and Bely wrote his essay in 1903 seems not to matter (and one wonders why Ivanov's essays taken seriously and Bely's not, especially when only the latter held "technical knowledge of music").<sup>98</sup>

The idea that Scriabin should have been the "natural" choice for Bely just does not fit the facts: in 1903, Scriabin was not closely associated with any Symbolists and, let us not forget, was eight years older than Bely. Scriabin (who had been publishing compositions for over ten years at this point) must have seemed to Bely like a member of the previous, pre-"dawns" generation. Scriabin had just quit his job as a piano professor in the Moscow conservatory with his eyes set on an early "retirement" in Switzerland, and would live abroad during Symbolisms' heyday from 1904 to 1910. Furthermore, Scriabin's own non-Christian mysticism did not closely resemble that developed

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<sup>96</sup> Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 317-18.

<sup>97</sup> Taruskin, *Traditions*, I, 782.

<sup>98</sup> Morrison, on page 11 of *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*, claims that Ivanov wrote extensively about Scriabin in his 1910 article, "The Testaments of Symbolism." There is no mention of Scriabin in that article. Ivanov did not become acquainted with Scriabin until he moved to Moscow in 1913. Ivanov's fascination with Scriabin conflicts with the retrospective humanism he cultivated at the same time. Indeed, Michael Wachtel suggests that Ivanov thought of Scriabin as an artist beyond the bounds of Symbolism. See his commentary to Ivanov's 1915 essay, "Scriabin's View of Art," in *Selected Essays*, 312-313.



by the Symbolists or Solovyov.<sup>99</sup> Morrison writes that, “from its 1903 conception to its ultimate abandonment, the *Mysterium* did not and could not exist in this world.”<sup>100</sup> Scriabin’s ambition to transcend the material world and usher in the spiritual transformation of humanity is quite different from Solovyov’s conception of theurgy as the gradual spiritualization of the material world and of humanity. Indeed, the material world is the object of theurgic creation, which seeks to incarnate the divine within it. As I hope to have made clear by now, Scriabin was in fact an unlikely target for Bely’s praise.

“On Theurgy” was written under the exuberant sway of music. Bely recognized the magical hold it has over him: “Music is real, elemental magic.” He thought that humanity was reaching a full understanding of its power, and, therefore, that “the ability to spontaneously influence, subjugate, and enchant is undoubtedly growing.”<sup>101</sup> But, magic is not what Bely wants. Even if all great music is magical, he says, “then not all of it is theurgic.” This is dangerous because magic has the ability to “control the elements through the sounds of the soul.” But, to engage in such practice for oneself and not for the Glory of God is “a sin and a horror.” True theurgy is magic “addressed to the Lord.”<sup>102</sup> The theurgist, crying out to the Lord, transforms art into prayer, imbuing it with magical power over the soul. The theurgic artist need not adopt a religious subject matter, but must harness for their purposes the power of prayer: “The presence of this touch of theurgy determines the

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<sup>99</sup> For a discussion of Scriabin, see Mitchell, *Orphans*, 68-73. In the 1910s, many critics would begin to describe Scriabin’s music in theurgic terms, even if his own personal brand of mysticism was far from Solovyov’s conception of theurgy. See Mitchell, “Scriabin and the Russian Silver Age,” in *Demystifying Scriabin*, 26-45.

<sup>100</sup> Morrison, *Symbolism*, 147.

<sup>101</sup> Bely, “O teurgii,” 374. “Музыка это действительная, стихийная магия. Музыка доселе была впереди европейского человечества. Быть может, лишь в настоящую минуту оно начинает вплотную подходить к музыке, вбирая в себя ее стихийную магическую мощь. Способность стихийно влиять, подчинять, зачаровывать несомненно растет. Так будет и впредь.”

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., beginning of section IV, 376. Bely thus calls theurgy “white magic.” “Если всякая глубокая музыка, так или иначе воплощаемая, в основе своей магична, то далеко не всякая теургична. Теургия с этой точки зрения является как бы белой магией. Если говорится пророкам, ходящим перед Господом: «Утешайте, утешайте народ мой», то, наоборот, к магам, владеющим тайной составления «неежедневных сочетаний» повседневных слов, но не обращенным к Господу, относится грозное: «Терафимы говорят пустое, и вещуны видят ложное...», т. е. умение магически управлять стихиями посредством звучаний души не во славу Божию — грех и ужас.” In 1909, he would return to the topic of magic, publishing perhaps his most famous essay, “The Magic of Words.”

miraculousness of some exceptional artistic passages found in secular writers, for example, in Dostoevsky, Gogol, Goethe, because in every prayer there is a possibility of receiving the miraculous power of God.”<sup>103</sup> As such, theurgy has the potential for far greater power in comparison to magic which is not addressed to God: “The strength and advantage of theurgy over magic lies in the fact that the former is entirely permeated with ardent love and the highest hope for God’s mercy. That is why the consolation of magic, no matter its power, is always the consolation of emptiness.”<sup>104</sup>

But how can the artist imbue their art with prayer; to properly orient it towards the Lord? To do so, Bely says, one must reveal Eternity within it, to reveal the Face of art—Sophia. To illustrate this idea, he decides to analyze and compare the work of two different artists from two different centuries: first the poet Mikhail Lermontov and then the composer Nikolay Medtner. In Lermontov, Bely perceives a fiery magic, but one which always turns away from true theurgy and becomes hopeless. Theurgy demands a kind of eternal, sacred love for God. This divine love must supersede Eros. In practical terms, this means transforming love poetry into the expression of a generalized, symbolic, sacred love.<sup>105</sup> Lermontov, in his love poetry, reveals his search for Eternal love over and above human love:

The search for eternal love is the feeling that made Lermontov turn towards his beloved with a request to destroy his hopes “*with a cold gaze*.”<sup>106</sup> Fear and awareness that every earthly love is transient, together with the search for a reflection of Eternity in a loved one, liberated by memory from the shackles of the accidental and transient—in Lermontov this results in the combination of the search for *eternal love* with the search for *love in Eternity*. From here,

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<sup>103</sup> Bely, “О теургии,” section II. “Присутствием этого налета теургии определяется чудодейственность некоторых исключительных художественных мест, встречающихся у светских писателей, например у Достоевского, Гоголя, Гёте, потому что во всякой молитве заключена возможность получения этой чудодейственной силы Божией...”

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., end of section IV. “Сила и преимущество теургии перед магией заключается в том, что первая вся пронизана пламенной любовью и высочайшей надеждой на милость Божию. Вот почему утешение магией, какою бы последняя ни обладала мощью, есть опять-таки утешение пустотою...”

<sup>105</sup> Love poetry treated in this way is one of the major ways in which “Sophia” is imagined by the Symbolists. Another is through nature poetry, i.e. pastoral tropes of nymphs and beautiful nature—this approaches Sophia in her guise as the “World Soul”. A third way is to employ biblical imagery like the dawn and the “Face in the Sun” to express Sophia directly and in more overtly religious terms.

<sup>106</sup> Bely here refers to Lermontov’s 1830 poem, “Спасибо” (“Thank you”), where the poet enthusiastically thanks a woman for shattering his hopes and dreams with a cold glare.

there is only one more step—and the beloved creature becomes a bottomless symbol, a window into which looks in an Eternal, Radiant Friend—the Beloved...<sup>107</sup>

Bely is disappointed in Lermontov, however. He did not take that final step—thinking his vision of Eternity was “incorporeal,” Lermontov “breaks off the shoots of his insights, which could have turned into lush plants touching the heavens.” As such he remained a “disappointed demonist” [i.e. magician] and failed to turn into Pushkin’s famous “poor knight” who saw “one vision, incomprehensible to the mind.”<sup>108</sup>

Here, Bely quotes from a poem that serves as one his major Sophianic creeds and a good practical example of the kind of love poetry he demands from Lermontov, Pushkin’s “The Poor Knight”—about a knight who crusades for Mary, the Mother of God, rather than for any earthly maidens like the other knights. In battle the paladin yells a Latin phrase popular invoked by the Symbolists (and a code for Sophia): “*Lumen coelum, sancta Rosa!*” [“Light of Heaven, holy Rose!”].<sup>109</sup> In the poem the knight prays only to Mary and refuses all other religious sacraments. Thus, at death Satan is ready to take his soul to hell for his doctrinal sins, but Mary intercedes and welcomes him to her kingdom. To Bely, Mary is Sophia, as he confirms in a letter to Emil, “I knew what I was doing when I confused Sophia with Maria, but in the plane on which I stood (symbolic, not embodied), *one can and should* confuse Sophia with Maria.”<sup>110</sup> Medtner used this poem as an inscription to his “Fairy Tale,” Op. 34/4. This piece easily accommodates a Sophiological reading, as it features one of

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<sup>107</sup> Bely, “O teurgii,” section IV. “Искание вечной любви вот то чувство, которое заставляло Лермонтова обращаться к любимой женщине с просьбой «убить холодным взглядом» надежды. Боязнь и сознание, что каждая земная любовь преходяща вместе с исканием в любимом существе отблеска Вечности, освобождаемого памятью из-под оков случайного и преходящего, все это сочетает у Лермонтова искание вечной любви с исканием любви у Вечности. Отсюда еще один шаг и любимое существо становится лишь бездонным символом, окном, в которое заглядывает какая-то Вечная, Лучезарная Подруга - Возлюбленная...”

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. “Если бы Лермонтов сознал, что его виденье не бесплотно, а бесплотна та полумаска, из-под которой блеснул ему луч жизни вечной, то из разочарованного демониста обратился бы в того рыцаря бедного, которого Пушкин заставил увидеть «одно виденье, непостижное уму», и уже, очевидно, без всякой полумаски. Но этого не было с Лермонтовым и вот он обрывает ростки своих прозрений, могущие обратиться в пышные растения, вершиной касающиеся небес.”

<sup>109</sup> This is also a saying associated with the Rosicrucians, and Bely would participate in the early twentieth-century revival of this medieval Christian esotericism.

<sup>110</sup> Bely to EKM, 10 November 1903 (letter #54).

Medtner's ecstatic codas where the formerly minor-mode musical material transforms in the light of the major mode, accompanied by the ringing of bells. In general, Medtner's "knightly" pieces fit in easily with Bely's and Blok's frequent image of the medieval knight as a servant of Sophia (derived from Solovyov), and, thus should not be considered idiosyncratic to the composer, but part of Symbolist practice.<sup>111</sup>

Bely demands from Lermontov *one more step*: one which would have resulted in his recognition in "the light breath of the breeze the dawn greeting of Her, Whom he had sought all his life and almost found so many times."<sup>112</sup> Here Bely quotes from one of the primary biblical sources of Sophia, The Wisdom of Solomon, in which "Wisdom" is referred to in explicitly feminine language. This passage is worth reproducing because it presents one of the clearest possible definitions of how Sophia enables humans to engage in theurgic creation:

For she is the reflection of eternal light, the pure mirror of the active power of God and the image of his goodness. Although she is only one, she can do all things; while unchanging herself, she makes all things renewed. Generation after generation she enters into holy souls, and turns them into friends of God and prophets. [...] She is more beautiful than the sun and outshines every constellation of the stars. In comparison with the light she is higher...<sup>113</sup>

Sophia enters into souls, giving humanity a reflection of divine power. She turns regular folk into prophets, i.e. artists into theurgists. To Bely, the artist must recognize Sophia's presence in the soul and then, explicitly or implicitly, address their creations to Her.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> This is especially apparent in his early Op. 14 set of two "Fairy Tales." The first, entitled "Ophelia's Song," invoking Shakespeare's Ophelia—a common name for Sophia used by Alexander Blok—is followed by Medtner's spectacular "Ritterzug" (procession of the knights).

<sup>112</sup> Bely, "O teurgii," section IV. "Еще шаг, еще один только шаг Лермонтов узнал бы в легком дуновении ветерка заревой привет Той, Которую он искал всю жизнь и столько раз почти находил..."

<sup>113</sup> Wisdom 7:26-27, 29. New Catholic Bible translation, slightly altered to fit Bely's quote.

<sup>114</sup> Bely often lists all of his favorite names for Sophia in one sentence. Here he does so in his discussion of Lermontov (in section IV of "O teurgii"): "She is the idea of the universe, the Soul of the world, whom Solovyov calls Sophia, the Wisdom of God and Who embodies the Divine Logos... Medieval hymns are addressed to Her: '*Mater Dei sine spina—peccatorum medicinal...*'" Bely mined many western European religious and mystical traditions for material, as his use of Latin shows.

Unfortunately, in the end, Lermontov always turns away from Sophia. But, Bely is quick to say that this was not entirely his fault. She had not fully revealed himself to him. But, there is way young artists can avoid falling into the same error:

She, whom he sought all his life, did not reveal herself to him completely, but did not remain a mask either. She was hidden from him by only a *half-mask*. What Lermontov did not resolve calls out in our souls. We must either close our eyes to the spirit's urge for eternal love, or, tearing off the half-mask, find Eternity, so that at last a "*vision incomprehensible to the mind*" may flash upon us poor knights.<sup>115</sup>

Bely clearly viewed himself and his friends of the "dawn" as knights of Sophia. Theurgists who reveal the image of Her in their art. He now turns from Lermontov to the work of one of those fellow knights, Medtner, and his *Stimmungsbilder*. To Bely, the eight works of the album reveal "the freshness and density of remarkable talent and impeccable completeness of form." But, more importantly, they are "characterized by their theurgism."<sup>116</sup>

Bely bestows his highest honor on this "composer-theurgist" in whom he sees so much of himself, his desires, and his "awaiting moods." Crucially, he sees such a resemblance to Medtner precisely because of the composer's lack of modernist experimentation. The boldly novel use of the everyday and familiar is the key to make magic happen—not the anxious desire to create a new language. The properly new can only be expressed in the familiar:

Here you will not find any cacophony, or morbidly nervous twitchiness, or the gaudy dilution so characteristic of our young and sometimes talented composers. The form is crystal clear everywhere, and yet the ideas touched upon are completely new and desirable. Our expectations, our struggles are crystallized in their typical features. Listening to what sounds to us in the works of Mr. Medtner, we involuntarily sort out our feelings, using the composer's ideas as a kind of spiritual guidance.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Bely, "O teurgii," end of section IV. "Та, которую он всю жизнь искал, не открылась ему до конца, но и не осталась в маске. Вся мучительность его порываний к Вечности заключается в том, что некоторые черты Ее были доступны ему. Она была закрыта от него только полумаской. Неразрешенное Лермонтовым вызывает в наших душах. Мы или должны закрыть глаза на прорывание духа к вечной любви, или, сорвав полумаску, найти Вечность, чтобы наконец блеснуло нам - бедным рыцарям «виденье, непостижное уму»..."

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., beginning of section V.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. "Здесь не найдешь ни какофонии, ни болезненно-нервной издерганности, ни аляповатой разжиженности, столь характерной для наших молодых и подчас талантливых композиторов. Форма везде кристально чиста, а между тем затрагиваемые идеи совершенно новы и желанны. Наши ожидания, борения наши кристаллизуются в их типических чертах. Прислушиваясь к тому, что звучит нам в произведениях г.

Medtner has a theurgic effect on Bely and, precisely for that reason, he wants to compare the composer's music to Lermontov's almost-but-not-quite theurgic verse. It is unclear to what extent Bely's decision was fueled by the fact that Medtner himself used inscriptions from Lermontov in the set. As Christoph Flamm shows, Medtner worked closely with Lermontov's poetry as he composed his earliest music—in addition to the two poems which appear as epigraphs in Op. 1, Medtner set two other Lermontov poems to music (one of which was published as Op. 3/1) and had the famous “Rusalka” in mind for his Op. 2/1.<sup>118</sup>

This means that both Bely and Medtner were both in the thrall of Lermontov when they met in fall of 1902, but it is not clear the extent to which they may have discussed interpretations of the poetry. Nevertheless, Bely uses references to Lermontov to explicate his narrative reading of Medtner's Op. 1—one that fits perfectly well with the two epigraphs in the score. Overall, Bely's narrative closely fits the actual ordering of the pieces in the set to such an extent that it is certainly plausible Medtner viewed his own music along similar lines. Let us examine the set now.

### Theurgic Beginnings

Here we have youthful works that, despite their occasional clunkiness, show many of the stylistic features what would come to define Medtner's music.<sup>119</sup> The set already amply shows Medtner's perhaps most distinguishing trait as a composer—the ability to write in an astonishingly large variety of moods, styles, and forms. Indeed, most of the pieces do not belong to any kind of

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Метнера, мы невольно разбираемся в наших чувствованиях, пользуясь идеями композитора как своего рода духовным руководством.”

<sup>118</sup> See the extensive discussion in Flamm, *Medtner*, 144-162. In 1903 Medtner “abandoned” Lermontov, but would return to the poet in his late works which show a rapprochement with his youth in general.

<sup>119</sup> The pieces are often dated to 1896-1897, i.e. when Medtner was only sixteen or so. As Christoph Flamm shows, however, such an early date can possibly apply to only certain preliminary sketches. The album represents a selection and refinement of the mass of early material composed through 1901 (notably a set of (unpublished) preludes from 1897 contains earlier versions of some of the final works). Medtner kept working on the set through 1902, which should thus be considered the terminal year of composition. See Flamm, *Medtner*, 358-59.

schematic form, testifying to Medtner's already highly developed formal creativity. They exhibit a boldness of conception that belies their youthfulness. Despite its combination of pieces conceived of in different years, the album is not randomly assembled. The order of the eight pieces is governed by key relationships, as well as stylistic and programmatic factors (See the Table 2.1 for piece titles and keys). These relationships indicate a deeper substructure. The pieces are organized in pairs related by key. All piece pairs after the opening (so, III & IV, V & VI, and VII & VIII) have the first piece in a minor key and the second in its relative major.

Table 2.1. Nikolay Medtner, *Acht Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1, Overview.

Piece Designation	Key (secondary key)	Lermontov Inscription
I. Prologue	E-maj	"An Angel flew across the midnight sky and he sang a quiet song..."
II. Allegro con impeto	G#-min (B-maj)	
III. Maestoso freddo	Eb-min (Db-maj)	
IV. Andantino con moto	Gb-maj (Bb-min)	
V. Andante	Bb-min (D-min)	"The blizzard is roaring and snow is falling, but through the noise of the wind a distant ringing sometimes breaks through, humming—that's echo of a funeral."
VI. Allegro con humore	Db-maj (Bb-min)	
VII. Allegro con ira	F#-min	
VIII. Allegro con grazia (quasi valse)	A-maj	

Medtner places an epigraph by Lermontov on the first and fifth pieces, separating the album into two distinct halves. These first and fifth pieces, related in key by a tritone, feature diametrically opposed content, as defined by the inscriptions: the first poem depicts an angel singing while bringing a young soul to earth and the second depicts funeral bells ringing through the wail of a blizzard (indicating the opposition—a soul ascending to heaven). Additionally, certain pieces share motivic similarities; for example, the fifth and sixth works have a similar quick triplet piano figuration, both evoking the snowstorm mentioned in the Lermontov inscription, but in different moods. Furthermore (and this will be important for Bely's reading), the final three pieces are all

short and dance-like (performed at various shades of “Allegro”) and feature the kinds of rhythmic and metrical complexities that are typical of Medtner’s dance music. We can thus assume that Medtner took the precise ordering of the pieces seriously, likely to support a narrative reading of the album similar to that which Bely supplies.

The first piece, the “Prologue,” has received some attention in the Medtner literature due to its epigraph from Lermontov’s poem “Angel,” which he later placed at the head of his book. In fact, this piece is a word-for-word setting of the poem, and Medtner would later go on to publish it again in revised form with the vocal part and text added.<sup>120</sup> Like all Symbolists, Medtner communicated his aesthetic and spiritual ideas through quotations of poetry, and this poem is a profound expression of those ideas. Unfortunately, however, commentary on this piece has been plagued by several misconceptions and factual errors; Bely’s commentary will help us clear up one of them. The first misconception is one of those classic “biographer’s myths” that gets endlessly recycled by scholars looking for a fun story (but who should know better). As the story goes, Medtner only “discovered” after the fact that the melody line perfectly fits the text.<sup>121</sup> As Christoph Flamm shows, however, Medtner actually wrote a draft setting of the poem first, which he later turned into the solo piano version published in Op. 1.<sup>122</sup> This fact explains the form of the final piece—a through composed setting of the four quatrains.<sup>123</sup> The first quatrain features the opening melody played twice (with variations), corresponding to the two couplets. The second quatrain follows suit with its own melody. These melodies are recapitulated in the fourth quatrain, one for each couplet. The third

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<sup>120</sup> Published by Jurgenson in 1909 as Op. 1bis. Medtner transposed the key down an augmented 2<sup>nd</sup>, to D-flat major, probably to place it in a more comfortably vocal range. He also changed notes in the vocal line in the third quatrain.

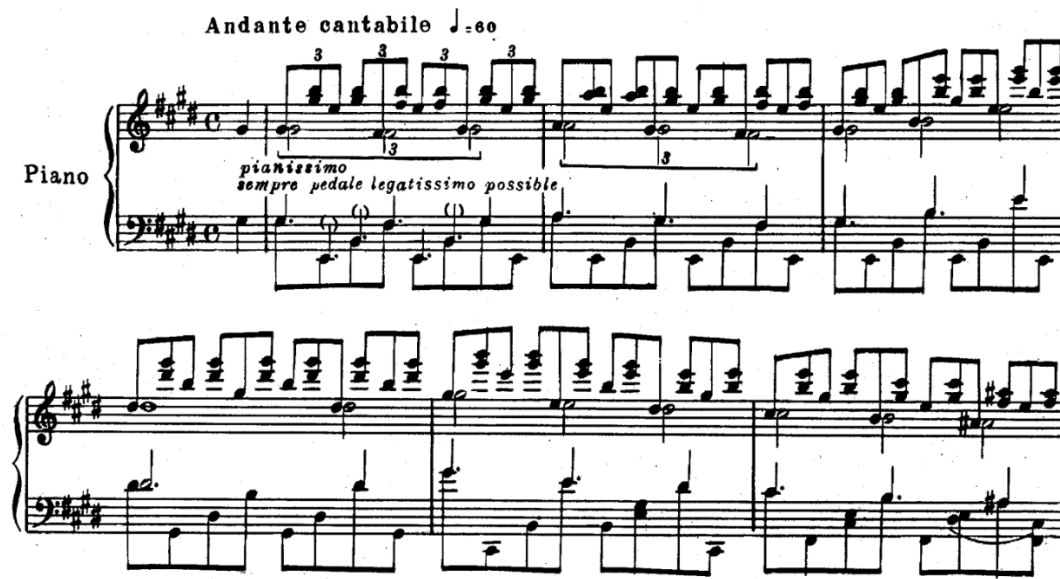
<sup>121</sup> This myth originated in Bernard Pinsonneault’s 1956 French-language biography of Medtner. It was reproduced in Martyn, *Medtner*, 17, and even in Mitchell, *Nietzsche’s Orphans*, 118.

<sup>122</sup> See Flamm, *Medtner*, 358. He even reproduces a facsimile of the early draft on page 662.

<sup>123</sup> Rebecca Mitchell’s assertion that this first piece is in a “simple ABA form” is incorrect, as there is no self-contained “B” section in the piece. See Mitchell, *Nietzsche’s Orphans*, 116-119, for her comments on the work.



quatrain, turbulent and modulating, develops its own material before retransitioning back to the tonic.<sup>124</sup>



Example 2.6. Medtner, *Acht Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1, I. “Prologue,” mm. 1-6.

This piece is often held up as a prime example of Medtner’s characteristic rhythmic complexity (see Example 2.6). Indeed, the score itself is eye-popping, with four different rhythmic subdivisions operating simultaneously: eighth-note triplets, half-note triplet, straight eighth notes, and the irregular subdivision dotted quarter + dotted quarter + plus quarter [3+3+2]. Unfortunately, however, this is really just an illusion based on overly pedantic notation. In practical terms there are only two competing rhythms: following the groupings of figurations, the pianist will feel the right hand in three groups of four and the left hand in three groups of 3+3+2. The 4/4 bar is thus subdivided into three beats, but the beats in each hand do not align after the first. Indeed, the left hand lags further and further on beats 2 and 3. The left hand melody should thus sound as a

<sup>124</sup> The form could thus be schematized as AA’BB’CDAB, with each letter (typically) eight bars.

lengthening echo of the right hand.<sup>125</sup> Overall, this calculated rhythmic effect cannot be said to be characteristic of Medtner's compositional practice, as he otherwise shuns such "artificial" schemes. Indeed, Medtner was often lauded for his rhythmic ingenuity, but his creations tend to be fluid and nuanced without the repetitive or algorithmic schemes that characterize his countryman Stravinsky. The later dances in the album are more characteristic of Medtner's mature rhythmic practice.

Now we have arrived at the third and final misconception of this work, and one that Bely can help us with—i.e. what does it mean? The poem which it sets, Lermontov's "Angel," is about an angel singing a heavenly song while carrying a young soul down to earth. On earth, the suffering soul can still feel within itself the sound of that heavenly song, "wordless, but alive." Trying to find "songs of the earth" that could rival the heavenly song. Languishing on earth, and "full of wondrous desire," the soul can never be satisfied with the "dull songs of the earth."<sup>126</sup> Not surprisingly, commentators focus on the "heavenly song" aspect of the poem—typically reading it as an example of his religious-aesthetic theory of the "initial song" that resounds in the human soul and of which the composer must contemplate in order to create true music. Thus, the poem is considered to be the "basis on which Medtner's lifelong aesthetic philosophy rested,"<sup>127</sup> and the song is taken to be a musical depiction of the heavenly song itself. While the former claim is indisputable, the latter claim demands further investigation. Here is Bely's own interpretation of the piece in "On Theurgy":

The first number of the album expresses precisely the feeling that pushed Lermontov to write his famous lines:

I go out alone on the road.  
The flinty path shines through the fog.  
The night is quiet, the desert listens to God,  
And star speaks to star.

But this dichotomy between nature, solemnly calmed in the embrace of the night's dark blue ether, and the soul standing above the abysses, stirs somewhere deep, deep, when you hear

<sup>125</sup> This extremely nuanced effect requires utmost precision from the performer and has thus never been properly captured in recordings. Like with many of the pieces in this first album, the ideas are interesting, but the pieces risk coming off as clunky if not performed with the utmost nuance.

<sup>126</sup> Quotes taken from Michael Wachtel's translation. See Wachtel, *Introduction to Russian Poetry*, 85.

<sup>127</sup> Martyn, *Medtner*, 17. Mitchell also makes the same claim, discussing Medtner's ideas in the context of Platonic theories of remembrance—see Mitchell, *Orphans*, 118.

the flowing chords, as if hovering in the sky... As if two air currents collided in the heights, and then came forth waves. Yearning sorrow frozen in the depths. It is lulled by ethereal-flowing waves, washing away every grief. Perhaps the line of pain was crossed... Someone could not bear it and was already sobbing... Tears were already clouding their vision... Someone threw their head back to the sky and froze, seeing that “*an angel was flying across the midnight sky and singing a quiet song*”... And the soul asked to fly, even if it was threatened by the stirring chaos.<sup>128</sup>

Musically speaking, Bely takes note of the rhythmic complexities and the atmospheric effects they create (“flowing chords, hovering in the sky... currents colliding in the heights,” etc.). Notably, Bely associates the music with a *different* Lermontov poem (although he also references the epigraph in the quoted italics). This other poem has a similar setting: nocturnal imagery of the clouds and the heavens. Yet, here, the subject is a human being standing firmly on the earth, longing for heaven, rather than an Angel carrying down a human soul for a “world of sadness and tears.” Indeed, Bely’s interpretation emphasizes the fundamentally *tragic* nature of Lermontov’s poem, as the soul is cruelly separated from heaven by the angel, condemned to earthly suffering until death. Bely hears this pain in the music, one which promotes a longing for the heavens—one that stimulates in the soul the desire to fly aloft, even if it means having to come face to face with chaos.

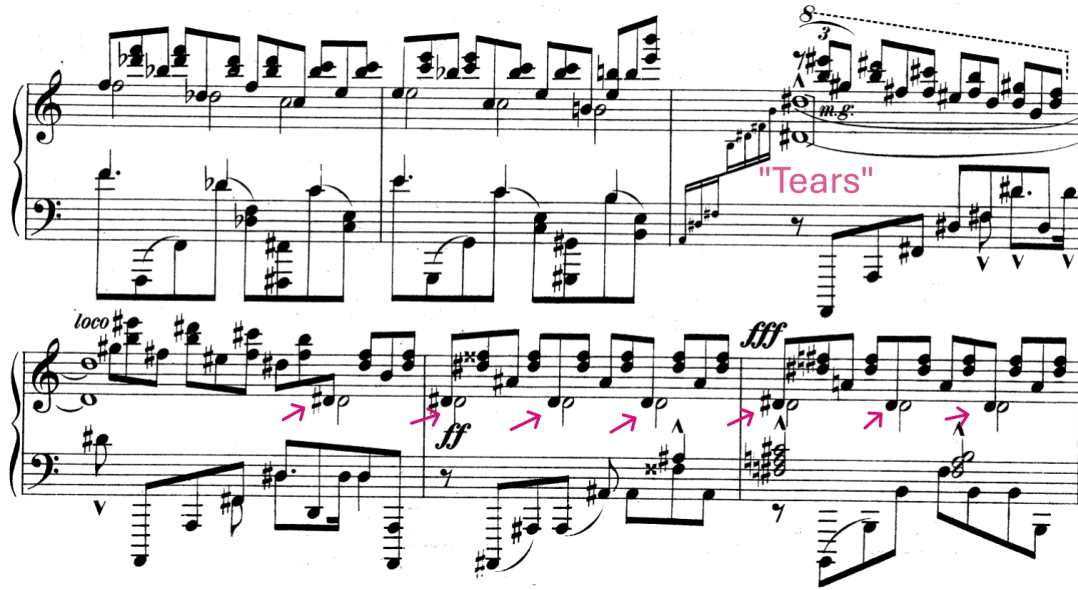
Musical details in the text setting indicate that Medtner held a similarly tragic sense of the poem. Take the setting of the poem’s third stanza: “He carried in his embraces a young soul / For the world of sadness and tears; / And the sound of his song in the young soul / Remained—wordless but alive.”<sup>129</sup> Here, Medtner builds up to a tragic climax right on “tears.” What Medtner

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<sup>128</sup> Bely, “O teurgii,” Section V, in *Manifesty*, 384. Bely quotes an untitled Lermontov poem from 1841. “Первый номер альбома выражает как раз то чувство, которое заставило Лермонтова написать свои знаменитые строки: ‘Выхожу один я на дорогу./ Сквозь туман кремнистый путь блестит./ Ночь тиха, пустыня внемлет Богу,/ И звезда с звездою говорит.’ Но это развоение между природой, торжественно успокоенной в объятиях ночного, темно-синего эфира, и душой, стоящей над провалами, шевелится где-то глубоко, глубоко, когда слышишь плавные, будто парящие в небе, аккорды... Как будто в вышине столкнулись два воздушных течения, и вот пошли волны. Тоска замерла в глубине. Она забаякана эфирно-плавными волнами, омывающими всякое горе. Быть может, перейдена черта боли... Кто-то не выдержал и уже рыдал... Уже слезы туманили взор... Кто-то опрокинул голову к небу, да так и замер, видя, что «по небу полуночи ангел летел и тихую песню он пел»... И душа запросилась лететь, хотя бы ей угрожал зашевелившийся хаос.”

<sup>129</sup> Translation by Wachtel, *Introduction*, 85.

does next is surprising: for the following couplet about the resonance in the soul of the heavenly song, “wordless but alive,” Medtner makes no attempt at all to illustrate such a song. Instead, he does something frankly bizarre—he sets the entire couplet on one single note with no change whatsoever. You cannot get less “songlike” than that.<sup>130</sup> Under this insistent note, the left hand presents some faint motivic echoes of the earlier melody, in the form of chords (Example 2.7).



Example 2.7. Nikolay Medtner, *Acht Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1, I. “Prologue,” mm. 37-42 (repeated notes pointed to with arrows).

The drama of Medtner’s setting thus arises from the stark difference between the exquisite and ethereal opening music and the tragic climax in which the state of humanity as fallen away from the divine and its song is emphasized. The heavenly song remains a faint memory present in the soul and constantly threatened to be drowned out by the “dull sounds of the earth.” Only the quasi-ascetic practice of the composer-theurgist can infuse earthly songs with divine beauty. Even so, the gulf between the heavenly and earthly can only instill a painful yearning.

<sup>130</sup> In the 1908 song setting, Medtner gives for these bars an actual melody (although still chant-like) as an *ossia*, presumably to liven up the piece. In the original Jurgenson edition, Medtner also sets the first couplet of the third quatrain with a single repetitive note as well (mm. 33-36). The melody was changed in the collected Soviet edition.

Bely continues his narrative with this yearning of the soul to fly, to unite with God. The second *Stimmungsbild* is a bizarre piece where the music repeatedly and violently lurches towards a cadence. This fatalistic striving is briefly interrupted by a contrasting melody in the relative major, one which, however, is forced back into the minor after only four bars (the promise of a B section is quickly obliterated, leaving just a small fragment). But Bely notes this small section, calling it a “*white vein*” (the color “white” is, for Bely, heavily invested with Symbolism of the divine—as part of his extensive theosophical color symbolics):

The intense power of the soul rushing into space, flying through chaos and abysses to God, reaching colossal strength... There is something incredible in the titanism of aspirations—titanism that has not rejected God. Here, some *white vein* clearly shines through, affirming and not destroying hopes. Here, at the moment of the greatest tragic tension, wings grow, carrying away.<sup>131</sup>

An “obvious” interpretation of this piece would be the suffering of earthly souls as they continually and fruitlessly strive until death (hence the unusually high level of repetition). Bely, clearly inspired by his overtly Christian reading of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* and the idea of the *Übermensch*,<sup>132</sup> instead perceives “titanism” in the soul’s aspiration to “colossal strength” and to eventual unity with God—notably, not “titanism” in the more typical sense of overthrowing the gods. The “white vein” is thus a symbol of union with God (Example 2.8).

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<sup>131</sup> Bely, “O teurgii,” in *Manifesty*, 383. “В дальнейших отрывках альбома напряженная мощь ринувшейся в пространство души, сквозь хаос и бездны летящей к Богу, достигает колоссальной силы... Это что-то невероятное по титанизму стремлений -- титанизму, не отвергнувшемуся от Бога. Тут ясно сквозит какая-то белая жилка, утверждающая, а не разбивающая надежды. Тут, в момент величайшего трагического напряжения, вырастают крылья, уносящие.”

<sup>132</sup> Bely’s Christian reading of Nietzsche is most overt in his widely anthologized essay, “Symbolism as a Worldview,” written shortly after this one.



Example 2.8. Medtner, *Acht Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1, II. Allegro con impeto, mm. 13-20 (the “White Vein” begins at arrow).

The third piece, a slow march in one of Medtner’s favorite keys, Eb-minor, is one of the best pieces of the set. The opening, while heavily chromatic, exhibits a chromaticism that constantly returns to the dominant through passing motion—thus avoiding the kind of endless, non-functional chromatic slip-and-sliding in which many other late-Romantic composers indulged. Indeed, much of Medtner’s chromaticism is derived from stepwise linear movement of individual voices, rather than through symmetrical chromatic sequences. The structure of the opening phrase is bizarre—it begins with a 7-bar phrase (missing its anacrusis) ending on a half-cadence. Then the final four bars are repeated, but altered to cadence on the tonic. Bely’s calls this passage “striving through chaos” and the lack of any kind of symmetrical or conventional phrase structure could be seen to support that notion. The music then takes up a polyphonic hymn in the relative major—the ostentatious imitative counterpoint is typical of his “dithyramb” style and is meant to produce a quasi-archaic, yet exalted, tone of praise. It is, however, constructed from the same motivic material as the opening march. For Bely, the soul has now truly reached a “titanic” state, as he perceives Prometheus himself “striding

through chaos” while singing an “infinitely powerful, unnaturally restrained” hymn.<sup>133</sup> With this “Promethean” hymn of prayer, Medtner attains true artistic theurgy (Example 2.9)—unlike Lermontov, who for Bely always failed to achieve theurgy at the last moment. Medtner attains theurgy not simply by offering a hymn of praise, but by first “striding through” dark chaos in order to find an “elusive, captivating, unexpectedly-sacred, new tone” in which to sing prayers:

And where Lermontov either turned away, or, surrounded by chaos, had dark forebodings—there in Mr. Medtner there is a desire, inspired by love, to break through this hanging fog. And as every deep, effective, real (and not imaginary) striving for light is already a prayer, and every prayer deepened by power is theurgic, Medtner’s works are also theurgic. But in order for this theurgism to finally sound *with an elusive, captivating, unexpectedly-sacred, new tone*, what degree of duality must the best of us have gone through, with what force must others, having ascended to the summit of their unconquered aspirations, have cried out: “I await the call, I seek an answer, the sky darkens, the earth is silent... Have mercy, God, on the night souls” (Blok), so that the rapture of the inviting prayer, all the fervor of world flight, is finally granted. Truly, here, in this music, one can hear the promise of certain wings—perhaps those which, according to D. S. Merezhkovsky, *are necessary to fly over history*?<sup>134</sup>



<sup>133</sup> Bely, “O teurgi,” 383. “Дальше все переходит в какой-то бесконечно могучий, неестественно сдержанный гимн шествующего сквозь хаос Прометея.”

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. “И там, где Лермонтов или обрывал («а жизнь, как посмотришь» и т. д.), или, окруженный хаосом, предсказывал («Я знал, что голова, любимая тобой, с твоей груди на плаху перейдет»), — там у г. Метнера окрыленное любовью стремление пробиться из этого виснувшего тумана. И как всякое глубокое, действенное, действительное (а не мнимое) стремление к свету -- уже и молитва, а всякая углубленная силой молитва -- теургична, теургичны и произведения Метнера. Но для того, чтобы этот теургизм мог наконец зазвучать неуволимо пленяющим, неожиданно-священным, новым оттенком, какую степень раздвоенности должны были пройти лучшие из нас, с какой силой другие, взойдя на вершину их непреодоленных стремлений, должны были воззвать: «Я жаду призыва, ищу ответа, темнеет небо, земля в молчанье... Помилуй, Боже, ночные души» (Блок), чтобы наконец был дарован восторг призывной молитвы, весь жар мирового полета. Воистину тут, в этой музыке, как бы слышны обещания каких-то крылий -- не тех ли, которые, по словам Д. С. Мережковского, необходимы, чтоб полететь над историей?»



Example 2.9. Medtner, *Acht Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1, III. Maestoso freddo (Prometheus “Striding through Chaos,” mm. 1-11, and then the “Theurgic Hymn,” mm. 12-22).

The fourth piece, a beautiful, lyrical song in the relative major of number three, is the most formally complex of the bunch. It moves to the second, wistful, theme in the minor mediant which then builds up to a joyful climax on the way back to the opening melody (and tonic). At the end, the second theme is brought back in the tonic *major*, transforming its character. This is a fascinating piece, as it shows Medtner’s early willingness to incorporate elements of sonata practice (like the return of the second theme in the tonic) into song forms that are otherwise not sonata-like at all. This effectively demonstrates that Medtner creatively synthesized his understanding of formal procedures from the study of the classics. Bely perceives this piece as evocative of that “precious” joy that can only be attained from traversing the path “through despair, through the gaping horrors of tragedy.” Perhaps he had in mind the transformation of the minor-key second theme into major after the climax, or perhaps his thinking was more generalized at this point. In any case, he



compares this precious joy to that the mountain traveler feels while bravely facing death in order cross the alpine pass:

It is precious because *not even every* mountain traveler is capable of conquering it, surrounded by chaos that has burst forth from the gaping abysses of our drama. A firm foot and a fearless gaze are needed here. That is why it is so charming, our joy—our dear, drunken, eternally fearless readiness for death. I am sure that far from everyone understands *what I am talking about, where I am speaking from*, taking for an allegory what really, in reality, happens to mountain travelers.<sup>135</sup>

The fifth piece is the central turning point of the collection, as the following three pieces are shorter dances. Not only is this one headed with the other Lermontov epigraph, but it unusually pictorial in nature.<sup>136</sup> The poem, “Metel’ shumit” (“The blizzard is roaring”) the first stanza of which is inscribed, depicts a raging snow storm through which the distant echo of funeral bells can be heard (for the full text of the inscription see Table 2.1). The music illustrates this stanza fairly blatantly. It opens with a blizzardly gust which then subsides. Slow, solemn bells are heard in the depths of the piano, over which the gales whip up again. Curiously, a short fragmentary mournful song emerges from the icy winds. The bells return (transposed), the blizzard rages, but then the quiet, mournful song emerges a second time—now in major—unfurling into a full phrase to the accompaniment of the funeral bells. One final gust and the piece ends in quiet stillness. I believe it here, in this stormy piece, that Medtner tried to symbolize the emergence of the heavenly song from the howling chaos of earthly winter—theurgically instilling a faint glimmer of the divine eternal into the “dull songs of the earth.” Indeed, here the song emerges from cruel winds and tolling bells

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. “Она драгоценна тем, что даже не всякий горный путешественник способен ее завоевать, окруженный хаосом, вырвавшимся из зияющих пропастей нашей драмы. Тут нужна твердая нога и бесстрашный взор. Вот почему обаятельна она, наша радость -- наша милая [Серафим], пьяная, вечно бесстрашная готовность к смерти. Я уверен, что далеко не все понимают, о чем я говорю, откуда я говорю, принимая за аллегорию то, что действительно, наяву происходит с горными путешественниками.” Perhaps this paragraph is responsible for Medtner’s 1907 setting, dedicated to Bely, of Heine’s “*Der Bergstimme*,” in which a mountain traveler dies trying to make his way home (Op. 12/3).

<sup>136</sup> Medtner frequently employed pictorial imagery and word painting throughout his entire career, although certainly not to the same degree as in this early work.

completely unexpectedly, with no clear source and (furthermore) no corresponding line in Lermontov's poem (Example 2.10).



Example 2.10. Nikolay Medtner, *Acht Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1, V. “Metel’ shumit,” [“The blizzard roars”], mm. 35-46 (The tail end of a snowy gust in the right hand, the funeral bells in the left, and the first part of the mournful song in long held notes between the wing and the bells).

While the first piece in the album concerns humanity's yearning for heavenly life, this one is about death and the dark earthly misery of winter. And yet, as Medtner wrote in his program notes to his 1909 House of Song recital, “The earth is God’s temple; earthly life is a symbol of Divine life. There is no way to Heaven except through the earth; Without participation in earthly life with its joy and suffering, struggle and death, there is no communion [причастия] of eternal life.”<sup>137</sup> The heavenly song must be found symbolically within and through the earth and earthly life. This is the most fundamental point animating this chapter—the Symbolists did not try to reach the heavens by abandoning the earth, by rejecting human life, but tried to bring the divine down to earth. This is

<sup>137</sup> Medtner, House of Song Program Note, see Appendix B.

also the point Bely makes in the next stage of his narrative reading. Here he, finally introduces Sophia herself by way of a Vladimir Solovyov poem. It turns out it is her voice singing the song from behind the chaos of the blizzard. Medtner has found Eternity through chaos, he has found the *dawn in the midnight snowstorm*:

What joy sounds in the following lines of one of Solovyov's poems, beginning to see how the muddy waves retreat, how the defeated chaos becomes clear and the screeching of the snowstorm no longer sounds like cries of anger, but like the first February, sacred, spring praises of Eternity:

You are as immaculate as the snow behind the mountains,  
 You are as thoughtful as a winter night.  
 You are all on fire, like a polar flame,  
*A bright daughter of dark chaos.*<sup>138</sup>

What is this *She*, *who* gives help from there, from behind the chaos, shining with the dawn, we now, it seems, are already beginning to understand, and our dull eyes light up with an unprecedented brilliance...<sup>139</sup>

This "She" is Sophia, the divinely-human muse who helps humanity to find the true religious, theurgic path of artistic creation. Here she is equated with that Eternity which the artist must embody within their art. Symbolized by the dawn, she can only be found in and through "dark chaos" (i.e. the earthly). She gives help from "there," i.e. from those abysses which (to Bely) dangerously impinge on human life but which must be confronted directly. The vision of Her "lights up our dull eyes with unprecedented brilliance." This is what Medtner calls the "miracle of art," that is, "the ability of the material element itself to be transfigured through the spirit, through inspiration."<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, "On Saimaa in winter," 1894. Saimaa is a lake in Finland (then part of the Russian empire) not too far from Petersburg.

<sup>139</sup> Bely, "О теургii," 385. "Какая радость звучит в нижеследующих строчках одного из стихотворений Соловьева, начинающего видеть, как отступают мутные волны, как побежденный хаос просветляется и визг метели уже звучит не криками злобы, а первыми февральскими, священными, весенними славословиями Вечности: 'Ты непорочна, как снег за горами,/ Ты многотуманна, как зимняя ночь./ Вся ты в огне, как полярное пламя./ Темного хаоса светлая дочь.' (Соловьев) Что это за Она, Которая подает помощь оттуда, из-за хаоса, блестя зарею, мы теперь, кажется, уже начинаем понимать, и невиданным блеском зажигаются наши потухшие очи..."

<sup>140</sup> Cited at the top.

The final three dances in the album are earthly dances, celebrating the vision of Sophia in the snowstorm of number five. Indeed, in number six, the snowstorm figuration reappears, now transfigured into what Bely calls the joyful, bright snowstorm of early spring—accompanied with the earthliest of earthly dances, the Habanera.<sup>141</sup> The eighth piece features another such dance—the waltz. These fill Bely with those images of joyful apocalyptic ecstasy that are typically of his youthful writings:

And so the subsequent numbers [i.e. #6-8] of Mr. Medtner's album sound precisely like this post-Lermontovian, chaotically joyful song of a snowstorm, when pale whorls of snow so tenderly kiss, circle, sweep and fly further and further, now knocking on the gates, now raising the black hands of trees—the sacred herald of the great day of resurrection from the dead that is invariably coming upon us.<sup>142</sup>

As Bely said in a letter to Emil, the seventh piece was his favorite.<sup>143</sup> This piece features the most striking rhythmic complexities of the bunch. Here Medtner offers an exercise in complex metrical subdivisions, syncopation between hands, and odd meter. While still dance-like, it does not readily evoke any traditional genre-dance; however, within these twisted rhythms one can perceive a distorted reflection of the Habanera rhythm of the previous piece. Unlike piece number one, the rhythmic complexities are real and not the result of notational contrivances and contrasting static patterns (Example 2.11). In this passage, the opening phrase—with its subdivision of 4/4 time into a syncopated 3+2+3 (eighth-note groups)—slips imperceptibly into 5/8 (2+3), before a new melody emerges sitting comfortably within the odd time.

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<sup>141</sup> Medtner uses the characteristic Habanera rhythm, also known as a Tango rhythm.

<sup>142</sup> Bely, "O teurgii," 385. "И вот дальнейшие номера альбома г. Метнера звучат именно этой после-лермонтовской, нашей хаотически радостной песнью метели, когда бледные свитки снегов так ласково целуют, кружат, заматают и дальше, и дальше летят, то стуча в ворота, то воздымая черные руки деревьев, -- священные глашатай неизменно идущего на нас великого дня восстания из мертвых."

<sup>143</sup> Bely to E. Medtner, 9 April 1903 (#27). Here Bely describes Medtner's playing at his recent concert in overtly Symbolist terms: "As for me, I am delighted with his playing—"knowledgeable," "winking"—and at the same time surprisingly noble and correct."



Example 2.11. Medtner, *Acht Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1 No. 7, mm. 11-18 (repeat of opening phrase in 4/4 that then dexterously slides into 5/8 section with a new melody at arrow).

### Theurgic Endings

The Medtners' responded positively to Bely's article—after all it was written during a period of extensive engagement among all three. Emil Medtner wrote to Bely, that “the ‘theurgism’ of Kolya’s [Nikolay’s] works is a formula that is clear to me,<sup>144</sup> and specifically about Bely’s essay that, “What you wrote about Kolya is delightful, I have nothing to object to this.”<sup>145</sup> After reading “On Theurgy,” Emil decided to write a large polemical article in the form of an unsent letter, in which he argued the following points: that not all art must necessarily aspire to theurgy and that music should not be placed in privileged position in comparison to other art forms.<sup>146</sup> Emil did not dispute

<sup>144</sup> E. Medtner to Bely, 9 August 1903 (letter #41).

<sup>145</sup> E. Medtner to Bely, 20 October 1903 (letter #50).

<sup>146</sup> E. Medtner to Bely, 15 October 1903 (letter #47). E. Medtner revised this unsent letter in anticipation of publishing it alongside Bely’s article when it was reissued. Unfortunately this never happened, so E. Medtner’s article never saw the light of day.

anything else, remaining in agreement with Bely's definition of theurgy and his Sophiological interpretation of his brother's music.

Furthermore, Emil Medtner, out of dedication to new literary and religious currents in Russia (and the desire to earn some extra cash), frequently attempted to review the latest issues of *New Path* and *World of Art* in the newspaper *Dnieper Region*.<sup>147</sup> Taking advantage of Bely's discussion of his brother's music in "On Theurgy," Emil placed an anonymous notice in the newspaper entitled "Theurgic Composer." He wrote, "In *New Path* Andrey Bely provides an interesting characterization of the works of the young composer, Mr. Medtner, recently collected in an album entitled, '*Stimmungsbilder*.'" <sup>148</sup> He followed this with extensive quotations from Bely's article. Emil Medtner himself promoted the notion that his brother was specifically a *theurgic* composer. As such, Bely's interpretation of Medtner's Op. 1 must be taken seriously as something the composer himself could have agreed with.

And we now know that he did. Over the next few years, Nikolay Medtner took up the banner of theurgy. He worked on what he called a "theurgic sonata" which included an instrumental setting of Luke 6:21: "Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh."<sup>149</sup> This verse, part of the Beatitudes, indicates the power of God to materially and spiritually transform humanity through Christ—the attainment of such transfiguration was the central goal of theurgical creation. The theurgic sonata was left unfinished, and Christoph Flamm postulated in his 1995 dissertation that Medtner quickly abandoned the idea of theurgy in

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<sup>147</sup> I say "attempted" because some of writings were blocked by the censor due to the ban on discussing Merezhkovsky's religious-philosophical society. He could not publish in Nizhny Novgorod newspapers because that was where he worked as a censor himself. The relaxation of censorship restrictions after the 1905 revolution helped to increase public discussion of Symbolism and religious philosophy.

<sup>148</sup> Quoted in footnote 10 to letter #50, *Bely i Metner, Perepiska*, I, 359. Emil published the note in the 1 October 1903 edition of *Dnieper Region*.

<sup>149</sup> King James Translation. See Flamm, *Metner*, 665-66, for a facsimile of part of the unpublished draft, showing the gospel text set syllabically above the melody. The title on one of the pages appears to have been "Theurgic or Liturgical Sonata Fantasia," but is partially crossed out. The drafts are for both piano solo and piano quintet and are dated 1904-05. See Flamm, *Metner*, 539-542, for description and discussion of drafts.

1904, assuming perhaps that the youthful influence of Bely had worn off.<sup>150</sup> The recent publication of Bely and Emil Medtner's extensive correspondence proves otherwise.

In what is certainly an astonishing revelation for those interested in Medtner today, Emil reported to Bely in January 1907 on his brother's latest compositional project:

Kolya [Nikolay] is busy working on a theurgic fantasy (probably: *Eine theurgische Tondichtung für Pianoforte, zwei Geigen, Alt, Cello* or yet more instruments; in Russian it would simply be called a piano quintet or sextet or septet); this piece will serve as a natural transition from the final limits of subtlety and sonority he has achieved in his pianistic style to an orchestral style—which he intends to develop entirely on his own and independent of “fashionable” Wagnerian instrumentation; the themes of this Theurgic work are unusually transparent, distinct, joyful, and original.—Yes! He and You are all that gives me the strength to bear my wretchedness.<sup>151</sup>

Simply put, this shows that Nikolay Medtner was more actively involved in the artistic and religious pursuits of the Symbolists than has been thought. Medtner typically only appears in accounts of Russian Symbolism as the passive recipient of Bely's praise or as Emil's famous brother.<sup>152</sup> Yet, Medtner's book, *The Muse and The Fashion* (written many years later in 1935), should be considered a Symbolist treatise on the religious aesthetics of music—one which must be understood in the context of Symbolist theory developed in the first decade or so of the century. This letter shows that Nikolay was not simply a disciple of Emil and was, on the contrary, quite receptive to the kind of religious thought promoted by Bely and other Symbolists.

Emil's comments about Medtner's theurgic ambitions also forces other revisions in the current scholarly picture of Medtner—unambiguously showing that Medtner was actually interested

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> E. Medtner to Bely, 12-17 January 1907 (Letter #133 in *Perepiska*). The phrase in parenthesis is Emil's own: “Коля занят теургической фантазией (вероятно: *Eine theurgische Tondichtung für Pianoforte, zwei Geigen, Alt, Cello* или еще больше инструментов; по-русски будет называться просто фортепианный квинтет или секстет или септет); эта вещь послужит естественным переходом от доведенного им до последних пределов тонкости и звучности фортепианного стиля к стилю оркестральному, который он намерен развить совершенно от себя и независимо от “модной” вагнерианствующей инструментовки; темы Теургической необычайно прозрачны, отчетливы, радостны и оригинальны. - Да! Он да Вы - вот все, что мне дает силу нести мое убожество.”

<sup>152</sup> Emil was directly involved in Symbolism in many ways, but most notably as the founder and editor of the publishing house Musaget (1909-1914).

in the problem of orchestration from near the beginning of his active career (and indeed that he tried to develop a specifically modern, anti-Wagnerian aesthetic).<sup>153</sup> Medtner's failure to develop this theurgic orchestral style and the extreme difficulties he would soon come to face while trying to orchestrate his piano concerti no doubt were responsible for his later rejection of sonority as a fundamental element of music.<sup>154</sup> As he wrote in his book:

Sonority can never become a theme. While other elements appeal to our spirit, soul, feeling, thought—sonority itself, as a quality of sound, appeals to our auditory sensation, to the taste of our external ear. Sonority in itself is capable of only increasing or weakening our pleasure in the qualities of the object, but can in no way determine its essence or value. Having recognized this, and, at the same time recognizing that the essence of music is not of a material-sensory, but of a spiritual order, we have to classify this notorious “sonority” as a service element.<sup>155</sup>

In 1907, then, Medtner was either interested in the problem of orchestral sonority on deeper level than he was in 1934, or his experiments with a new anti-“Wagnerian” method of instrumentation were intended to actively oppose the contemporary interest in using the orchestra as a well-spring of new instrumental combinations and sound colors. Either way, at some point in 1908 Medtner gave up finishing his “*Theurgische Tondichtung*” and abandoned his efforts to create a theurgic orchestral style.

Nevertheless, it remained his most personally meaningful project, and he made sure to complete it near the end of his life as a kind of summation of his career—taking the final form of a Piano Quintet (Op. posth.). The early “Theurgic Sonata” on Luke's gospel became the first movement. For the middle slow movement, Medtner transformed a setting of Psalm texts for voice

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<sup>153</sup> Something his countryman Igor Stravinsky would actually succeed in doing in his neoclassical music of the 1920s, with its heavy emphasis on winds.

<sup>154</sup> See the section on “Sonority” in *Muse*, 51-55.

<sup>155</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 5 (translation altered). “Звучность никогда не может стать темой. В то время как другие элементы апеллируют к нашему духу, душе, чувству, мысли звучность сама по себе, как качество звука, апеллирует к нашему слуховому ощущению, к вкусу нашего внешнего слуха, который сам по себе способен лишь увеличить, либо ослабить наше удовольствие от качеств предмета, но никоим образом не определять его сущности или ценности. Признав это и одновременно признав сущность музыки сущностью не материально-чувственного, а духовного порядка, приходится отнести эту пресловутую «звучность» к элементам служебным.”



and piano from 1906: Psalm 25:11,<sup>16</sup> “For thy name’s sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity; for it is great. Turn thee unto me, and have mercy upon me; for I am desolate and afflicted.”<sup>156</sup> Medtner frequently turned to penitential song texts (i.e. those expressing sorrow and regret) in his work, and the idea that art can serve as a means to attain God’s grace and mercy is also intrinsic to Bely’s definition of theurgy, which is “entirely permeated with ardent love and the highest hope for God’s mercy.”<sup>157</sup>

Furthermore, Medtner incorporated into all three movements of the Piano Quintet other themes of great personal significance used previously in his career: the medieval Catholic requiem chant *Dies irae* (in a major mode) and his own so-called “Muse” theme. This latter melody first appeared in his 1913-14 *Sonata-Ballade*, Op. 27, which used as a hidden program Afanasy Fet’s religious poem, “Kogda bozhestvenny bezhal” (“When the Divine One fled”), about Christ’s temptation in the wilderness by Satan. As shown by the sketches, the melody in question was a setting of the fourteenth line of the poem, in which Fet quotes Christ’s command to Satan to “Kneel down before God the Lord” [“Pred bogom gospodom lish’ preklonyay”].<sup>158</sup> Medtner is quite literally doing as Bely prescribed in “On Theurgy”: invoking the “miraculous power” of Christ’s own words within his music.

Around the same time he composed the *Sonata-Ballade*, Medtner used the same melody in a setting of Pushkin’s poem “The Muse” (“Muza”), Op. 29/1. This poem held great personal significance and Medtner would later place it at the head of the first chapter of his book. The first stanza depicts the Muse teaching a young shepherd how to play on the pan-pipes both “solemn

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<sup>156</sup> KJV. Flamm also reproduces a facsimile of the draft of this work as well, on page 667 of *Metner*.

<sup>157</sup> Bely, “O teurgii,” in *Manifesty*, 381.

<sup>158</sup> See Flamm, *Metner*, 436-40, for an account of the genesis of the *Sonata-Ballade*.

hymns inspired by the gods” and simple shepherds tunes. In the second, the Muse takes the pipes for herself and performs heavenly music for the enraptured shepherd.

<p>Alexander Pushkin, “Muza”</p> <p>В младенчестве моем она меня любила И семистольную цевницу мне вручила. Она внимала мне с улыбкой — и слегка, По звонким скважинам пустого тростника, Уже наигрывал я слабыми перстами И гимны важные, внушенные богами, И песни мирные фригийских пастухов.</p> <p>С утра до вечера в немой тени дубов Прилежно я внимал урокам деви тайной, И, радуя меня наградою случайной, Откинув локоны от милого чела, Сама из рук моих свирель она брала. Тростник был оживлен божественным дыханьем И сердце наполнял святым очарованьем.</p>	<p>Alexander Pushkin, “The Muse”</p> <p>In days when I was young, her love to me she gaveth. The pipes with seven tones, the shawm to me she tendered. She heard my melodies and smiled, And with lightest touch upon the dear and penetrating reeds I oft did strive to play with weak and childish fingers: The hymns magnificent, inspired by gods <b>immortal</b>, The songs serene and <b>pure</b> by Phrygian shepherds sung.</p> <p>From morn till eventide in silent shade of oaks With zeal I heard the <b>laws</b> told by the <b>mystic virgin</b>. Rejoicing in my young heart with recompense most rare, And tossing curling locks from a clear and lovely brow, Herself from out my hands the shawm she gently took: The reeds were filled with life, exalted by her spirit. My heart was filled with wondrous joy and holy <b>rapture</b>.</p>
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Here Pushkin writes what to the Symbolists could only be the most overtly theurgic poem imaginable. He depicts “Sophia” herself as a Muse teaching the shepherd how to play the hymns of gods, and, not satisfied with just that, has her take up the flute to reveal to the pupil the rapturous sounds of heavenly music itself. The translation was done with Medtner’s approval by his British student Edna Iles for his recording session with the great German soprano Elizabeth Schwarzkopf in the late 1940s. Words in bold are not present in the Russian original and clearly demonstrates Medtner’s Sophianic understanding of the poem, as the English emphasizes the divinity of the Muse. The musical setting begins with the dark melancholy of the modal minor and slowly transforms by the end into the ecstatic jubilation of sacred love, complete with bells. Clearly much of Medtner’s music offers a striking parallel with the early Sophianic poetry of Bely and Blok.

Medtner deepens the theurgy already present in the poem by using the same melody to which he set Fet’s quotation of Christ’s words commanding Satan to kneel before God. This melody first appears with these words from the first stanza, “and solemn hymns inspired by the gods” (“i gimny vazhnye, vnushennye bogami”), and then again in climactic fashion at the end of the piece on

the final line “and filled my heart with holy rapture.” The melody itself has a stately, chant-like air to it (See Example 2.12). The three anacrusis beats step up to a held D, before firmly leaping down a sixth—in the original Fet setting, this opening motive accompanied the words, “Before God your Lord” (“Pred bogom gospodom”).

mf cresc.

-и - гръ-валъ я сла - бы - ми под - ста - ми И гим - ны  
droits en - cor, et quand d'un souf - fle fai - ble S'en - ton - nais, ..

f e poco maestoso dimin.

важ - ны - е, вѣ - шен - ны - е бо - га - ми, И пѣ - ни  
plein d'é - moi, les hym - nes so - len - nel les Ou les chants  
m.d. m.d. m.s.

Example 2.12. Medtner, “Muza” (“The Muse”), Op. 29/1, mm. 9-12 (at the line “and solemn hymns inspired by the gods”).

The “Muse” theme is perhaps the strongest indication that Medtner subscribed to some version of Bely’s Sophiology, as he used the same theme for Christ’s words as he did to invoke the Muse. We can conclude that, for both Bely and Medtner, Christ is the ultimate source of the power of art, and He appears in the form of Sophia/Muse to instruct humanity on the proper path of artistic creation as religious creation, as theurgy. It is unclear how early Medtner composed the initial sketch of this theme as a Fet setting, but when he turned back to his “*Theurgische Tondichtung*” at the end of his life, he had to include within it his most theurgic theme. When he finished this quintet in

the late 1940s, he dropped the word “theurgic” from the title, but at the same time he finally fulfilled the theurgic dreams instilled in him by his friend Bely over four decades prior.

In this next chapter, we will examine how Medtner and the Symbolists took up Western, specifically German, versification practices as a means to renovate the inherited Russian poetic tradition. Medtner deftly set German and Russian poetry in metrical forms which the Symbolists popularized. The Symbolists, unlike their Slavophile forebearers, embraced the idea that Russia must unite with West rather than turn away from it. Concordantly, they freely welcomed Western artistic and philosophical influences. Unfortunately, Medtner’s participation in this project of cultural union between East and West largely resulted in misunderstanding by Russian music critics and the public, who viewed his music fundamentally German in nature, despite his close connections with new trends in Russian religious thought and Symbolist aesthetics.

### Chapter 3. East or West? Uniting German Art and Orthodox Religion

Germany, the classical country of geniuses, will persist in decadent Russia—the coming country of prophets. There is something uniting Germany with Russia in the amazing sonata of Nikolai Karlovich (after all, there is much that is purely Russian-mystical in it along with the Germanic, just as in the album).

—Andrey Bely (1903)<sup>1</sup>

We must salute this intelligent selection and ordering of Goethe's songs in such profound musical settings as one of the few manifestations of true culture.

—Andrey Bely (1906)<sup>2</sup>

If we consider Medtner's musical form, he seems Germanic; if we listen to the content of his themes that fly into the soul, he is Russian: his arabesques, with their expansive depth and prophecies of a better future, are like the most tender lyrical outpourings of [Alexander] Blok, while their strictness of form brings us closer to Kant. And so the most tender tremors of lyricism sound forceful, like a musical imperative dictating something to us. Medtner is neither here nor there—homeless, like his music!

—Andrey Bely (1911)<sup>3</sup>

The Symbolists' theurgic vision of the spiritualization of mankind through artistic creation imagined all of humanity to be collectively working together to accomplish the task. An artist working in complete isolation could never be a theurgist, and neither could the requisite universality be found within a single national tradition. Yet, for the Symbolists, this did not mean that all individuals or nations would play an equal role. Following Solovyov, they believed that Russia, as a sprawling country encompassing East and West, would serve as a leader in the coming unification of

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<sup>1</sup> Bely to ЕКМ, 4 July 1903, letter #37 in *Perepiska*. The sonata is Op. 5 and the album is Op. 1. "Германия, классическая страна гениев, продолжится в декадентской России - грядущей стране пророков. Нечто, соединяющее Германию с Россией, есть в изумительной сонате Ник<олая> Карловича (ведь есть же в ней много чисто русско-мистического наряду с германским точно так же, как и в Альбоме)."

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for attribution, "Умный подбор и расположение гётевских песен в такой угадуемой музыкальной оправе мы должны приветствовать, как одно из немногих проявлений истинной культуры."

<sup>3</sup> Bely, "Snezhnye arabeski." "Musical imperative" is a reference to Kant's "categorical imperative." "Если рассматривать музыкальную форму Метнера, он оказывается германцем; если прислушаться к содержанию его влетающих в душу тем, он — русский: широта, даль, пророчество о лучшем будущем уподобит его арабески нежнейшим лирическим излияниям Блока; строгость формы приблизит к Канту; и нежнейшие трепетания лирики прозвучат повелительно, как что-то внушающее нам музыкальный императив. И ни здесь, ни там Метнер. И его музыкальное дело — такое бездомное!"

humanity under the universal symbol of Christ. But this meant that Russia would have to overcome the central question that had long riddled its cultural and intellectual history: the question of “East or West?” This old debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers asked whether Russia should adopt the forms of modern European civilization or if it should instead embrace the deeply spiritual and communal life of the Orthodox Russian folk. Medtner and the Symbolists wanted to have it all—they wanted to place the great accomplishments of Western culture on Eastern religious foundations.

Fearing that the rise of secular individualism in the West threatened the spiritual foundations of art and life, the Symbolists viewed Russia—with its vast population of Orthodox faithful—as a reservoir of mystical truth and divine energies. At the same time, they felt that the cultural achievements of nineteenth-century Russia, while great, were not sufficiently universal to express the full depths of Christian truth. Thus, cultural forms and artistic techniques developed in the West must be united with Russian achievements and both traditions must be reevaluated in terms of spiritual meaning and mystical content. Western artists who were seen to possess profound insight and articulate spiritual depths—e.g. Goethe, Beethoven, and Nietzsche—were understood to be mystical Symbolists themselves and, thus, direct precursors to the Russian Symbolists. Similarly, the latter re-imagined the history of nineteenth-century Russian literature, restoring forgotten poets like Fedor Tyutchev and Afanasy Fet to prominence while characterizing novelists like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy as religious prophets and martyrs instead of socially-committed realists.

Medtner’s use of Classical and Romantic German poetry for most of his *lieder* compositions in the first decade of the twentieth century clearly mirrors the wider Symbolist interest in the same corpus. Symbolists were not only influenced by the mystical themes and images of poets like Goethe, Novalis, and Heine, but they also turned to the German canon for technical guidance in the handling of poetic meter and rhythm. Specifically, the borrowing of freer German (and French)

approaches to meter was seen as a means to break free from the restrictive Russian syllabo-tonic tradition and constituted much of the Symbolists' poetic experimentation. Specifically, they took up the "dolnik" in earnest—a meter defined by a regular number of stresses per line separated by an irregular amount of unstressed syllables (usually one or two). The dolnik thus sits as a kind of intermediate between strict syllabo-tonic verse and completely free accentual verse. Through analysis of Medtner's settings of Goethe and Bely, I show how he participated in the Symbolist turn towards the dolnik and accentual verse within his song settings—which all reveal a deep understanding of, and a nuanced approach to, poetic rhythm and meter. Approaching Medtner's songs from the perspective of historical metrics, as I do here, highlights his deep engagement with Symbolist poetics, casts light on Medtner's unusual early career trajectory, and illuminates the meaning of many specific compositional choices in his early songs. Goethe was also a major influence on the Symbolist's theoretical writings, and I show how Medtner articulated his own mystical philosophy through the creative appropriation of Goethe's poetry.

Yet, Medtner's decision to set thirty of Goethe's lyrics in the original German, combined with the fact of his German ancestry, curtailed Medtner's public appeal and distorted his reputation among critics. He was branded as a proponent of that musical Germanism which Russian music had rebelled against. Naturally, most music critics were ill equipped to understand the connections between Medtner's art and the new Russian trends in literature, especially since he did not use many contemporary poems as lyrics. Nevertheless, I argue in this chapter that the common perception of Medtner as a pure Westernizer is incorrect. He premiered his first set of Goethe-lieder, opus 6, at the mansion of Margarita Morozova, whose circle, which included Bely, largely adhered to Solovyov's refiguration of Slavophile thought—i.e., that Russia must embrace the humanly heights of Western culture and religion, while restoring it to its properly divine foundation. Unlike the Westernizers, proper, this new Slavophilism rejected much of contemporary Western culture as too

secularized and commercialized and preserved Russia's messianic role in the world as a special source of divine truth.

In his article on Medtner's Goethe-lieder, Bely declares the composer to be the direct descendent of Beethoven, Schumann, and Wagner, while also explicitly placing Medtner at the forefront of new Russian music (alongside Scriabin) and of the "new religious consciousness." This recently coined term refers to the idea, commonly held at the time among the Russian cultural elite, that artists should be prophet-mystics, acting to bring about divine revelation in art and life. As Bely explains, in Medtner's Goethe settings, "the promise of the ineffable gradually resounds for us, now resurrected again in our souls and objectified by us in religious forms and images." Ultimately, however, this Symbolist account of Medtner's union of East and West did not penetrate into the broader musical sphere, where he seemed permanently branded as a academicizing Germanic composer in the orbit of Brahms.

### Symbolism, East and West

From the very beginning of their careers, before 1905, both Medtner and Bely were preoccupied with the question of uniting German art with Russian religious mysticism. In 1903, Medtner argued (in an unsent letter to Emil) that artists must believe in the spiritual depths of their own art as a means through which the divine can be experienced. In short, Medtner conceptualized the artist as akin to the Orthodox mystic, who strives to directly perceive the divine through spiritual contemplation. This thought brought him to the realization that there must exist a fundamental affinity between German art and Orthodox religion:

It is not good when an artist loses faith in art, that is, the kind of faith which, for example, a person has in God when he clearly senses Him with his spirit, and does not only recognize Him as some kind of transcendental idea. In this way an artist should also believe in art.... But I just want to say that... isn't it true that German art and the Orthodox religion have so much in common? In the last few weeks I could not have had more joy from, or enough



delight in, Goethe and Beethoven, whom I am predominantly reading, and in Serafim of Sarov, about whom so much is written now....<sup>4</sup>

At the time both Medtner and Bely were enthralled by Russia's own Orthodox mystical heritage, symbolized by the figure of Serafim, Russia's greatest saint and who Nikolay Berdyaev would describe in 1911 as the "peak of eastern Christianity and the key to understanding the mystical mission of Orthodox Russia."<sup>5</sup> Despite Serafim's great importance—worthy of inclusion in a short list with Goethe and Beethoven—his monastic asceticism meant that he never embodied his mystical experiences into artistic forms. Nevertheless, for Medtner, a clear parallel exists between the process of artistic creation and Serafim's insight into (and experience of) the divine. Even if Goethe or Beethoven may not have had the same depth of mystical insight into the divine as Serafim, they nevertheless succeeded (in Medtner's view) in bringing eternal truth down to earth and into the imperfect artistic forms of humanity.

This, of course, was the artistic-religious mission of all Symbolists and why non-Russians like Goethe and Beethoven were considered direct precursors. Yet, while the Symbolists proudly imagined that the nineteenth-century Russian literary heritage could rival the West's in quality and depth, they held the Russian musical legacy in much lower esteem. Not only the Medtners, but Bely, Blok, and Ivanov all deeply revered German music as the pinnacle of the art. Furthermore, they understood music to be a more powerful means of conveying inner mystical experience than any other art form. Thus, this musical inferiority was a sign of cultural underdevelopment—it pointed to a disturbing gap between the profound mystical experiences of Russian artists and the sophistication

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<sup>4</sup> Unsent letter from Nikolay to Emil Medtner written 2-5 Aug 1903, in *Pis'ma*, 50. "Нехорошо, когда художник теряет веру в искусство, т[о] е[сть] какую веру... Я, например, понимаю только такую веру в бога, когда человек духом своим его совершенно отчетливо осязает, а не признает его только как какую-то заоблачную идею. Так же художник должен верить и в искусство.... Но я только хочу еще сказать, что... не правда ли, как много общего между немецким искусством и православной религией? Я как раз последнее время не могу достаточно нарадоваться, наве- селиться на Гете с Бетховеном, которых преимущественно читаю, и на Серафима Саровского, о котором теперь так много пишут [...]"

<sup>5</sup> Nikolay Berdyaev, "The Problem of East and West in the Religious Consciousness of Vladimir Solovyov," in *The Brightest Lights of the Silver Age*, 96.

of the human forms within which they should be expressed. The attainment of a genuinely theurgic, universal Christian culture required the closure of this gap—a project designed to combat the commercialization and mass production of secular culture on the rise in the West.

Symbolist poets adopted musical techniques—those perceived as Western—to facilitate the vivid expression of mystical experiences. The notion that music is a language of mystical experience prompted experimentation with poetic meter, phonetic structure, and form. Bely sought this musicalization of poetry through a wide range of techniques, including the grafting of German symphonic form onto poetic structure (as a means of infusing it with mystical content). Medtner was also fundamentally concerned with music's power to convey these same mystical experiences. He posited the divine basis of musical forms and practices that emerged in the West and argued that this divine basis had been recently corrupted in the same West through the introduction of modernism. Both his book and much of later music composition proceeded from the explicit goal of purifying his inherited musical practices of modernist, secular perversions—and thus allowing the divine basis of music to resound unhindered. As a result, practical concepts like the interrelation of tonic and dominant, the resolution of dissonance to consonance, the differentiation of scales and modes, the sonata's themes and their development, cadence and modulation, *inter alia*, became imbued in Medtner's thought with the deepest and most significant mystical meaning—enabling the tonal system to act as a language of the divine in the same way as other Symbolists perceived the (musicalized) language of poetry. Thus, Medtner's idiosyncratic adoption and extension of the Western tonal system itself was motivated by the Russian Symbolist desire to express the ineffable in art.

Already by June 1903, Bely affirmed that Medtner had succeeded in uniting the “purely Russian-mystical” East and the “Germanic” West in his music. In a letter to Emil, he wondered what exactly was that essence which originated in Goethe and, passing through Nietzsche, now

“dwells hidden in the Russian people.” Nevertheless, he asserted that this essence can be found in Medtner’s music:

My thesis: from Goethe to Nietzsche (who showed the secret illness of Goetheanism in himself) and from Nietzsche to The Unknown, there is something which, more so than Dostoyevsky, always dwells hidden in the Russian people. What I mean is—Germany, the classical country of geniuses, will be continued in decadent Russia—the coming country of prophets. That “something” which unites Germany with Russia is within the amazing sonata of Nikolai Karlovich (after all, in the sonata there is much that is purely Russian-mystical along with that which is Germanic, just like in the *Album*).<sup>6</sup>

Just as Medtner perceived a hidden affinity between German art and Orthodox religion, Bely feels that the mystical basis which had served as a well-spring for German artistic “geniuses” was now available to Russian “prophets,” who would continue to cultivate artistic creation as a form of religious creativity without sacrificing the sophisticated technical achievements of elite art. Therein lies the appeal of Medtner’s music for Bely—it satisfied his love of high German culture while funneling into it a large dose of Russian mysticism. Bely and Medtner were united in this joint mission—one that actually bypassed Emil to some extent, as he frequently maintained that his brother was a completely “German” composer.

Much of Bely’s creative work thematizes the tensions between German individual “genius” and Russian collective mysticism. In 1910 he published his first novel, *The Silver Dove*, as part one of a planned trilogy which he boldly labeled “East or West.” While this first novel is about the “East,” the sequel would be concerned with the “West,” and the third novel would bring about the desired union of East and West. In *The Silver Dove* he set out to depict the inhuman East by sending his Muscovite poet-protagonist Daryalsky out to the countryside to join a Dionysian mystical sect known as the “Doves.” The fatal tragedy that befalls Daryalsky is reflective of the greater tragedy

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<sup>6</sup> Bely to E. Medtner, June 2-4, 1903 (#37). “Мой тезис: от Гёте к Ницше (показавшем на себе, чем тайно болел гётизм) и от Ницше к Тому Неизвестному, который дальше Достоевского, всегда живущего скрыто в русском народе. Или: Германия, классическая страна гениев, продолжится в декадентской России - грядущей стране пророков. Нечто, соединяющее Германию с Россией, есть в изумительной сонате Ник<олая> Карловича (ведь есть же в ней много чисто русско-мистического наряду с германским точно так же, как и в *Альбоме*).”

inherent in the sharp divide between individualistic artistic creation and communal mysticism. In the sequel (which would become his famous novel *Petersburg*) Bely satirizes the godless West in the figure of Senator Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov, who is constantly dreaming of geometrical forms and the rationalization of government bureaucracy.

The trilogy never received its unifying conclusion; nevertheless, Bely's decision to title it "East or West" garnered much discussion in reviews of *The Silver Dove*, as he hit on the central animating theme of the Russian intelligentsia at the time. In a review entitled, "East or West", Dmitry Merezhkovsky seemed to misunderstand the purpose of Bely's satirical caricatures, claiming that Bely made the mistake of "all Slavophiles old and new" by making out the "Russian East" to be a land of "religious plenitude" and equally caricaturing the "European West" as "empty space." Instead, Merezhkovsky believes that the East has "trampled" the individual personality by way of "pseudo-collectivity." In his view, the West contains the truth about man and the East contains the truth about God. Thus, Merezhkovsky posits that the only solution to the question "East and West?" is to deny it altogether, instead embracing "East and West."<sup>7</sup> Of course, Merezhkovsky expresses what was Bely's deeper intention all-along.

Merezhkovsky's ideas concerning the union of East and West derive directly from the philosophy of Solovyov—from whom Bely was also heavily indebted. In a 1911 article, Berdyaev frames the contemporary problem of East and West in the context of Solovyov's influential writings:

This Russian longing for universal humanity, for universality, serves as the basis for posing the problem of East and West. The problem of East and West, the problem of unifying the two worlds into a Christian all-unity, into a divine humanity, was Solovyov's fundamental problem, and it tormented him his entire life. But what makes Solovyov great, as well as greatly significant, is the fact that the problem of East and West is not only his fundamental problem, but also Russia's fundamental problem.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dmitry Merezhkovsky, "Vostok ili zapad," (1910). Accessible here: [http://az.lib.ru/m/merezhkovskij\\_d\\_s/text\\_1910\\_vostok\\_ili\\_zapad.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/m/merezhkovskij_d_s/text_1910_vostok_ili_zapad.shtml).

<sup>8</sup> Berdyaev, "East and West," in *Silver Age*, 88.

According to Berdyaev, Solovyov's contribution to the problem was to move beyond the nineteenth-century debate between the Slavophiles and Westernizers by reframing the debate away from Christian nationalism towards a Christian universalism (in which Russia would still play an important role): "Russia's great mission was to over-come by love and self-renunciation the sin of the millennium-long conflict between East and West, to overcome this enmity which more than anything else was preventing Christ's work from being accomplished on earth."<sup>9</sup> Solovyov believed that the East was marked by the "dominance of divinity over humanity" while the West was marked by the "dominance of humanity over divinity." He instead called for the "perfect union of divine and human" or what he called "divine-humanity."<sup>10</sup>

Given that the Symbolists were artists rather than monastic ascetics, and thus worked within the very "human" forms of art, they could not turn away from the accomplishments of humanity in their pursuit of mystical experiences. Nor could they abandon what they believed to be the mystical foundation of art for the aestheticist cultivation of "art for art's sake." Thus, Solovyov's vision of an equal emphasis on the human and divine, and the concordant unity of East and West, lay at the core of Symbolist religious aesthetics. In his 1909 essay, "The Present and Future of Russian Literature," Bely provided a manifesto for the future of Russian art built around the union of East and West. He argued that due to "modern Western individualism," literature in the West has become a "profound cult of form," in which the "the hidden potential of creativity" is now obscured by an overemphasis on formal technique. Bely asserts that Russians must accept the Western emphasis on formal perfection but only insofar as "form is considered the product of religious creativity—and literary technique the external expression of a living confession."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 91. Solovyov's central concept of "divine-humanity" is sometimes also translated as "Godmanhood." The idea expresses his metaphysical belief that all of humanity is both human and divine, like Christ.

<sup>11</sup> Andrey Bely, "Настоящее и будущее русской литературы," *Весты* 2, 3 (1909). Reprinted in Bely, *Lug Zeleny* (Al'tsiona, 1910). Accessible here: [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_0440.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_0440.shtml). Text abridged from: "В свете современного западного индивидуализма литература есть только особая форма искусства; но смысл литературы, будучи извне

But how is religious creativity actually expressed in artistic form? The answer for Bely was simple: rhythm. Bely believed that the deep melodiousness of the soul was expressed through rhythms. The temporal nature of rhythm meant that the temporal arts of music and poetry were most suited to the mystical expression of the rhythms of the soul. But for Bely, rhythm was not just cosmic or metaphorical, but was specifically the movement through time of artistic elements in poetry or music—which should correspond to the composer’s own inner “rhythms.” In Bely’s thought, then, rhythm is both the mystical content of the soul and its concrete manifestation within temporal art forms.<sup>12</sup> This is the reason why he began to devote himself to the study of metrics in poetry: he wanted to understand the difference between rhythm as a free expression of the poet’s soul and meter as a crystallized form:

The first pressing task consists in precisely differentiating between rhythm and meter. Strange though it may seem, these two areas continue to this day to be blurred and confused. Rhythm is the actual expression of the natural melody of the poet’s soul (the spirit of music); meter is the precise, crystallized artistic *form* of rhythmic expression.<sup>13</sup>

In his 1910 book, *Symbolism*, he devoted much space to the study of the most common and celebrated meter of Russian poetry—iambic tetrameter. He noticed that much of the time, lines would not feature all four stresses. Due to the nature of the Russian language, pyrrhic feet would often be substituted for iambic feet. Bely defined poetic rhythm as the deviations from the meter, with sustained deviations called “melody” (in a reference to Wagner’s “endless melody”). His

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формален, религиозен изнутри. Далее: форма неотделима от содержания. И западноевропейский символизм скрытую потенцию творчества разлагает на форму. Религия -- углубленный культ формы. Задача современной русской литературы -- принять положение западноевропейской эстетики: форма неотделима от содержания. Но с выводом из этого положения русская литература не согласится никогда. Форма есть только продукт религиозного творчества. И литературный прием есть внешнее выражение живого исповедания.”

<sup>12</sup> For scholarship on Bely’s conception of rhythm, see John Elsworth, “The Concept of Rhythm in Bely’s Aesthetic Thought,” in *Andrey Bely Centenary Papers*, ed. Boris Christa (Verlag Adolf Hakkert, 1980), 68-80; and Mikhail Gasparov, “Bely-stikhoved i Bely-stikhotvorets,” in *Andrey Bely: Problemy tvorchestva*, eds. Lesnevsky and Mikhailov (Sovetsky pisatel’, 1988), 444-460.

<sup>13</sup> Bely, “Lyric Poetry and Experiment,” in *Selected Essays*, 245-46. He goes on to write, “I once had occasion to talk at length with a well-known musical theoretician, [the composer] S. I. Taneyev, who was studying the rhythmic of *byliny*. I was forced to concur with him that, without any knowledge of the musical laws of rhythm, it is hardly possible to follow the genesis of metrics.”

research resulted in the discovery of all the rhythmic forms possible in iambic tetrameter and he tried to characterize different poets by their rhythmic preferences. Bely's desire to see maximum deviation from the ostensible meter influenced his own poetry and led him to the cultivation of rare rhythmic forms. Ultimately, his desire to have the rhythms of the soul break free from the strictures of meter led him to occasionally experiment in accentual verse instead of the foot-based metrical system (i.e. "syllabo-tonic").

One of the most characteristic achievements of Bely and the Symbolists, however, was the cultivation of a poetic meter in between the strictness of syllabo-tonic verse and the unconstrained liberty of accentual verse: the "dolnik" (recall that this refers to verse with a fixed number of stresses per line, but with varying numbers of unstressed syllables in between). The dolnik thus represents a kind of union of rhythmic freedom with metrical regularity.<sup>14</sup> The Symbolists borrowed the dolnik from Classical and Romantic German poets. Alexander Blok made equirhythmic translations of Heine's dolniks and became the most celebrated master of the meter in Russian (leading the Symbolist poet Vladimir Pyast to say that Blok approached Russian poetry as if it were German).<sup>15</sup> The Symbolist cultivation of the dolnik clearly reflects their desire to adopt Western artistic formal practices as a means to expand their ability to convey mystical content. In Bely's thinking, the dolnik literally allows for greater expression of mystical experience due to the wider range of rhythmic patterns available—the long hegemony of syllabo-tonic meters in Russia had begun to restrict such expression.

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<sup>14</sup> For scholarship on the dolnik as a poetic form and its development by the Symbolists, see Marina Tarlinskaja, "Metrical Typology: English, German, and Russian Dolnik Verse," *Comparative Literature* 44, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 1-21; Vera Polilova, "Стих Гейне в научных дискуссиях и русской переводческой практике (1910—1930-е годы), *Балтийский акцент* 14, no. 4 (2024): 222-235; Sergei Liapin and Igor Pilshchikov, "'Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam' and the typology of the Russian dolnik (following Osip Brik's, Boris Jarcho's and Andrei Fedorov's remarks on the Russian translations from Heine)," *Studia Metrica et Poetica* 2, no. 1 (2015): 58-80.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Georgette Donchin, "French Influence on Russian Symbolist Versification," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 33, no. 80 (Dec 1954): 161-187 [170]. On Blok's dolnik practice, see James Woodward, "Rhythmic Modulations in the dol'nik Trimeter of Blok," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 1968): 297-310.

In 1932, Bely described the expansion of rhythmic variety within iambic tetrameter and the cultivation of the *dolnik* as the two major accomplishments of Russian Symbolism as a poetic movement. He used the term “*pauznik*” to describe the *dolnik*, because he understood the meter to be derived from triple meters with unstressed syllables sporadically removed—with the end result “close to Heine”: (note how Bely dresses up his account of the historical development of versification in Soviet lingo):

The degeneration of Russian academic verse reflects the decline of the nobility and the rise of the merchant class; The strong triple meter verse of Nekrasov replaced the withering iambic verse of Pushkin, and became laced with the motifs of populist poetry. The Symbolists turned Nekrasov’s practice into a *pauznik*, bringing it closer to Heine’s... The Symbolists brought to light the [rhythmic] modulation in the Classical iamb and the *pauznik* in triple meter; by this they expanded the sphere of meter...<sup>16</sup>

Medtner contributed to both of these Symbolist accomplishments. In his song settings, his handling of poetic meter is extraordinarily nuanced. Fluidly employing a wide variety of rhythmic patterns, Medtner sensitively highlights shifts in poetic rhythm and other deviations from the prevailing meter, like iambic tetrameter. As a result, his music was universally admired for its rhythmic inventiveness and complexity—in many songs each poetic line might receive a subtly different musical rhythm, highlighting the “melody” of the verse. For this reason, Medtner’s settings effectively constitute rhythmic scansions of each poem. On the other hand, his settings of German- and Russian-language *dolnik* and accentual poetry positioned his songs as a part of Symbolist poetic experimentation. The *dolnik* was predominantly associated in Russia with Goethe and Heine. In his first two collections of German *lieder* (featuring both of those poets), Medtner showcased the *dolnik*—including a setting of Heine’s famous three-stress *dolnik*, “*Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam*”

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<sup>16</sup> Andrey Bely, “Поэма о хлопке,” in *Novy Mir* 11 (Nov 1932), 230-31. “Вырождение русского академического стиха отражает эпоху снижения дворянства, уступающего место купцу; крепкий трехдольник Некрасова явился на смену захиревшему ямбу Пушкина; он сплелся с мотивами народнической поэзии; символисты его превратили в паузник, приблизив к трехдольнику Гейне...Символисты выявили модуляционность в классическом ямбе и паузность в трехдольнике; этим они расширили сферу метра...”



(Op. 12/2). He also set Bely's "Zolotomu blesku veril" (Op. 13/2) and originally planned to include it in the same opus as the Heine settings.<sup>17</sup> Bely's poem is also a three-stress *dolnik*, in which he "turned Nekrasov's practice into a *pauznik*, bringing it closer to Heine's." From his very first published song opus, Medtner displays a Symbolist concern for the deft handling of poetic rhythm and meter, and the peculiar progression of his early career is easily explained by ever deeper engagement with the intricacies of Symbolist poetics. Let us now examine that engagement and its results.

### Reading Poetry

With one published opus under his belt, Nikolay Medtner decided to make a serious study of poetry. Finding himself alone on the outskirts of Moscow in the summer of 1903, he acquired the latest Symbolist collections published by the Muscovite houses "Griffin" and "Scorpion." Scorpion was headed by Valery Bryusov and had released almanacs with new poetry for the previous couple of years. Griffin was a new rival house that had just issued its inaugural almanac—with the first published poetry of Bely and Blok. Clearly well aware of literary trends, Medtner also acquired new collections of the poetry of Fyodor Tyutchev (1803-1873) and Afanasy Fet (1820-1892)—these older poets, ignored by the socially-committed realist critics of the latter half of the nineteenth century, were experiencing a revival at the hands of the Symbolists, who perceived them as forerunners.<sup>18</sup> Sweating over this new modern verse, Medtner developed a certain technique in assessing poetic form. And when he subsequently turned to the family's beloved Goethe, he was so

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<sup>17</sup> For the details concerning Medtner's original plans to publish the Bely and Heine settings together, see Flamm, *Medtner*, 386-87. He otherwise never intermixed different-language poems in his published song opuses.

<sup>18</sup> For the revival of Tyutchev and Fet, see Pyman, *Russian Symbolism*, 10-14. Vladimir Solovyov was partially responsible for the rehabilitation of Tyutchev with a 1895 treatise on the poet. Fet's poetry and his translation of Schopenhauer into Russian captivated Bely in his youth.

astounded at the latter's poetry that he wrote a lengthy unfinished letter to his brother (now living in Nizhny Novgorod and working as a censor):

Yes, so about Goethe. The thing is that I have recently forced myself to read poetry properly. First I read a little Tyutchev, then the poetry of "Scorpion" and "Griffin," and now in the summer I have looked through Fet's collection properly. And what happened? My cold attitude to poetic verse has not changed in the least, either thanks to Tyutchev and Fet, or to "Scorpion" and "Griffin." But, thanks to them, or rather thanks to the fact that I read them so intensely—especially "Scorpion" and "Griffin," over which I sweated so much trying to catch, grasp, or feel in them at least some semblance of human form—thanks to all this I acquired a certain technique in reading poetry in general. This is the technique I previously lacked in order to appreciate poetry properly. And yet, I now understand that a certain technique in reading poetry is just as absolutely necessary as in reading music. And now, when I turned to Goethe, I positively went mad with delight. No, really, let's take Tyutchev or Fet—although they are talented, one still feels to a certain extent that poetic form is a burden for them. There is no creativity in form, but only in thoughts and moods. And if you think about it carefully, if you look closely, then perhaps it will turn out that Russians generally have little creativity in artistic form. For them, form always seems to be only a burden, a lesson that they have learned, and it's a good thing if they did! I'm not talking about Pushkin—reading him, I never had this feeling—creativity is felt in all parts of his work.<sup>19</sup>

Medtner's disappointment with the formal sophistication of Russian poetry was not total, with Pushkin exempted from all criticisms.<sup>20</sup> These early impressions would change in time, and after thirty Goethe settings, he then turned towards the verse of Tyutchev and Fet for many of his best songs.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, both Medtner's music and Russian Symbolist poetry flowed from similar

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<sup>19</sup> N. Medtner to E. Medtner, 5 August 1903 (unsent), in *Pis'ma*, 49. "Да, так вот о Гете. Дело в том, что в последнее время я заставил себя как следует вчитаться в стихотворную поэзию. Сначала почитал немного Тютчева, потом поэзию "Скорпиона" и "Грифа" и теперь летом просмотрел как следует сборник Фета. И что же? Мое холодное отношение к стихотворной поэзии несколько не изменилось ни благодаря Тютчеву с Фетом, ни "Скорпиону" с "Грифом". Но зато благодаря им или, вернее, благодаря тому, что я так напряженно читал их и в особенности "Скорпиона" с "Грифом", над которыми я столько потел, тискал уловить, схватить, осязать в них хоть какое-нибудь подобие человеческой формы, -- благодаря всему этому я приобрел некоторую технику в чтении стихов вообще. Этой-то техники мне раньше не доставало для того, чтобы оценить стихотворную поэзию. А между тем я вижу теперь, что здесь известная техника так же безусловно необходима, как в чтении нот, музыки. И вот теперь, когда я открыл Гете, я положительно сошел с ума от восторга. Нет, право же, -- возьмем хоть того же Тютчева или Фета -- хотя они и талантливы, но все же чувствуется до известной степени, что поэтическая форма для них бремя. Нет творчества в форме, а только в мыслях и настроениях. И как подумаешь хорошенько, разберешься, то, пожалуй, окажется, что у русских вообще довольно мало творчества в форме искусства. Для них вообще и всегда форма есть только бремя, урок, который они выучили и хорошо еще, если выучили! Я не говорю про Пушкина -- читая его, я никогда не имел этого ощущения -- у него творчество чувствуется во всем."

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, he would later argue to Emil that Pushkin was a greater poet than Goethe. See Flamm, *Medtner*, 178.

<sup>21</sup> Medtner employed several Tyutchev and Fet poems that had never before been set to music, including a few that were widely quoted in the Symbolist literature as programmatic: for example, Tyutchev's "День и ночь" ["Day and Night," Op. 24/1] and "О чем ты воешь, ветер ночной" ["Why do you howl, night wind?" Op. 25/2 and Op. 37/5].

literary sources, i.e. German Classicism and later Romantic currents in both Russia and Germany. Yet, he never became wholeheartedly enthusiastic with the idea of setting the poetry of his contemporaries, preferring to stick with those poets whom the Symbolists declared as their direct predecessors (e.g. Goethe, Tyutchev). Medtner's careful study, however, of his contemporaries' poetic experiments informed how he read verse and assessed its form—one enhanced by his later close association and engagement with these authors. As his letters make clear, he continued to read Symbolist periodicals and attended lectures and poetry recitations at gatherings like Bryusov's *Society for Free Aesthetics* and Morozova's own religious-philosophical society. He also read Bely's literary criticism and theoretical articles on Symbolism, which Emil would report to Bely about—leading the latter to exclaim in sarcastic frustration that Nikolay was his “only reader in Moscow.”<sup>22</sup> That his compositional approach to text setting was deeply molded by his engagement with literary Symbolism explains why Medtner's songs were perceived as bizarre by contemporary music critics—as Grigory Prokofiev put it in a 1906 review of Medtner's Goethe Lieder, Op. 6, “the listener is surprised by his strange attitude to the meaning of his words: Medtner hears and understands poetry differently than an ordinary person.”<sup>23</sup> Of course, this assessment could also be made of the Symbolists as a whole, given their ubiquitous tendency to retrospectively read Classical and Romantic poetry through the lens of Symbolism itself.

From his studies of poetry, Medtner acquired (as he confessed to Emil) the “very serious symptoms of a passion for Goethe,” which he admitted must be “our family's hereditary disease.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Bely-E. Medtner, *Perepiska*, II, 254-55.

<sup>23</sup> Grigory Prokofiev, Review of Medtner concert of 7 November 1906, reproduced in Flamm, *Medtner*, 269. “Что касается Метнера, как вокального композитора, то тут удивляет слушателя, странное отношение к его смыслу слов: Метнер слушает и понимает стихи не так, как обыкновенный человек.”

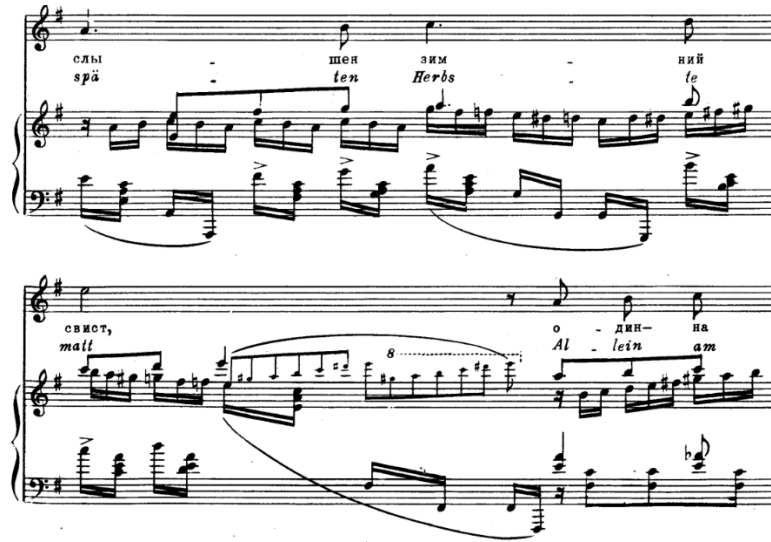
<sup>24</sup> N. Medtner to E. Medtner, 4 August 1903 (unsent), in *Pis'ma*, 48-9. “Тогда, т[о] [сть] две недели тому назад, мне хотелось сообщить тебе, что я открыл в себе весьма серьезные симптомы страсти к Гете.... Именно страсти. Раньше было не то. Ты, вероятно, заметил это. А теперь я вижу, что, вероятно, страсть (опять-таки именно страсть) к Гете, Бетховену и им подобным (тьфу! Да разве есть им подобные-то!!!!) есть наша семейная наследственная болезнь, и ничего тут ровно не поделаешь!..”

Seeking to defuse this “passion,” Medtner told his brother that he had just set Goethe’s “Auf dem See” [“On the Lake”] along with Pushkin’s “Я пережил свои желанья” [“I have outlived my desires”]—these two were paired with an earlier Lermontov setting and published as Op. 3.<sup>25</sup> In the Pushkin setting Medtner employs his characteristic snowstorm pictorialism, in which the image of a storm rustling the last leaf on a bare branch is meant to invoke the frustrated isolation and imminent death of the poetic subject. After the end of the second stanza in which the poet asks if his “end will come,” Medtner (Example 3.1) drums up a blizzard in the piano “underneath” the voice, as it sings the opening of third stanza: “So, stricken by the late cold/ as the whistling winter storm is heard.”<sup>26</sup> With its whirling triplets and the blatant contrast between the slowly moving voice and swift, pictorial piano writing, this song serves as a kind of prototype for his subsequent “snowstorm” songs (Op. 13/1 and Op. 12/2) which Bely especially enjoyed.



<sup>25</sup> The Lermontov is a setting of “У брат обители святой” [“At the gates of the holy monastery”] and incorporates a chant-like motive from his youthful setting of Lermontov’s “Молитва” [“Я, мать божия”]—indicating an early interest in the salvific power of the Mother of God. See Flamm’s illuminating discussion and analysis of all three Op. 3 romances in Christoph Flamm, “*Primeti:* Musical Symbols in Medtner’s Songs,” in *Nikolay Metner: Music, Aesthetics, Contexts*, 120-130.

<sup>26</sup> Pushkin, “Я пережил свои желанья” (1821). “Так, поздним хладом поражённый,/ Как слышен зимней бури свист,/ Один на ветке обнажённой/ Трепещет запоздалый лист.”



Example 3.1. Medtner, “Ya perezhil svoi zhelan’ya,” Op. 3/2, mm. 17-21.

Medtner later rejected this Pushkin setting—the only time he did so for a published work—and reset the text as Op. 29/5. Careful attention to his treatment of Pushkin’s poetic rhythms within the iambic tetrameter reveals why Medtner ultimately chose to revisit the text. In the Op. 3/2 setting, Pushkin’s shifting use of pyrrhic feet (between the first, second, and third foot of the iambic tetrameter line) sometimes results in the misalignment of poetic and musical rhythm due to the use of a periodic phrase structure with repetitions of motivic ideas—i.e. the first time a motive appears, the musical and poetic stresses will align, but not necessarily when it is repeated—something entirely normal within the romance tradition, of course. But, in Medtner’s second setting from 1913, he employs an expanded range of rhythmic patterns to accommodate Pushkin’s text—clearly he had well learned the lessons of Bely’s investigations into the varying rhythms of iambic tetrameter.

Medtner’s first Goethe setting, Op. 3/3, with its cheerful serenity, sits rather on the opposite end of the spectrum of nature pictorialism in music to blustery blizzards. Goethe’s subject, in “Auf dem See,” enjoys Edenic bliss in the bosom of nature while rowing on a Swiss mountain lake, and Medtner’s accompaniment succeeds in evoking the gentle lapping of waves against a boat (Example 3.2). The gently rocking vocal part is first presented in the piano within a contrapuntal framework

made up of slowly moving lines and pedal points, suggesting the unity or wholeness of nature. In the middle of the song, the poetic subject becomes temporarily excited by the sublimity of the surrounding mountain heights and even higher stars, but the peaceful mood of the opening returns as the subject embraces earthly life—the dream of the heavens fades away and the subject is now content with the reflection of the mountains, stars, and “ripening fruit” in the lake itself. This poem, with its point of finding divinity present or reflected within earthly nature (rather than abandoning the earth for the heavens), expresses the basic premise of Medtner’s religious-aesthetic beliefs, and of Symbolism more broadly.

Andantino

И си-лу в грудь, и све-жесть в кровь ды-хань-ем воль-ным  
Und fri-sche Nahrung, neu-es Blut Saug-ich aus frei-er

Example 3.2. Medtner, “Auf dem See,” Op. 3/3, mm. 1-10.

Nikolay turned to the poem as a means to stem his burgeoning obsession with Goethe: “my passion for Goethe was resolved in a romance to his words (‘On the Lake’).”<sup>27</sup> And yet, as he exclaimed to Emil, his interest in Goethe was largely induced by an appreciation of the craft of

<sup>27</sup> N. Medtner to E. Medtner, 5 August 1903 (unsent), in *Pis'ma*, 50. “Моя страсть к Гете разрешилась романсом на его слова («На озере»).”

versification: “I now understand that a certain technique in reading poetry is absolutely just as necessary as in reading music. And now, when I turned to Goethe, I positively went mad with delight.” Medtner explained that he now perceived in Goethe’s verse a certain creativity in the treatment of poetic form itself and expressed dismay that, to his mind, only Pushkin seemed to match Goethe in this capacity. The very first creative result of Medtner’s joyful discovery was his setting of “Auf dem See,” and, indeed, the poem has an interesting, *sui generis* form. Here is the text along with Afanasy Fet’s (nearly) metrical translation—which Medtner ultimately used as the basis for his song, perhaps because the other two in the opus were to Russian texts.

Goethe, “Auf dem See”	Fet, “Na ozere”	Goethe, “On the Lake” <sup>28</sup>
<p>Und frische Nahrung, neues Blut Saug’ ich aus freier Welt; Wie ist Natur so hold und gut, Die mich am Busen hält! Die Welle wieget unsern Kahn Im Rudertakt hinauf, Und Berge, wolkig himmelan, Begegnen unserm Lauf.</p> <p>Aug’ mein Aug’, was sinkst du nieder? Goldne Träume, kommt ihr wieder? Weg, du Traum! so Gold du bist; Hier auch Lieb’ und Leben ist.</p> <p>Auf der Welle blinken Tausend schwebende Sterne, Weiche Nebel trinken Rings die türmende Ferne; Morgenwind umflügelt Die beschattete Bucht, Und im See bespiegelt Sich die reife Frucht.</p>	<p>И силу в грудь, и свежесть в кровь Дыханьем вольным лью. Как сладко, мать-природа, вновь Упасть на грудь твою! Волна ладью в размер весла Качает и несёт, И вышних гор сырая мгла Навстречу нам плывёт.</p> <p>Взор мой, взор, зачем склоняться? Или сны златые снятся? Прочь ты сон, хоть золотой, - Здесь любовь и жизнь со мной!</p> <p>На волнах сверкают Тысячи звёзд сотрясенных, В дымном небе тают Призраки гор отдаленных. Ветерок струится Над равниною вод, И в залив глядится Дозревающий плод.</p>	<p>And fresh nourishment, new blood I suck from the wide world; How beautiful and good is nature Which holds me to her breast! The waves rock our boat In rhythm with the oars, And mountains, with clouded peaks, Meet our course.</p> <p>Eye, my eye, why do you lower? Golden dreams, will you return? Go away, dream! golden as you are; Here too is love and life.</p> <p>On the waves twinkle A thousand floating stars, Soft mists drink up The towering distances around; The morning wind flies around The shaded bay, And the lake mirrors The ripening fruit.</p>

Goethe’s “Auf dem See” does demand a “certain technique” in reading to appreciate that all three stanzas are in different meters. The first octave is in mixed iambs (four-stress lines alternate with three-stress) and the ensuing quatrain is firmly in trochaic tetrameter—Fet’s translation

<sup>28</sup> Translated from the original German as that was the text Medtner originally examined.

reproduces both meters. The final octave, however, appears to be in three trochees per line, but in every other line the second trochaic foot is replaced by a dactyl. Thus, it could be considered a *dolnik* due to the varying number of intra-ictic unstressed syllables. Interestingly, Fet's (almost) "metrical" translation of the final octave preserves the *dolnik* meter, but not the exact distribution of unstressed intra-ictic syllables! The second and fourth line of the octave feature dactyls for the first two feet instead of trochees. Perhaps Fet thought that any three-stress *dolnik* form would be suitable because ultimately, in the Russian view, the meter is still the same.

Medtner's setting stays true to Fet's text and shows clear awareness of the metrical complexities. He uses different rhythmic profiles for each change of poetic meter (Example 3.3). Medtner sets the iambs of the first octave in a steady stream of eighths with an upbeat so that the metrical stresses fall on the strong beats of the bar. Had he continued in this manner for the subsequent trochaic quatrain, the only difference would be the lack of upbeat—only a careful listener would detect the change in poetic meter. Instead, he changes the division of the bar into triplets so that each stressed syllable receives an agogic accent in addition to the metrical accent—altering the rhythmic profile of the music to match the new meter. This corresponds to a change in mood, as the poetic subject becomes excited at the realization that "Here too is love and life," and he no longer needs to dream of mountain peaks shrouded in heavenly mists.



мер вес ла ка ча ет и не сёт, и вышних гор сы -  
un.sren Kahn im Ru.der trägt hin - auf, Und Ber.ge wol.kig,  
- ра я мгла на вотречу намплы вёт. Взор мой, взор, - за  
him.mel - an, Be - geg.nen un.sren Lauf. Aug, mein; Aug; was  
чем склонять ся? И лены зла ты е снят ся? Прочь ты, сон,  
sinkst du nie - der? Gold.ne Träu.me, kommt ihr wie der? Weg, du Traum!

Example 3.3. Medtner, “Auf dem See,” Op. 3/3, mm. 20-31 (End of iambs and beginning of trochees).

Medtner rhythmically unifies the song in the final dolnik stanza (Example 3.4) by combining the duple subdivision (from the iambic passage) and triple subdivision (from the trochaic passage) together into a complex hemiola. Similar to how the dolnik can resemble but does not quite conform to strict meters (effectively intermixing duple and triple feet), Medtner’s rhythm alternates between different rhythmic patterns and metrical subdivisions. He even goes so far as to highlight the empty (pyrrhic) foot in Fet’s translation of the first line of the dolnik stanza (“Na volankh sverkayut,” bar 35) with a triplet missing the downbeat. (For the corresponding line in bar 38, Medtner alters the rhythm to a pair of eighth notes to match the trochaic foot.)

con moto

На вол-нах свер-ка-ют ты-ся-чи звезд со-тря-сён-ных;  
Auf der Wel-le blin-ken tau-send schwe-ben-de Ster-ne;

в дым-ном не-бе та-ют при-зра-ки гор от-да-лён-ных;  
Wei-che Ne-bel rin-ken rings die tür-men-de Fer-ne;

*pp*

Example 3.4. Medtner, “Auf dem See,” Op. 3/3, mm. 35-40.

Medtner’s study of Goethe forced him to reevaluate his priorities as a song composer. No doubt realizing the need to preserve Goethe’s own words, poetic forms, and the exact rhythms and images from which they were constructed—all of his future settings were done in the original German. Suffering from the symptoms of Goethe-passion more than ever, he immediately set about drawing up a list of poems to use for future settings, along with motivic sketches.<sup>29</sup> The subsequent thirty settings over the course of three opuses would contain poems in *dolnik* and in free accentual verse. He also turned to another highly regarded master of the *dolnik* by the Symbolists—Heinrich Heine, whose famous “Fichtenbaum” played an important role in the Russian development of *dolnik* theory in early twentieth-century formalist debates over its translation.<sup>30</sup> Medtner’s setting of

<sup>29</sup> For a description of this early list and sketches, see Flamm, *Medtner*, 561. Some of these poems were set in Opp. 6 and 15 and some never revisited.

<sup>30</sup> See note 14.

this poem is another example of his snowstorm pictorialism, whipped up in a long coda as an accompaniment to the spruce tree's winter dreams of fiery sun and palm trees. He dedicated this song along with two other Heine settings to Bely as his Op. 12.

Medtner's turn towards Heine at this point has previously been a major mystery; indeed, the poet was dismissed by Emil due to his Jewish heritage in letters to Bely.<sup>31</sup> Yet, Heine was one of the most important influences on Symbolist versification, and my emphasis on the importance of historical metrics for the study of Medtner's music showcases his shared interests with his literary colleagues. Another mystery in Medtner scholarship was his original plan to include his setting of Bely's "Epitafiya" (i.e., "Zolotomu blesku veril") in the same opus as the Heine settings, despite the difference in language. Yet, the examination of the meter of Bely's poem makes the answer clear. It was originally published in the pages of the magazine, *The Golden Fleece* (where Emil worked as a music critic), as the last of four "Epitaphs." Emil reported to Bely that it instilled in Nikolay the desire to set one of his poems for the first time.<sup>32</sup> While the first three "Epitaphs" are in regular iambs, the last one is a dolnik with incredible rhythmic diversity. Its meter thus likely played a part in Medtner's sudden inspiration. I have added stress marks to the poem to make the rhythmic variety apparent (note that the opening stanza is ambiguous as to whether the grammatical subject is an "I" or a "he"):

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<sup>31</sup> In the early years of the twentieth-century, Emil became increasingly under the influence of antisemitic Aryanism and of Wagner's writings on Judaism. He began to reformulate Symbolism in racial terms and developed a quasi-religious cult of Goethe and German culture in which he advocated that the redemption of humanity lay in the leadership of the Aryan race. This racialist thinking was grafted onto the Christian universalism that informed Symbolist aesthetics. Emil's antisemitism was a major part of his antimodern opposition to the commercialism and mass production of art, which he described as the "Judaization of the stage" in a 1909 article, "Estrada," later republished in his *Modernizm i muzyka* (Musaget, 1912). Bely (along with Alexander Blok and Vyacheslav Ivanov) shared in Emil's antisemitism and promoted Emil's ideas about culture, race, and mass culture in various essays from the end of the decade. For a biographical study of Emil Medtner, see Magnus Ljunggren, *Russian Mephisto*. There is no extant evidence that Nikolay himself shared in Emil's Aryanism, and his choice to set Heine implies that he may have disagreed with his brother (although antisemitism did not stop Blok from devoting himself to Heine's verse).

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the contexts of Bely's poem and an analysis of Medtner's setting in light of the latest sources, see Flamm, "Романсы Николая Медтнера на слова Андрея Белого," in *Nikolay Medtner: Nezabytye motivy*, 239-261.

<p>Andrey Bely, “Epitafiya IV”<sup>33</sup></p> <p>Золотóму блéску вéрил, А умер от солéчных стрéл. Думой вéка измéрил, А жízнь прожить не сумéл.</p> <p>Не смéйтесь над мёртвым поэтóм, Снесите ему́ цветóк. На крестé и зимóй, и лётóм Мой фарфóровый бьётся венóк.</p> <p>Цветы́ на нём побíты. Образóк полни́л. Тяжё́лые плиты́! Ждú, чтоб их кто-нибúдь снял.</p> <p>Люби́л только звóн колоко́льный И закат. Отчегó мне так бо́льно, так бо́льно? Я не виновáт.</p> <p>Пожалéйте, придíте-- Навстрéчу венкóм метнúсь. О, любите́ меня, полюбите́: Я, быть мóжет, не умер, быть мóжет, Вернúсь. Проснúсь...</p>	<p>Bely, “Epitaph IV”</p> <p>Believed in the golden shine, And died from the sun’s arrows. Centuries were measured with a thought, But life was unable to be lived.</p> <p>Don’t laugh at the dead poet, Bring him a flower. On the cross in winter and summer My porcelain wreath batters.</p> <p>The flowers on it are broken. The icon has faded. The tombstone is heavy! I’m waiting for someone to take it off.</p> <p>I loved only the tolling of bells And the sunset. Why is it so painful, so painful? It’s not my fault.</p> <p>Have pity, come here— I’ll throw you my wreath O, love me, love me. Maybe I haven’t died, maybe I’ll return. I’ll wake up...</p>
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“Epitafiya” largely consists of lines with a fixed number of stresses: three. Some lines, taken individually, conform to specific metrical forms (e.g., line 2 and 5 are in amphibrachic trimeter), while other lines are only possible in a dolnik. Bely clearly tried to maximize the diversity of different metrical forms, and the first four quatrains all consist of lines with different rhythms (the final stanza becomes overwhelmed by anapests, rhythmically emphasizing the poet’s increasing desperation and struggle against the tombstone). Recall that, for Bely, the shifting rhythms of poetry are what express the poet’s inner mystical experience. The greater the freedom and variety, the more the poet has been “liberated from the dogmatic forms and images that violate us,” metrical forms included.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Bely wrote the poem in early 1907 while recuperating from surgery in Paris and later changed the title to “Druz’yam” (“To Friends”) and lightly revised the text when he republished it in his collection *Pepel’* (*Ashes*).

<sup>34</sup> Appendix A.

Another factor motivating Medtner's interest in the poem must have been the thematic focus on the resurrection of the artist. As mentioned, resurrection was one of the primary theological concepts underlying the Symbolists' theurgic notion of the transfiguration of the world and of humanity, and as an artistic theme it features prominently in Bely's and Medtner's work. Indeed, in a program note intended to explain the symbolic meaning behind his Goethe settings, Medtner appended a description of his settings of the Heine and Bely poems explicitly in terms of resurrection:

Two songs by Heine and an "Epitaph" by Andrei Bely are also closely related to the set of thoughts outlined. All three depict "gloomy guests on the dark earth."<sup>35</sup> One yearns for destruction and meekly puts up with it ("Lieb' Liebchen" and "Bergstimme");<sup>36</sup> others, rushing towards the Sun past the Earth ("Золотому блеску верил"), die from the arrows of the Sun and from the grave send their love for the Earth and the thirst for reconciliation with it—the hope of resurrection.

Thus Bely's poem is a perfect encapsulation of the Symbolists' turn towards the "human" forms and practices of the West, like the *dolnik*, in order to convey a type of religious, artistic mysticism with clear origins in Russian religious philosophy and the Russian folk veneration of the earth.

Medtner's setting of this Bely poem highlights the extreme rhythmic diversity with an accomplishment of his own: no poetic line is set to precisely the same rhythm, and yet the song is heavily unified motivically. Notice the exaggerated sing-song melodiousness of the melody line—perhaps an attempt to capture somewhat Bely's own notoriously melodic "singing" of his own poetry (Example 3.5). Like other pieces we have analyzed in the first two chapters, the phrase structure is difficult to parse, even though the opening phrase actually fits into a 4+4 bar structure. After beginning on a tonic 4/2 chord, the music progresses to a *vi* chord (a minor) in bar 2. A contrasting idea then occurs over predominant harmony that moves to a proper V-I cadence in bar 4. This cadence is echoed in bar 5, which launches the next phrase with a varied repetition of the

<sup>35</sup> A line from Goethe's "Wandrer's Nachtlied I," which Medtner set as Op. 15/1.

<sup>36</sup> Op. 12/1+3

basic idea. The basic idea is then repeatedly fragmented until a phrygian half cadence in the key of iii (e minor) is reached at the end of bar 8. This is yet another great example of how Medtner seems at first to employ conventional phrases that nevertheless do not conform to any Classical phrase type.

Andante con moto

*mf* *dimin.*

Зо-ло-то-му блес-ку ве-рил, а у-мер от сол-неч-ных стрел.  
*An des Gol-des Schim-mer glaub't'ich Und starb von der Son-ne ver-sengt*

*mf* *p*

*mf* *dimin.*

Ду-мой ве-ка из-ме-рил, а жизнь про-жить не су-  
*Durchschaute E-wig-kei-ten Das Le-ben nur blieb mir*

*mf* *dimin.* *pp*

*mel.* *fremd.* *m.d.*

Не сме-й-тесь над мёрт-вым по-э-том, сме-си-те е-му цве-  
*Ver-lacht nicht den to-ten Po-e-ten, trag' ihm ein Blüm-lein*

Example 3.5. Medtner, “Epitafiya,” Op. 13/2, mm. 1-10.

Medtner conveys the poet’s attempt to break free from the grave and the “hope of resurrection” with spectacular climax at the end of the piece (Example 3.6). The middle of the work had featured a “failed” climax wherein Medtner depicts the poet’s rattling of the gravestone (and porcelain wreath) with increasingly violent dotted rhythmic figures in the bass (not shown). After this he returns to the opening material (always subtly varied in accordance with Bely’s rhythms) and

ratchets up the tension yet again. As the singer screams about their desire to return from the grave on a high A (mm. 34-35), the piano part builds up to a powerful climax that finally lands on a glorious C major tonic chord (bar 36). Except, take a look at how Medtner actually arrives at the major tonic: the previous chord is a  $\text{II}4/3$  chord (end of bar 35)—clearly an applied dominant of V! The music simply proceeds directly from there to the tonic and is not a tonal resolution by any stretch. While the effect is tremendous (and certainly not something one would ever find in the music of Medtner’s predecessors), the meaning is clear—the tonic has not been attained by legitimate tonal voice leading, and the “hope of resurrection” must remain exactly that.

The musical score for Medtner's "Epitafiya," Op. 13/2, mm. 33-39, is presented in two systems. The first system (mm. 33-35) features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics in Russian and German. The piano part includes dynamic markings like *f*, *accelerando*, *subito molto crescendo*, and *ff impeto*. The second system (mm. 36-39) continues the piano part with a *tranquillo* marking and a final chord.

Vocal lyrics:  
 у - мер, быть может, вер-нусь. Про-  
 tot bin, noch kehr'ich zu-rück. Wack!

Example 3.6. Medtner, “Epitafiya,” Op. 13/2, mm. 33-39.

Martha M. F. Kelly, in her *Unorthodox Beauty: Russian Modernism and Its New Religious Aesthetic*, showcases how Russian artists at this time were much more familiar with Orthodox customs and rituals than much scholarship implies, and that in Silver Age poetry one can easily perceive

“profound attention to and innovative use” of Orthodox liturgy and culture, like “icons and Easter, monks and baptisms, incense and annunciations.”<sup>37</sup> We find similar imagery in Bely’s poem—the poet’s grave is clearly an Orthodox one with its icon and porcelain wreath hanging on a cross. The clanging of the porcelain wreath on the cross represents a kind of undead inversion of the ringing of church bells—a comparison that Medtner underscores in his own setting by the use repeated-chord accompaniment figures for both. Furthermore, Kelly highlights the importance for Russian Silver Age poets of the old Orthodox doctrine of deification (*theosis*) as a form of salvation with “emphasis on the restoration—indeed divinization—of the body along with the soul.” Due to this emphasis on physical resurrection, “Russia’s artists in this period became fascinated with images of the transfigured body and its implications for the redemption of materiality.”<sup>38</sup> Medtner’s emphasis on resurrection as a core element of his Sophiological aesthetics—and the manipulation of tonal practices to depict its success or failure—thus places him firmly within what Kelly calls Russian modernism’s “Sophianic task.”

Bely himself also placed Medtner at the center of what is now called Russian literary modernism. At the start of his 1906 essay on Medtner’s Goethe lieder, he surveys the current state of Russian music, identifying Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, and Medtner as the best of the moderns. Under the impression that Rachmaninoff has stopped developing, Bely focusses instead on the latter two composers. He compares Scriabin’s and Medtner’s accomplishments to those in literature, writing that “there is a parallel between the conquests in the field of literary form and the development of young Russian music.”

Medtner and Scriabin bring us a new word. This new word is expressed both by conquests in the area of musical form and in the elaboration of the eternal goals and aim set for music by the great composers of the nineteenth century.... But culture and seriousness completely separate these two composers from groundless originality. There is a parallel between the

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<sup>37</sup> Martha M. F. Kelly, *Unorthodox Beauty: Russian Modernism and Its New Religious Aesthetic* (Northwestern University Press, 2016), 18.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



conquests in the field of literary form and the development of young Russian music.... Medtner and Scriabin are completely opposite from each other. If we allow comparisons, this opposition is analogous to the incommensurability of the impeccable masculine verse of Bryusov with the falsely feminine, melodious line of Balmont.<sup>39</sup>

The identification of Medtner with Bryusov and Scriabin with Balmont is an invidious comparison intended to bolster Medtner. Balmont was certainly the most popular Symbolist poet and his melodious verse was favored by composers like Rachmaninoff and (later) Stravinsky for texts. Yet to younger Symbolists like Bely, Bryusov was the greatest poet of the modern era and Balmont was considered already past his prime by 1906. Bryusov was also a major formal innovator (before Blok and Bely came of age) in the *dolnik* and in free accentual verse forms borrowed from French and German practice. Bely's emphasis on "conquests in the field of literary form" clearly mirrors his attribution to Medtner of "conquests in the area of musical form." Yet, like Medtner himself, Bely understood the new development of music to be rooted in the elaboration of the "eternal goals and aims" already set by the "great composers" of the nineteenth century—all Germans in Bely's estimation (he especially mentions Beethoven and Schumann as Medtner's predecessors).

While Martha Kelly emphasizes the great extent to which the images of Orthodox liturgy and practice pervade Silver Age poetry and act as the material basis for the expression of Symbolist artistic mysticism, it is my purpose to note the great extent to which Western artistic practices were used for the same. Not only did the Symbolists turn to Western versification practices to expand the rhythmic musicality of their verse, they also turned to German literature as an alternative source of imagery to express their religious aesthetics—most obviously with Goethe's *Eternal Feminine*, but also for their ideas about resurrection and the transfiguration of the Flesh. As Bely states, "In Goethe the promise of the ineffable gradually resounds for us, now resurrected again in our souls and objectified by us in religious forms and images. The new religious consciousness in its secret

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<sup>39</sup> Appendix A.

sources is providentially connected with Goethe.” As we will see below, Medtner also uses Goethe’s poetry to express his idea that the artist must venerate the earth as the spiritual basis of humanity and the source of its mystical power.

### Goethe in Russia

Medtner spent the winter of 1903-04 living in Nizhny Novgorod with Emil and Anna, and under his brother’s eye he composed the first of nine settings to be included in his Op. 6 Goethe collection. This first collection already shows Medtner’s tendency to mix of well-known staples of the lieder repertoire with nearly unknown texts chosen for their formal sophistication or how well they express some aspect of his artistic philosophy or mystical beliefs. Showing the characteristic brashness of a young composer, Medtner placed at the opening of the collection his setting of one Goethe’s absolutely most famous poems, the second “Wandrer’s Nachtlid” (“Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh”).

In his review, Bely gleefully noted Medtner’s use of Goethe’s original text, and not the much more well-known (in Russia) version “so unsuccessfully translated by Lermontov,” entitled “Gornye verzhiny.”<sup>40</sup> *Apropos*, we can recall Medtner’s youthful exclamation to his brother that “poetic form is a burden” for many Russian poets, who seem to possess “no creativity in form, but only in thoughts and moods.” Medtner’s extreme subtlety with the smallest details of text setting as a means of generating musical expression demanded the use of the original German. Bely expressed amazement at the specific way in which Medtner sets Goethe’s poems, claiming that musical rhythms seem not invented but discovered within the verse itself: “Following the melody and accompaniment during the performances of Medtner’s romances, one is involuntarily amazed by the fact that the music for Goethe’s songs was not composed, but, on the contrary, was taken as if from the songs themselves.

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<sup>40</sup> Bely, see Appendix A.

And yet, within the limits of Goethe’s melody, the composer freely shapes the music.”<sup>41</sup> Bely perceives Medtner as kind of medium who channels Goethe’s true melodies to the audience. Thus the composer garnered a substantial amount of respect from professional poets in his handling of poetry—cementing his place among the Symbolist ranks.

Following Bely’s lead, we will compare of Goethe’s “Wandrer’s Nachtlied II” with Lermontov’s translation. This exercise reveals a striking difference in approach to poetic form that clearly resonates with the Symbolists expansion of the domain of rhythm and meter through the absorption of Western influence. Lermontov took the unique form and irregular rhythms of Goethe’s original and put them into trochaic trimeter—thus imposing the “dogmatic form” that Bely felt was violating his ability to express inner rhythms on one of the greatest achievements in German accentual verse. Nevertheless, Lermontov achieves a sumptuous expressiveness through vivid imagery and sonorous detail while engaging in an impressive amount of rhythmic variety for such a short poem. Goethe instead manipulates rhythmic and other formal parameters with a greater degree of freedom, but has less poetic imagery overall. Let us look at the Lermontov first—after all, he was Medtner’s favorite poet in his youth, and it is not inconceivable that Medtner may have had his eye on this famous Russian text for use in a romance:

Lermontov, “Iz Gete”	Lermontov, “From Goethe”
Горные вершины Спят во тьме ночной; Тихие долины Полны свежей мглой; Не пылит дорога, Не дрожат листы... Подожди немного, Отдохнёшь и ты.	Mountain peaks Sleep in the darkness of night. Quiet valleys Are full of fresh mist. The road is not gathering dust, The leaves are not trembling. Wait a little, And you too will rest.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

For his two quatrains Lermontov employs the common rhyme scheme of AbAb CdCd (with alternating feminine and masculine rhymes). In trochaic trimeter, he employs two distinct rhythms for each half. The first quatrain employs trochees for the first foot, which are replaced by pyrrhics in the second quatrain, speeding it up. The enjambments in the first quatrain align with and thus reinforce the rhyme scheme. The overall melodious lilt of the poem is impeded by consonant clusters in the first (“Spyat vo t’me”) and third (“svezhey mgloy”) lines which slow down the reader and perhaps serve to musically illustrate the calm darkness of night. This effect is reproduced in the final line (“Otdoxnyosh’ i ty”), wherein Lermontov suddenly addresses the reader—somewhat of a shock after the serenely peaceful descriptions of nature. In the imagery of the poem, the reader is located in-between the mountain peaks and quiet valleys—thus within the peaceful bosom of nature, where the night traveler will find restorative rest. The poem is subtly inventive and certainly colorful, but could appear conventional when placed next to Goethe’s original:

Goethe, “Wandrer’s Nachtlied II”	Goethe, “Wanderer’s Nightsong II”
Über allen Gipfeln Ist Ruh, In allen Wipfeln Spürest du Kaum einen Hauch; Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde. Warte nur, balde Ruhest du auch.	Above all the hilltops [peaks] Is peace, In all the treetops You can feel Hardly a breath; The little birds are silent in the woods. Just wait, soon You too shall rest.

Most obviously, Goethe does not employ a regular meter. While the poem is constructed from recognizable patterns, the final result is a demonstrably unique form. The most regular formal feature present is the rhyme, which in the first quatrain conforms to the same scheme used by Lermontov, AbAb. The rhyme scheme changes to cDDc in the second quatrain, but this is undermined by the enjambment between lines four and five. Thus, the phrase structure does not exactly map onto the stanzaic structure—the punctuation implies a more natural dividing line at

“Hauch.” The rhyme, instead of generating a sense of regularity, now works against the reader, who must press on through line five and cannot linger on “du.” As we will see in Medtner’s setting, “du” is placed in the middle of a musical phrase ending on “Hauch.”<sup>42</sup>

The metrical structure is strange, and, indeed, the exact scansion of the text is debated among Germanists.<sup>43</sup> Judith Ryan suggests that the text was constructed to give the impression of “unconstrained speech, in spite of the verbal, rhythmic, and motivic patterns” that Goethe used to construct it.<sup>44</sup> The poem is built largely from duple feet shifting between iambs and trochees, with a sudden incursion of dactylic feet in line five (“Vögelein schweigen im”). Thus, the lengthy line five stands out both visually and aurally. The irregular meter creates a musical problem for the composer, as one cannot simply create a balanced period structure with each phrase corresponding to a line, as one could with Lermontov’s translation.<sup>45</sup> Goethe addresses his reader earlier (than Lermontov) in line four—introduced into the landscape as a perceiving subject who can “feel hardly a breath.” Tall trees and even taller mountain peaks loom overhead, but, when compared to Lermontov’s beautifully illustrated natural scene, Goethe is sparser with his imagery. Indeed, he uses a strikingly small amount of imagery—only lines 1, 3, and 5 refer to nature at all (whereas in Lermontov’s translation the first six lines do). This “dryness” is compensated by Goethe’s constantly varying repetition of similar sounds and subtle metrical shifts, producing a mesmerizing effect which Bely and Medtner no doubt perceived as the expression of that soulful “melodiousness” that comprises the true content of all Symbolist poetry.

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<sup>42</sup> Notably, Schumann actually emphasizes the rhyme of “Ruh” and “du” with a rest and a motivic echo in the accompaniment.

<sup>43</sup> For a sampling of possible metrical interpretations, see Judith Ryan’s short discussion of the poem in *The Cambridge Introduction to German Poetry*, 83.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Alexander Varlamov’s setting of Lermontov’s poem. Here is a recording: <https://youtu.be/T2lBfs3buYg?>

Medtner had the good fortune to premiere his setting of this text, along with the rest of his Op. 6 Goethe lieder and other piano works, at Margarita Morozova's opulent Smolensky Boulevard mansion on 31 October 1906.<sup>46</sup> Welcomed by Morozova into the highest echelons of Muscovite merchant-class society, as well as into the world of Russian Symbolism and religious thought, Medtner's reputation among the leading composers of Moscow was sealed on the basis of a relatively small amount of works composed to that point (eleven opuses, of which five were even premiered in this concert).<sup>47</sup> In her memoirs, Morozova described the concert as a great success:

A large number of people were invited, and Nikolay Karlovich had great success. There already existed a circle of special lovers of his art, who later became somehow especially united. Their number expanding, of course, over the years and at his concerts and other performances, these lovers of his art gave him a warm welcome and ovations. At Medtner's concerts there was always great excitement and high spirits, which was accompanied by warm applause and endless demands for encores. Everyone was always delighted with his works and his wonderful playing. He played his music perfectly, with some kind of subtle mastery.<sup>48</sup>

Morozova states she first met the Medtners in 1902 but became closer to them in the years 1905-1907, while under the "influence" of Andrey Bely, with whom "all the Medtners were enchanted."<sup>49</sup> In the spring of 1906, she would stay up all night in conversation with Bely or with E. Medtner, and then, in the early morning, would go out into the garden to inhale the lilacs, listen to the birds, and observe the dawns. She also had "the good fortune to take lessons from Nikolay

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<sup>46</sup> Morozova, *Metner*, 21.

<sup>47</sup> All the works on the program were first premieres, which Medtner repeated on 7 November for the public. The program for that concert, as reproduced in Flamm (pg. 578), included the A-major Piano Sonata Op. 11/1, the "Sonata-Elegy" Op. 11/2, the *Märchen* ("Tales") Opp. 8+9, and the Dithyrambs Op. 10 (along with the Goethe lieder). Medtner played a major role in the Symbolist revival of the dithyramb (along with Ivanov), yet his name is unfortunately missing from Katherine Lahti's *The Russian Revival of the Dithyramb: A Modernist Use of Antiquity* (Northwestern University Press, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Morozova, *Metner*, 21. "Народу было приглашено очень много, и Николай Карлович имел большой успех. У него уже тогда намечался круг особых любителей его искусства, которые потом как-то особенно сплотились, число их расширилось, конечно, с годами, и на его концертах и всюду, где он выступал, эти любители его искусства устраивали ему горячий прием и овации. На концертах Метнера всегда царил большое оживление, приподнятое настроение, которое сопровождалось горячими овациями и бесконечными вызовами. Все всегда бывали в восторге от его произведений и от его чудесной игры. Играл он свои произведения совершенно, с каким-то тонким мастерством. Особенно замечательны и своеобразны из его произведений сказки, сонаты и песни."

<sup>49</sup> Morozova, "Metner," 28. Bely formally met Morozova in the late spring of 1905.

Karlovich for almost three years, which, of course, brought us very close and gave me the opportunity to understand and appreciate his love for Classical music, especially Beethoven.”<sup>50</sup>

Bely—true to form as someone obsessed with the union of East and West—describes her as simultaneously both deeply connected with the Russian people and also truly Germanic:

“Everything in her was Russian; her soul sang to me with the Russian soul, with the life of the people (folk); and at the same time: there was something clearly Germanic in her: the Valkyrie rose up; M. K. Morozova empathized with the people (folk) like no one else; she understood Zarathustra like no one else. And a feeling for Nietzsche lived in her.”<sup>51</sup> Thus Morozova provided a major link between Bely, the Medtners, and the neo-Slavophile belief in the resurrection of “Holy Rus” she promoted at her Religious-Philosophical Society.

Bely’s relations with Morozova began well before he ever met her. Since 1901 he had occasionally sent her flowery, courtly love letters (anonymously signed “Your Knight,” having first glimpsed her in the distance at concerts) in which he declares her to be Sophia’s “earthly icon”:

The leitmotif of my mystical love for M. K. M[orozova] grows and begins to cover everything; the poetry of Fet and Lermontov sounds figurative to me; in all of Fet’s love poems there is a reflection of one love: the World Soul’s love for her knight; I feel myself to be this knight—simultaneously the knight of the Heavenly Vision and Her earthly icon; this earthly icon is M. K. M[orozova].<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Morozova, “Metner,” 22. Given that the Medtners left for Germany in December 1906, she could have taken lessons with Medtner for a maximum of one-and-a-half years if she began in summer 1905. Therefore, if her memoirs can be trusted on this point, she must have resumed lessons in 1908 after Medtner’s return for at least a year.

<sup>51</sup> Bely, *Nachalo veka, Berlinskaya redaktsiya*, “Morozova.” “Все было - в ней русское; мне запела душа ее душой русской, народною жизнью; и вместе с тем: в ней было что-то и явно германское: приподымалась Валькирия; М. К. Морозова вчувствовалась в народ, как никто; понимала она, как никто, «Заратустру». И чувство к Ницше в ней жило.”

<sup>52</sup> The quotation is from Bely’s unpublished “Material towards a biography” and is found on page 6 of the editors’ introduction to Andrey Bely, *“Vash Rytsar”: Pis’ma k M. K. Morozovoy*, edited by A. V. Lavrov and John Malmstad (Progress-Pleyada, 2006), my translation. «... вырастает и начинает все покрывать лейтмотив в моей мистической любви к М. К. М.; поэзия Фета и Лермонтова мне звучит прообразовательно; во всех любовных стихотворениях Фета - отблеск одной любви: любви Мировой Души к рыцарю; я ощущаю себя этим рыцарем - одновременно рыцарем Небесного Видения и земной иконой Ее; эта земная икона - М. К. М.»

Morozova is Sophia (or her “icon”) and he would soon include her in his Second Symphony as the character called “Fairy Tale.”<sup>53</sup> But Morozova did not mind these letters because she herself was an ardent reader of Vladimir Solovyov. Bely made her into a living human symbol of the kind of art he hoped to produce. Art in which the presence of Sophia was universal: “By means of marble, paints, and words, art creates the life of the Eternal Woman; religion rips off this veil. One can say that Her smile reposes on every statue made of marble, and conversely that She is the Madonna sculpted in the ages. The primordial chaos...is deified and becomes Her body.”<sup>54</sup>

The idea that “primordial chaos” or “earthly chaos” would need to be prepared for Sophia’s descent directly mirrors the more straightforward notion that the artist transforms the “chaos” of their physical materials into the eventual art work, which would then become a suitable vessel of spiritual content (or an “icon” of Sophia). In many places Bely directly associates the (Dionysian) “primordial chaos” itself with Russia, its countryside and people, and the (Apollonian) “shaping techniques” that the artist uses to sculpt this chaos into Sophia with the West. This idea was common among Morozova’s circle, with those emphasizing the refinement of artistic technique associated with German (or French) culture and those with an eye to the chaotic sources of art more associated with neo-Slavophilism. Morozova was personally very close to Emil, with whom she created a large and unfortunately unpublished correspondence. Yet, as she wrote to the Solovyovian philosopher Evgeny Trubetskoy in 1913, “at its root, [Emil’s] view of art is foreign to me: he is more of an aesthete and ‘Apollonian,’ while I cannot accept art in any way other than through the religious and ‘Dionysian’ in it, which seems to me to be closer to the world soul.”<sup>55</sup> Clearly there was disagreement as to the extent to which Western forms were needed for the expression of the

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<sup>53</sup> He also included her in his great narrative poem, “Pervoe svidanie” (“First Encounter”), twenty years later as the character with the surname “Zorina” (“zorya” was the way he spelled the Russian word for “dawn,” typically zarya). She was the “dawn” of 1901 for him in a very real way.

<sup>54</sup> Bely, “Apocalypse,” in *Mystical*, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Mitchell, *Orphans*, 132. The “world soul” is another Solovyovian term for Sophia.



“religious and Dionysian” content of art—the philosophers in Morozova’s circle were ultimately less interested in Western artistic forms than the Symbolists themselves, who had to find ways to actually shape mystical visions and Dionysian chaos into recognizable forms.

A fundamental aspect of Symbolist theory concerned precisely this problem of how to come back down “to earth” from the heights of mystical experience, so that actual human art could be created and those experiences given earthly form. The question becomes how to intelligibly convey mystical insight without sacrificing it to purely formal aesthetic concerns. Medtner himself stressed this exact point late in life in his notes on what to revise in his book: “All our art should be nothing other than parables accessible in form to everyday understanding. But the words of these parables should not lose their original divine content. Parables should not be understood as religious preaching. Many religious sermons use worn-out empty words and are devoid of divine content.”<sup>56</sup>

Bely himself stresses this point in his article on Medtner’s Goethe lieder. While he had some musical literacy from childhood piano lessons, he certainly did not feel comfortable discussing music in any kind of technical depth. He instead embarks on a discussion of the similar mystical inclinations that Medtner and Goethe both express within their creative work, despite their temporal distance. He first claims that Goethe succeeds in bringing the “ineffable” stuff of the heavens back down to earth—clothing it with comprehensible “earthly” words and clear “religious forms and images” for the benefit of normal folk. Surprisingly, Bely does not think that Beethoven accomplished the same task, declaring that the great German composer never descended from the heavens.<sup>57</sup> Thus Medtner is Goethe’s true musical “contemporary” rather than Beethoven:

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<sup>56</sup> Medtner, “Postscript to *Muzʹa i moda*,” from Medtner’s Moscow archive—reproduced with attribution in Flamm, *Medtner*, 246–47. “Все наше искусство должно быть ничем иным как притчами доступными по форме житейскому пониманию. Но слова этих притч не должны утрачивать своего начального божественного содержания. Под притчами не следует разуметь религиозную проповедь. Многие религиозные проповеди пользуются истертыми пустыми словами и лишены божественного содержания.”

<sup>57</sup> Medtner would certainly not agree with this characterization of Beethoven’s music as detached from earthly forms and images. Nevertheless, Bely’s assessment of Beethoven seems indicative of a broader opinion of Beethoven as an

There is something in Medtner's music that involuntarily links it with Goethe's poetry. Beethoven did not genuinely coincide with Goethe. Beethoven dwelled in the "stars," without the promise of descending down to earth. In Goethe, on the contrary, the promise of the ineffable gradually resounds for us, now resurrected again in our souls and objectified by us in religious forms and images. The new religious consciousness in its secret sources is providentially connected with Goethe. He possesses a prophetic, immortal, cheerful seriousness. It is with this cheerful seriousness that Medtner's talent is endowed. [In "Selige Sehnsucht"] Goethe speaks as if of this seriousness:

And as long as you do not have it—

This: die and become!

You are only a gloomy guest

On the dark earth.<sup>58</sup>

That is why Medtner's choice of Goethe's songs for romances is not accidental. It is caused by a familial attraction to Goethe. Medtner and Goethe have an involuntary coincidence in their experiences.<sup>59</sup>

Both Medtner and Goethe successfully accomplish the Symbolist imperative of both "resurrecting" the ineffable within their souls and then "objectifying" in the forms of art. East and West are united in their art. To Bely, they also share a similar approach to life which they express in art, a certain "prophetic, cheerful seriousness" that he perceives in Goethe's poem "Selige Sehnsucht" ["Blessed Yearning"]. Here he quotes the final stanza, which is difficult to interpret on its own. In the poem Goethe praises "the living thing that yearns for death in the flames," just like a moth, "eager for the light," is burned in the candle's flame. Those who are overcome by a "strange feeling" in the presence of a "gleaming quiet candle," no longer remain captive by the surrounding shadows and are drawn upward by "new desires." Goethe directly juxtaposes the candle's light with the dark gloom of night. Those without this deep mystical desire for the light will thus remain in darkness, a "gloomy guest on the dark earth." It might be natural to interpret this poem in light of a dichotomy between radiant heavenly life and gloomy earthly life, and thus to think that earthly life should be abandoned in an ascetic embrace of the spirit. However, this is not how Bely understood

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extremely difficult and unapproachable composer. Both Bely and Margarita Morozova expressed in their memoirs that Medtner helped them to "understand" Beethoven.

<sup>58</sup> Bely had the original German.

<sup>59</sup> Bely, see Appendix A.

the message. Rather the opposite—the yearning for heavenly life is precisely what enables joyful participation in earthly life. It enables the artist to develop “cheerful, prophetic seriousness” towards life (in Bely’s Nietzschean formulation). The twin imperative, “die and become!” signifies the attitude required to become something more than a “gloomy guest”—to instead become a full participant in earthly life as a step on the way to heavenly life. Needless to say, this full participation required the embrace of Western philosophy, poetry, and music as the fullest expression of humanity on its way to becoming divine. The job of the creative artist is to spiritualize the earth, to find the reflection of the heavens within it, to bring the eternal into the transient, to ultimately create “heaven on earth.”<sup>60</sup>

This is precisely how Medtner understood his own job as a Symbolist composer. In print, he repeated and expanded upon these very same ideas, while explaining the hidden mystical content behind his Goethe settings in a program note for his 1909 House of Song recital. This short essay (reproduced in Appendix B) is indisputable evidence that Medtner himself was not only intimately acquainted with Symbolist and Russian religious thought,<sup>61</sup> but conceived of his music as direct expression of it. Surveying songs from several different opuses, he places them all within a Sophiological narrative in which each song serves as a step in the progression of the attainment of mystical knowledge of, and union with, the earth. Medtner also reiterates Solovyov’s philosophy of divine-humanity, in which humankind simultaneously participates in divine and earthly life—and shows how Goethe anticipated the idea. Medtner also references the same Goethe poem, “Selige Sehnsucht,” as Bely did above:

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<sup>60</sup> Bely was heavily influenced by the final chapter of Revelation and the idea of the coming union of heaven and earth in the city of New Jerusalem. This book is a major source of his Sophianic imagery. For example, see Bely, “Apocalypse in Russian Poetry,” in *Mystical Essays*.

<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the program note shows considerable debt to a variety of Bely’s essays, especially his Sophiological manifesto, “Apocalypse in Russian Poetry,” which can be found in *Mystical Essays*, 87-104.

“Be true to the earth, my friends!” – Nietzsche’s slogan<sup>62</sup> was inherited from Goethe. The earth is God’s temple; earthly life is a symbol of Divine life. There is no way to Heaven except through the earth;<sup>63</sup> Without participation in earthly life with its joy and suffering, struggle and death, there is no communion [причастия] with eternal life. Man is the supreme creation of the Earth; humanity is the highest expression of earthly life. “The more you feel like a human being, the closer you are to the gods”—in the words of Goethe.<sup>64</sup>

Goethe’s work shows the struggle for achieving this worldview. The first “Wandrer’s Nachtlied”<sup>65</sup> expresses the state of the soul, tired of wandering in search of its fatherland, “a gloomy guest on the dark earth,”<sup>66</sup> sadly haunting the thresholds of life and powerless to cross them (“An die Thüren will ich schleichen”),<sup>67</sup> passing by the earthly in aesthetic contemplation (“Im Vorübergehn”)....<sup>68</sup>

But the soul, which for a moment comes face to face with death, finds the strength to partake of true life. “The fogs have broken, the sky has cleared... the distances have converged, the earth is now visible!” (Glückliche Fahrt).<sup>69</sup>

What follows will be a blessing, a consecration of the earth, the earthly, the human—as a prototype of the Eternal Being (“Gleich und Gleich”, “So tanzet und springet”)<sup>70</sup>, a solemn epithalamium for the marriage union with the earth (“Gefunden”).<sup>71</sup> The mother’s chest is not crowded for her son and there is no need for trees to grow into the sky: isn’t the Earth itself in Heaven?

But with true greatness, the poet meets and accepts death as both a rest (“Wanderer’s Nachtlied II”;<sup>72</sup> in contrast to the line, “There I rest with a brief silence,” in “So lasst mich scheinen...”) <sup>73</sup> and as a return to the fatherland, and from there the poet sends greetings to the living (“Geistesgruss”).<sup>74</sup>

Goethe’s poetry is thus used to express Medtner’s interpretation of what Martha Kelly deemed

Russian modernism’s “Sophianic task,” the transfiguration of the earthly material world into

heavenly, “holy flesh.” There are many pitfalls possible in this task—Medtner’s mentions falling into

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<sup>62</sup> From the third chapter of the prologue to Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Bely himself had a couple months earlier quoted this exact line from Nietzsche in his own House of Song lecture, a Sophiological piece entitled “Song of Life.”

<sup>63</sup> Vyacheslav Ivanov also frequently put forth similar ideas in his lectures and writings. For example, in his 1905 “The Symbolics of Aesthetic Principles,” he wrote: “We who are born of the earth are able to perceive Beauty only in the categories of earthly beauty. The Soul of the Earth is our Beauty. Thus there is no beauty for us if we break the commandment: ‘Remain faithful to the Earth.’” See Vyacheslav Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> This quote is the second half of Goethe’s aphorism, “Halte dich nur im stillen rein, Und laß es um dich wettern; Je mehr du fühlst, ein Mensch zu sein, Desto ähnlicher bist du den Göttern.” It was one of Emil Medtner’s favorite quotes. See his letter to Bely of June 3-8, 1905, in Bely-E. Medtner, *Perepiska*, I, 518-523.

<sup>65</sup> Medtner’s Op. 15/1.

<sup>66</sup> Goethe’s “Selige Sehnsucht,” final stanza.

<sup>67</sup> Op. 15/2.

<sup>68</sup> Op. 6/4.

<sup>69</sup> Op. 15/8.

<sup>70</sup> Op. 15/11 and 15/5.

<sup>71</sup> Op. 6/9.

<sup>72</sup> Op. 6/1.

<sup>73</sup> Medtner’s note. He did not set this famous poem, in which the subject does not accept death, wishing for eternal youth.

<sup>74</sup> Op. 15/12.

pure “aesthetic contemplation” in which the divine source of earthly beauties is forgotten. But, Goethe helps us to achieve the proper “worldview”—to attain “true life” which entails the “consecration” of the earth as a symbol of Heaven and its ultimate union with it.

Here Medtner refers Goethe’s “Wandrer’s Nachtlied II” (examined above) as the expression of the acceptance of death—thus confirming that he interprets the word “Ruh” to be a metaphor for death, which the poet “meets and accepts with true greatness.” By placing the poem in the same context as “Selige Sehnsucht,” Medtner constructs a broader worldview out of Goethe’s poetry. The mantra from this latter poem, “Die and become!,” must be embraced in order to not be a “gloomy guest on this dark earth,” but to instead partake in earthly life as a “prototype for Eternal being.” This embrace of the possibility of spiritualized and transfigured life leads to what Bely identifies as Goethe’s (and Medtner’s) “cheerful, prophetic seriousness.” In the program note, Medtner compares the embrace of earthly life (“with its joy and suffering, struggle and death”) as the way to heavenly life; whereas, “yearning for destruction” or “rushing to the Sun” can only result in the denial of both heavenly and earthly life. The rejection of Western, “human,” culture for the embrace of Russian, “divine” monastic aestheticism can only lead to destruction.

In his setting of Goethe’s “Wandrer’s Nachtlied II,” Medtner expresses this cheerful seriousness and “blessed yearning” with an interesting harmonic trick (Example 3.7).

**Canto.** *Lento. (M.M. ♩ = 40.)*

**Piano.** *pp*  
*con pedale*

*pp* *morendo*

*pp* *poco sfz* *morendo*

*pp* *poco sfz*

Ve - ber al len Gip - feln ist Ruh  
Ha - ver - shi - na - z - gor - shi - na -  
ist Ruh  
no - кой

Example 3.7. Medtner, “Wandrer's Nachtlid II,” Op. 6/1, mm. 1-6.

The song begins with three bars on the tonic, Eb major, with slow, soft echoing effects in the piano generating a sense of quiet stillness. The voice enters on hypnotically-repeated B-flats<sup>75</sup> and reveals Medtner’s characteristic attentiveness to the rhythm of the text, as he uses a duple grouping for the second beat of the 9/8 bar. Actually, this is more than simple “attentiveness,” but constitutes an intriguing and unusual scansion that can be seen as part of his interpretation of the text. Consider that Schubert, in his famous setting (Example 3.8), places “über” on the downbeat with agogic stress on the first syllable.<sup>76</sup> Here, Medtner places “über” on an offbeat *and* gives slightly longer note values

<sup>75</sup> This is likely an homage to Schubert, who also opens his vocal line on repeated B-flats, despite the fact that the song is in a different key.

<sup>76</sup> Schumann in his setting does so as well.

to the following word, “allen.” Furthermore, Schubert (and Schumann as well) places the first syllable of “Gipfeln” on an elongated strong beat, whereas Medtner quickly runs past the word, landing with extreme stress on “Ruh.” Thus Medtner’s rhythmic reading subtly emphasizes the conceptual idea that “...all ... is peace” at the expense of the landscape imagery of “Over...the mountain peaks.” This is further emphasized by the *sforzando* on “Ruh” and the repetition of “ist Ruh” without the preceding words in mm. 5-6.<sup>77</sup>

The image shows a musical score for Franz Schubert's "Wandrer's Nachtlid," Op. 96/3, measures 1-7. The score is in E-flat major (three flats) and 3/4 time. It is marked "Langsam." (Ad libitum). The vocal line (Singstimme) is in the upper staff, and the piano accompaniment (Pianoforte) is in the lower staff. The piano part features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the right hand and a more active bass line in the left hand. The lyrics are: "U - ber al - len Gip - feln ist Ruh, in al - len Wip - feln spü - rest du kaum einen Hauch; die Vög - - lein schwei - gen,". The piano part has a *pp* (pianissimo) marking in measure 1 and a *pp* marking in measure 4.

Example 3.8. Franz Schubert, “Wandrer's Nachtlid,” Op. 96/3, mm. 1-7.

The intrusion of chromatic notes in bar 4 of Medtner’s setting (Example 3.7) leads to the chord circled in red. This chromatic chord resolves by way of *diminished third* to the tonic (E-flat major) on the downbeat of the next bar. A diminished third chord is the inversion of the more common *augmented sixth* chord. Either way, both of these chords are classified in tonal theory as predominants. That is, they are used to establish the dominant chord (which in this song would be Bb major) in a cadence. The musically-attuned ear would thus hear the E-flat major chord on the downbeat of bar 5 as a dominant triad (of IV) rather than a tonic triad. Medtner, however, continues the music as if Eb is still the tonic (here heading back to the same diminished third chord again in

<sup>77</sup> Neither Schubert or Schumann repeat these words, although the repeat other parts of the poem.

bar 6). The result—which anyone can easily hear—is that the Eb tonic resounds with the brightness, directedness, and tension of a dominant, rather than the calm relaxation of the tonic. The “peace” of the tonic is combined with the dominant’s sense of movement. Medtner employs this same harmonic twist again at the end of the song, at the culmination of a large climax (Example 3.9).

The musical score is for Medtner's "Wandrer's Nachtlied II," Op. 6/1, measures 13-18. It is written for voice and piano. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The score consists of three systems. The first system shows the vocal line with the lyrics "cre - scen - do" and the piano accompaniment. The second system is marked "Maestoso." and "ff" (fortissimo). It contains the lyrics "War - te nur, bal - ruh - est du" and "Вре - мя при - дем: - де u мы от - дох -". A red circle highlights a chord in the piano part at the end of the second system. The third system is marked "diminuendo" and shows the vocal line with the lyrics "auch. - нешь." and the piano accompaniment.

Example 3.9. Medtner, “Wandrer's Nachtlied II,” Op. 6/1, mm. 13-18.

The idea of employing a triple forte climax in a song about the peace and stillness of nature—indeed, right on the words “Soon you to shall rest”—certainly would not occur to most composers (indeed, Schubert “crescendos” from pianissimo to piano). However, to Medtner, this song is not really about the peace and stillness of nature, but about the attainment of death and resurrection in and through nature—about “rest *and* a return to the fatherland.” The reprisal of the



circled chord at the height of climax further imbues that glowing brightness and energetic movement typically associated with the dominant, that feeling of *movement beyond*, into the feeling of “rest” characteristic of the tonic itself—*Stirb und Werde!*

In his House of Song program note, Medtner constructs a Sophiological theory about the importance of union with the earth for religious salvation based in the transfiguration of the earthly. In his theory, he posits several different kinds of relationships that one can have with the earth, all of which he depicts in his music. In Russian Symbolism, the earth is often understood to be inhabited by feminine “World Soul,” or Sophia, as the object of humanity’s sacred love. Indeed, most or all of Medtner’s nature and love poetry settings serve as religious metaphors for mankind’s relationship with the earth and employ many common symbols of Sophia—e.g. as muse, as nature herself, as a flower, as the dawn.<sup>78</sup> His settings of love poetry can also be read in this context, with elegiac expressions of love lost representing humanity’s separation from the earth or from Sophia, and ecstatic expressions of love gained as reunion with the earth or Sophia. This is precisely how Medtner’s interprets his own song settings in the program note.

He explains that there are obstacles to the establishment of the proper relationship between humanity and the earth. When a poem depicts one of these obstacles, Medtner will treat it in a tragic or elegiac manner. The “gloomy guest on this dark earth” could be “sadly haunting the thresholds of life, powerless to cross them.” Perhaps this tired wanderer has succumbed to viewing the earthly Sophia as an aesthetic object rather than the object of genuine, mystical union. Or perhaps the earth is viewed as a “trifle, as amusement—an attitude towards the earth not as a mother and bride, but as a harlot.”<sup>79</sup> The “soul” must give rather than take. The proximity of death can help: “But the soul,

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<sup>78</sup> Flamm also recognizes the fundamental nature of Medtner’s choice of poetic subjects as religious metaphors, but he does not perceive the Sophiological dimension to Medtner’s work. See Flamm, *Medtner*, 177.

<sup>79</sup> The biblical image of the harlot (or whore) from Revelation 17 appears in Bely’s “Apocalypse in Russian Poetry” as the enemy of Sophia and again in Medtner’s book as the enemy of the Muse.

which for a moment comes face to face with death, finds the strength to partake of true life....the earth is now visible!” Then there follows the consecration of the earth—the “prototype of the Eternally Existing.” Marriage with the earthly Sophia brings about the union of heaven and earth—”isn’t the Earth itself in Heaven?”<sup>80</sup>

Peculiarities in Medtner’s songs can often be explained by reference to this Sophiological scheme. Medtner’s setting of Goethe’s “Mailed,” the second song in his Op. 6 collection, is a great example of this, and precisely the kind of text setting that confused Medtner’s critics, who viewed his approach to poetry as bizarre. In Goethe’s poem we have what seems like a happy and carefree pastoral love ditty, in which the subject is searching for his love at home and in the fields. The beauty of nature reflects his buoyant mood and he seems to find his love snoozing in the grass at the end:

Goethe, “ <i>Mailed</i> ”	Goethe, “May Song”
Zwischen Waizen und Korn, Zwischen Hecken und Dorn, Zwischen Bäumen und Gras, Wo geht’s Liebchen? Sag mir das. Fand mein Holdchen Nicht daheim; Muß das Goldchen Draußen sein; Grünt und blühet Schön der Mai, Liebchen ziehet Froh und frei. An dem Felsen beim Fluß, Wo sie reichte den Kuß, Jenen ersten im Gras, Seh ich etwas! Ist sie das?	Between wheat and corn, Between hedges and thorns, Between trees and grass, Where are you darling? Tell me that. I did not find my little one at home; The little golden one Must be outside; Greening and blooming Beautiful is May; My darling frolics Happy and free. On the rock by the river, Where she gave a kiss, Right there in the grass, I see something! Is that her?

As we will see, however, Medtner sets this poem as a subtle tragedy. The music opens with a peppy pastoral jaunt in E-flat major (Example 3.10). It is extremely folk-like as the melody is built from short repeated motives with a compressed range, over a tonic pedal. Metrically, Goethe’s first three

<sup>80</sup> All quotations drawn from my translation of Medtner’s House of Song program note in Appendix B.

lines resemble a dolnik as the meter is irregular and an extra intra-ictic stress is inserted between the second and third beat. Medtner's subtly illustrates this poetic rhythm by adding a sixteenth-rest on the second eighth-note), so that the third poetic stress will fall on a strong beat ("Zwischen Waizen ... und Korn"). This effect creates a jittery feeling and prevents a smoothly flowing line. The harmonization above the pedal constantly emphasizes ii (f-minor), generating a subtly melancholic tinge and lack of harmonic motion that Medtner will soon transform into full-blown sadness.

Allegretto frescamento. (M.M. ♩ = 84). *p*

Canto. *p* Zwischen  
Меж ду -

Allegretto frescamento. (M.M. ♩ = 84). *p* poco rit. dim.

Piano. *p*

crescendo dim.

Waizen und Korn, zwischen Hecken und Dorn, zwischen Bäu-men und Gras.  
- ки - ны и ра - жи, меж - ду ча - щи ку - стовъ, меж - арь - совъ и лу - говъ

a tempo *leggerissimo*

Example 3.10. Medtner, "Mailed," Op. 6/2, mm. 1-8.

After a half-cadence in bar 12 (not shown), Medtner begins the phrase again (Example 3.11). This time the little ditty builds up "*con violenza*"[!] to a cadence that spaces out in dreamy melancholy over predominant harmony (mm. 15-17), slowing down the music tremendously. So far, the lack of harmonic motion and functional fifth-relations in the bass has made this music sound distinctly folk-like. Clearly, the poetic subject has stopped swiftly wandering in the wheat and corn and has turned inward with anxious hope. Note that the Db in the vocal line in bar 14, while ostensibly part of the

V7/IV harmony, sticks out like a sore thumb (and resolves to the omnipresent f-minor, ii7). At the end of Example 3.11, notice the key change. Here, Medtner does something quite unusual (for himself): he modulates with no preparation to a completely unrelated key: C#-minor.<sup>81</sup> This tonic note is the enharmonic equivalent of the mysterious Db from bar 14, so he did hint at what was to come. The next section (bar 20) begins with another “stanza” with no vocal part, reflecting the poetic subject desperately rushing to and fro in search of the beloved.

*crescendo, con violenza* *mf*

Wai-zen und Korn, zwi-schen Hee-ken und Dorn, zwi-schen Bai-men und Gras,  
 -ми-цы и ржи, меж-ду ча-щи кустовъ, меж-аъ - совъ и лу-говъ

*crescendo, con violenza* *mf*

*pleno f* *poco ritenuto dimin.*

wo gehst Lieb-chen, sag mir das  
 гдѣ нмъ ми-луй? гдѣ- ска-жи!

*pleno f* *poco ritenuto dimin.* *a tempo*

*mf*

Example 3.11. Medtner, “Mailed,” Op. 6/2, mm. 13-22.

<sup>81</sup> Typically Medtner accomplishes his modulations with smooth voice leading. The extra sharp in this case indicates C#-dorian.

This piano interlude and the poem's inner octet (offset in chart) is set in this distantly related C#-minor, with the pastoral mood evaporating (Example 3.12). Harmonically, he does something extremely “Russian”: the music alternates between the tonic, C#-minor, and the major subtonic (bVII), B-major. This rocking back and forth between major and minor key centers a whole step apart is one of the most distinctive practices of Russian folk song commonly employed by the mighty kuchka. Furthermore, our C#-minor is technically in the Dorian mode (sharp scale degree-6)—another Russian folksong touch.

Fand mein Hold - chen nicht da - heim; muss das Gold - chen  
 До-ма ми - лоу не на-шею; не си-дит - ся  
*a tempo*  
*poco rit.* *p*

Example 3.12. Medtner, “Mailed,” Op. 6/2, mm. 28-31.

After this episode in C#-minor, Medtner returns back to tonic to recapitulate the opening material. This time he does not repeat the opening phrase, but instead drives directly to another “*con violenza*” climax (Example 9), with temporal stretching. This is similar to its equivalent in Example 2, but with one major exception—right at the moment when the dominant is resolving to the tonic (mm. 51-52), Medtner introduces a big, honking Db in the bass (LH). This may not look like much on paper, but to the seasoned ear sounds something like getting jabbed with a needle. Clearly the poetic subject did not find his lass. This Db is, of course, the same note as C# from the song's B section—providing an “organic” coherence to the music's form.

con violenza *f* *ff* poco rit.

reichte den Kuss, je-nen ers-ten im Gras, seh ich et-was.  
 на мнѣ да-ла пер-вый свой по-цел-уй, и ви-жу тебѣ го-

Ist sie das?  
 -лю-бви мо-ей.

*a tempo, diminuendo* *p leggierissimo*

Example 3.13. Medtner, “Mailed,” Op. 6/2, mm. 46-55.

With this Goethe setting, Medtner transforms what should be a little love lyric into a subtly orchestrated tragedy of hope, doubt, anxiety, and despair over not finding one’s loved one anywhere. Bely claimed that this song “reveals Nietzsche’s demonism (which spontaneously grew out Goethe).<sup>82</sup> By “demonism” Bely refers to Goethe’s notion of the “demon” as a supernatural being of the earth who is neither good nor evil, but otherwise detached from the divine source of life—an eternal wanderer. In Medtner’s scheme, the subject is a wanderer on the earth, perhaps a Goethean “demon,” in search of love as a “trifle, an amusement” and refusing to heed the call of the Earth as divine “mother and bride,” instead continuing to search for something else to no avail—this is “the state of the soul that takes, but does not give itself.”

With this early Goethe setting, Medtner employed a musical style with elements drawn from the nineteenth-century Russian folk-song tradition and expressive of a Sophiological theory

<sup>82</sup> Appendix A.

developed by Solovyov and his Russian followers. He did this through the setting of an obscure Goethe text with enough deviations from the prevailing trochaic meter so as to give the impression of a *dolnik* or accentual verse. Medtner's adoption of Goethe did not constitute a rejection of his homeland, but was reflective of the Symbolist's syncretic embrace of Western forms of art in order to convey the religious foundations of life.

### A Russian Brahms?

Medtner's love of Pushkin (and later of Tyutchev and Fet, along with Lermontov) reflected the Symbolist's reevaluation of their own poetic heritage, as they prioritized those metaphysical and lyrical poets who suffered at the hands of socially-committed realist critics in the 1860s-80s. Medtner did not, however, attempt a similar revision of the Russian musical canon. He applied the same standards of formal creativity to his evaluation of Russian music as he did of poetry, and he did not find much to appreciate: in the same 1903 letter to Emil quoted above, Nikolay declared that even his great nineteenth-century predecessors, Tchaikovsky and Musorgsky, seemed "burdened" by form, as if it was "a lesson they learned."<sup>83</sup> While he appreciated much of Russian literature, he turned to the West for its musical heritage. This preference for German music over Russian was not unusual for Medtner's literary milieu and was actually standard among the Symbolists. Rosamund Bartlett notes that, "while [Vyacheslav] Ivanov adored the music of Beethoven more than any other, and Bely worshipped Schumann, Blok would have unhesitatingly declared that Wagner was his favorite composer."<sup>84</sup> Thus, to love German music was a perfectly "Russian" thing to do at the time, not something restricted to the Medtners with their German heritage.

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<sup>83</sup> N. Medtner to E. Medtner, 5 August 1903, *Pis'ma* 49. This evaluation, of course, was extremely common and was a major reason why Russian music in general struggled to gain a foothold in the German-centered scholarly canon of Western music. Later in his life, Medtner embraced his Russian predecessors as great composers, but still never elevated them to the level of Beethoven or Wagner.

<sup>84</sup> Rosamund Bartlett, *Wagner and Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 195. As for Bely, his love of Schumann and other German composers (Schubert, Beethoven) was enhanced through his friendship with the Medtners, but even before he met them, Bely already loved Wagner and Grieg.

Nikolay's assessment of German composers was based entirely on the professional evaluation of innovative handling of musical form—recall that for Bely, the Western mastery of artistic form was precisely the reason why its heritage must be studied and adopted by Russia for the expression of mysticism and prophecy. Medtner's discussion of his favorite composers almost always centers around their mastery of form. As he wrote to Emil, his most beloved musical idols were Beethoven and Wagner, “who were themselves positively form in the flesh, whose every step becomes an archetype, a clearly tangible form—and even if they break the law, the result becomes the law, that is, if they deviate from a form they have already exhausted, it is only in order to create a new one.”<sup>85</sup> This idea that Beethoven was “form in the flesh” whose every step resulted in the creation of new forms, strongly prefigures Bely's own programmatic declaration at the end of his 1907 lecture, “The Art of the Future.” Here Bely solves the problems of Symbolist artistic creation in one fell swoop: “Here is the answer for the artist: if he wishes to remain an artist but not cease to be a man, he must become his own artistic form. Only this form of creation still holds out the promise of salvation.”<sup>86</sup> Was the “art of the future,” then, actually with us the whole time? Bely actually declares a resounding “yes” to this question at the end of his 1909 essay “The Emblematics of Meaning” (in which he tried to systematically ground his theory of Symbolism in Neo-Kantian philosophy). He concludes that, “The novelty of contemporary art lies precisely in the enormous quantity of past material that has all at once emerged before us. We are experiencing today, in our art, all ages and all nations. The life of the past is now actually rushing by right before us. This is because we are now standing on the edge of a great future.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> N. Medtner to E. Medtner, 5 August 1903, *Pis'ma* 49. “Бетховену, Вагнеру, которые были положительно сами формой во плоти, у которых каждый шаг есть образ, форма, совершенно отчетливо осязаемая, и если они даже совершают беззаконие, то это закон, т[о] [сть] если они отступают от формы, которую уже исчерпали, то только для того, чтобы создать новую.”

<sup>86</sup> Bely, *Selected Essays*, 202.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibi.*, 197.



In the same vein, Blok penned the lines, “I seek strange and new things on the pages/ Of old and familiar books.”<sup>88</sup> And, indeed, his favorite “old and familiar books” were the librettos to Wagner operas (in both German and Russian), which he memorized and quoted in his poetry.<sup>89</sup> At the turn of the century, Wagner was in vogue in Russia, and Blok never missed a performance (seeing his beloved Sophia in Brünnhilde).<sup>90</sup> The Medtner’s Wagner-mania (including trips to Bayreuth) was thus not particularly unusual. What *was* unusual, however, was the way in which Nikolay accounted for Wagner’s significance—holding him aloft as a principled master of form (in the same breath as Beethoven, no less). This is one of Medtner’s most idiosyncratic, but revealing, opinions.<sup>91</sup> At the time, Wagner’s music dramas were often characterized as formless expanses of meandering tonalities and endless chromatic sequences—the point of the music lay not in its form but in its colorful effects and direct emotional impact. Medtner’s criticism of contemporary modernism was based precisely on the dislike of these same attributes popularly ascribed to Wagner. Instead, he found in Wagner’s scores (which he studied at the piano) a new level of formal cohesion built from extensive thematic development.

Such a view would have stumped Russian music critics at the time, who ubiquitously the following basic dichotomy between Brahms and Wagner as a means to categorize new musical trends. The “Brahmsian” approach prioritized strict form and contrapuntal writing (often seen as boring), while “Wagnerians” pursued coloristic and harmonic effects (fun). Thus, Medtner was always and explicitly lumped in with the Brahmsians—much to his own personal frustration and dismay.<sup>92</sup> But, there is a more obvious reason why critics would never think to place Medtner within

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<sup>88</sup> Blok, *Poems of Sophia*, 102. The poem was written in 1902.

<sup>89</sup> He also carefully studied Wagner’s theoretical writings and based his own theoretical articles on them. See Rosamund Bartlett, “Wagner and the Russian Symbolists: Aleksandr Blok,” in *Wagner and Russia*, 195-217.

<sup>90</sup> Indeed, in a letter of June 1903 to his fiancée, Blok wrote that his “Lady” is like that “naïve and uncultured, ultra-German passion, i.e., the German passion of the Valkyries and the Gods.” See Bartlett, *Wagner*, 201.

<sup>91</sup> He repeats this assessment in his book thirty years later, as well.

<sup>92</sup> Medtner frequently disavowed any affinity between his work and Brahms’s in his letters. Although his judgment was surely motivated to some extent by the desire to break free from being constantly stereotyped as Brahmsian.

the Beethoven-Wagner tradition. As Finnish composer and critic Ernst Pingoud put it in 1910, “Characteristic of Medtner’s essence is the avoidance of the orchestra, this giant instrument that every musician today aspires to and for which every ‘modern talent’ believes he can only create... From the outset, Medtner’s piano music must seem somewhat strange in Russia, because it does not have the full, rich sound of Russian masters.”<sup>93</sup> Since Beethoven and Wagner were masters of the orchestra in their day, and all the trends of modern music were predicated precisely on the massively expanding capacity of the orchestra at the turn of the century, Medtner’s rejection of that “giant instrument” was almost tantamount for many critics to the rejection of *music* itself, especially of the Russian variety.

Despite the fact that the mighty kuchka (and Glinka himself) all wrote songs and piano music, continuing to do so in the 1900s was not only a sign of Germanness, but the wrong kind of Germanness. Indeed, the question for Russian critics was not solely “German versus Russian,” but—which kind of Germanness (Brahms or Wagner)? And, despite Wagner’s later association with German nationalism in its most vile form, before World War I it was he who seemed (much) closer to Russian hearts. Indeed, to the critic Boris Popov, the question was one of “blood”: “There is too much German blood in Medtner. Not that Wagnerian blood which slowly flamed with the boundless languor of Tristan, but good, healthy German blood—alien to the Slavic, almost Chopinian sophistication of the aristocratically-refined Scriabin...”<sup>94</sup> As we know from Bely’s letters with Emil, he was outraged by Popov’s assessment, and, in response, he penned a powerfully

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<sup>93</sup> Pingoud, “Metner,” in Flamm, 281. “Es ist charakteristisch für Medtner’s Wesen, daß es dem Orchester, dem Rieseninstrument, zu dem jeder Musiker von heute hinstrebt und auf dem jedes „moderne Talent“ glaubt nur schaffen zu können, fürs erste aus dem Wege geht, Klaviermusik und Lieder schreibt dieser Künstler. Von vornherein muß Medtner’s Klaviermusik in Rußland etwas befremdend wirken, denn sie hat durchaus nicht den vollen satten Klang russischer Meister.”

<sup>94</sup> Boris Попов, “Пис’ма о музыке, II. Ноябрь’ескиа росы,” 60. “Въ Метнерѣ слишкомъ много нѣмецкой крови. Не той Вагнеровской крови, которая медленно пламенѣла необъятнымъ томленіемъ Тристана, а хорошей, здоровой нѣмецкой крови, которой одинаково чужды и славянская, почти Шопеновская утонченность аристократически-изысканнаго Скрябина, в жадныя алканія Ребикова.”

evocative attack on critics of all kinds entitled, “Artists to Insulters.” Bely takes his religious conception of artistic creativity to the absolute extreme, comparing artists with the crucified Christ, and implicitly referencing Popov’s “analysis” of Medtner’s blood. Here is the opening salvo:

We, artists, address a word to you, the insulters. You have seen our dreams. You have fed on our flesh. You have drunk our blood. You have turned our crucifixion, our unquenchable fire, our pure prayers into mere seasoning for your bland days. Our spilled blood boiled with the fire of creation: before you we presented our blood. At best you only liked the taste of our blood. Now we hurl you our contempt, our rage, our indignation. Our blood, defiled by you, cries out for vengeance!<sup>95</sup>

Whether in terms of “blood” or not, critics often associated Scriabin with Wagner and Medtner with Brahms. They perceived Medtner’s mastery of musical form but typically failed to perceive any kind of “Russian” or Symbolist mystical depth lurking behind it, which is, of course, much more overt in Scriabin’s music to begin with. The comparison of the two morphed into a dichotomy in which each composer was associated with diametrically opposed traits. Comparisons between the two composers became common enough that by 1911, the critic Yury Engel declared: “After Scriabin, Medtner. The two names that first come to mind when you think about the best in contemporary Russian music, and when dreaming of its future.”<sup>96</sup> Of course, Engel’s own reviews helped to generate this impression, as he never missed the chance to compare the two composers. In 1906, he first drew the battlelines between the two camps:

Scriabin is close to Chopin and Wagner; in his music, subjective above all, one almost always hears some kind of breakdown, some kind of pathos, not always deep, but always ardent, poignant. Medtner’s music is distinguished, on the contrary, by contemplativeness... everywhere in him one senses some kind of objectivity, I would even say restraint,

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<sup>95</sup> Andrey Bely, “Художники оскорбителям,” in *Весы*, no. 1 (Jan 1907): 53-56. “Мы, художники, к вам, оскорбителям, обращаем слово. Вы видели наши сны. Вы питались нашей плотью. Вы пили нашу кровь. Вы обратили в приправу к пресным дням вашим наши крестные мучения, наш неугасимый огонь, наши чистые молитвы. Наша проливаемая кровь закипала огнем творчества: перед вами мы обнажали кровь. В лучшем случае вам нравился только вкус нашей крови. Ныне бросаем вам наше презрение, нашу ярость, наше негодование. Кровь наша, оскверненная вами, о мщении вопиет!” Accessible here: [http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj\\_a/text\\_14\\_1907\\_arabesky.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_14_1907_arabesky.shtml). For Emil and Bely’s discussion of the Popov, see letters #131, 132, 136 in Bely-E. Medtner, *Perepiska*, I.

<sup>96</sup> Yury Engel, Review of Medtner’s 7 March 1911 recital, reproduced in Flamm, *Metner*, 298. “За Скрибиным Метнер. Два имени, которые в числе первых приходят в голову, когда думаешь о лучшем настоящем русской музыки, мечтаешь об ее будущем.”

reminiscent of the classics. In this respect, Medtner is closest to the German neoclassicist, the “serious, severe” Brahms.<sup>97</sup>

Another anonymous reviewer of the same concert combined Engel’s “contemplativeness” and “objectivity” into one, expressing surprise that a young composer could even possess such an attribute: “the general character of the composer’s work is objective and contemplative (Brahms), but not personal and Romantic, to which most new composers are attributed.”<sup>98</sup> Given that Medtner’s Symbolic mysticism was always expressed through the subtleties of form, meter, and thematic transformation, rather than through large orchestras awash in colors and gesturing to the beyond through novel harmonies.

Bely celebrates this austere quality of Medtner’s music as a necessary component of his Symbolist expression. He argues that there is always a danger for the “genuinely new” to be confused with that which only seems new due to particularities of appearance. Thus, Medtner’s continued cultivation of Classical form is an integral component of the music’s novelty: “In order not to confuse the genuinely new that Medtner’s work gives us with the musical anxiousness and nervousness that surrounds us, the young composer clothes it in a strict, completely definite form.”<sup>99</sup> To Bely, then, the “objective-contemplative,” formalist element in Medtner’s music serves as important “clothing” for its novel mystical content, which is contained in the musical themes:

Medtner is a true tragedian in music, just as Beethoven was. This element of pure tragedy imparts a prophetic, providential meaning to his themes. Only where there is *faith* in values is struggle possible, and tragedy is a flight through horror. Medtner’s themes soar wingedly

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<sup>97</sup> Yuly Engel, Review of Medtner concert of 7 November 1906, reproduced in Flamm, *Metner*, 262. “Скрябин примыкает к Шопену и Вагнеру; в его музыке, субъективной прежде всего, почти всегда звучит какая-то надломленность, какой-то пафос, не всегда глубокий, но всегда пылкий, острый. Музыка Метнера отличается, наоборот, созерцательностью; дает ли автор картинки настроения, изливает ли страсть серьезным языком сонаты, повествует ли сказки или поет дифирамбы, -- везде чувствуется в нем какая-то объективность, я бы даже сказал строгость, напоминающая классиков. В этом отношении Метнер ближе всего к немецкому неоклассику „серьезному” Брамсу, в нем даже есть черта сухости, столь характерная для Брамса.”

<sup>98</sup> [N. N.], Review of Medtner concert of 7 November 1906, reproduced in Flamm, *Metner*, 264. “Из всего такой вывод: общий характер творчества композитора объективно-созерцательный (Брамс), но не лично-романтический, к которому причисляют большинство новых композиторов.”

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

over the insurmountable abysses of the spirit. Medtner is perhaps the only Russian composer who affirms rather than destroys life.<sup>100</sup>

With this Nietzschean discussion of Medtner and tragedy, Bely invokes the language and ideas of his earlier essay “Symbolism as a World View.”<sup>101</sup> Here, a “tragedian” is defined as someone who perceives the essential (Dionysian) chaos of life bubbling beneath the calm superficiality of surface forms.<sup>102</sup> Medtner grants us artistic images “whose purpose is no longer to arouse a feeling of beauty, but rather to develop the observer’s capacity to see for himself the prototypical meaning of these images in the very phenomenon of life.”<sup>103</sup>

While few other critics perceived the “prototypical meaning” of Medtner’s themes and his ability to transform chaos into artistic forms of life, some did register that the music was seemingly about something “other” than the musical surface itself. The recycled trope that Medtner’s music is “objective-contemplative” refers to the perception that Medtner’s music is about “ideas” rather than “sensations.” It tries to depict something “behind” the music rather than to only please the audience with beautiful sounds and colors. As Grigory Prokofiev explained it in a review of Medtner’s January 1909 premiere of, *inter alia*, his second album of Goethe lieder (Op. 15): “I have to note the objective-contemplative nature of Medtner’s art: he does not speak about his experiences, he does not convey the mood of the text, but illuminates it in light of a general view of life and creativity, of which each song is a separate manifestation.”<sup>104</sup> Here Prokofiev unconsciously hits on the idea that Medtner’s music is symbolic—expressive of a deeper, quasi-religious worldview. Of course Medtner

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Written in 1903 after he wrote “On Theurgy” and published a year later in *World of Art*. See Bely, *Selected Essays*, 73-92.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>104</sup> Тогда же мне пришлось отметить объективно-созерцательный характер творчества Метнера: он говорит не о своих переживаниях, он передает не настроение текста, а освещает его светом общего взгляда на жизнь и творчество, отдельным проявлением которого является данная песня.”

conveys “experiences” and “moods” in his text settings, but not necessarily the ones that the audience (not privy to the inner significance of the text) would be expecting.

However, some critics viewed Medtner’s music as purely far too beholden to Western forms and to German classicism, and thus, in direct contradiction of Bely’s view, utterly detached from the creative tensions and possibilities inherent in the modern condition. This is precisely the argument that the music critic Boris Popov put forth in his review of Medtner’s November 1906 concert, published in the Symbolist magazine *Pereval*.<sup>105</sup> This angry little essay was really a disguised polemic aimed at Bely’s article on Medtner’s Goethe lieder from April. Popov was a proponent of the latest musical modernisms, and, like all modernist critics, he had his own pet composer he wanted to promote—Vladimir Rebikov (and he would soon abandon Team Rebikov for Team Scriabin). Outraged at the attention Medtner was receiving in contemporary literary circles, and equally upset that his music was sometimes lambasted by conservative critics as “decadent” when it does not “deserve” it,<sup>106</sup> Popov tried to set the record straight:

The name of this composer, the name of Medtner, is often mentioned in one or two (non-musical) magazines, where he is considered an innovator; in some circles, again unrelated to music, Medtner is compared with Scriabin and even with Rebikov. Professional musicians, keepers of ossified traditions, in the vast majority know nothing about Medtner or speak of him half-condescendingly, half-contemptuously, grumbling about this dangerous “young man,” who allegedly encroached upon the established boundaries. And completely undeservedly!<sup>107</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Boris Popov, “Pis’ma o muzyke, II. Noyabr’eskiya rosy,” *Pereval* 2 (Nov 1906), 58-61.

<sup>106</sup> Indeed, early reviews of Medtner’s work lumped him with the degenerate youth breaking all the rules of musical composition. Like Rachmaninoff, Medtner was often condemned as either disturbingly modern or hopelessly anachronistic. For a famous example, here is Cesar Cui’s condemnation of Rachmaninoff’s 1<sup>st</sup> Symphony (premiered in 1897): “If there were a conservatoire in Hell, if one of its talented students were instructed to write a program symphony on ‘The Seven Plagues of Egypt,’ and if he were to compose a symphony like Mr. Rachmaninoff’s, then he would have fulfilled his task brilliantly and delighted the inmates of Hell.” Rejected by both the conservatives and the modernists alike, Rachmaninoff suffered from mental illness impeding his creativity. See Peter Franklin, “Reading the Popular Pessimist,” in *Rachmaninoff and His World*, ed. Philip Bullock (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 2-25. The Cui quote can be found on 24n19.

<sup>107</sup> Boris Popov, “Pis’ma o muzyke, II. Noyabr’eskiya rosy,” 59. “Имя этого композитора, имя Метнера часто называютъ въ одномъ, двухъ (не музыкальныхъ) журналахъ, его тамъ считаютъ новаторомъ въ нѣкоторыхъ, опять таки не причастныхъ къ музыкѣ кругахъ Метнера сопоставляютъ со Скрябинымъ и даже съ Ребиковымъ. Профессиональные музыканты, хранители окостенѣвшихъ традицій, въ огромномъ большинствѣ ничего не знаютъ о Метнерѣ или отзываются о немъ полуснисходительно, полупрезрительно, брюзжать на опаснаго “молодого,” якобы посягнувшаго за установленные предѣлы. И совершенно незаслуженно!”

On the contrary, for Popov, Medtner “knows nothing of the present” or of the “tension of the modern soul.” This new modern life demands immediate expression in new forms of creativity—dissolving the old rules and conventions which can no longer contain the “nightmarish appearances of everyday life.”<sup>108</sup> Bely’s demand for Dionysian chaos, for mystical visions of Eternity, to be revealed in and through the highly developed Western formal heritage seems lost on Popov, who, in any case, clearly does not perceive such depths in Medtner’s music.

Comparing Medtner to Rebikov and Scriabin, it becomes clear that Popov is sick and tired of musical “form” in general. In a great illustration of the difference between Symbolists and genuine modernists, Popov seeks formal dissolution and a complete break with the established genres of the past:

But Medtner does not even know that refined languor in which the delicate, yearning soul of Scriabin dissolves conventional forms.... Medtner will not follow Rebikov, he will be afraid of cold whole-tone nightmares; he will carefully put a full-stop where Rebikov freezes with the howling question of bold dissonance. Feeling as such is alien to Medtner, *only feeling*, which Rebikov wrote on his banner, breaking forever with the architectonics of the sonata.<sup>109</sup>

Of course, Medtner and the Symbolists would be incredulous at Popov’s claims. One can imagine their rejoinders: surely Pushkin felt the same “refined languor” as Scriabin? Surely Bach himself engaged head-on the “howling question of bold dissonance”? If the modern soul is indeed faced with ever more encroaching chaos and despair, then now is not the time to abandon the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., “Въ наши тревожные дни, когда сумерки богам снова опустились на землю, Метнеръ тичего не знаетъ о настоящемъ. Онъ не слышитъ, что напряженность современной души, дрожащей, какъ натянутая струна, зоветъ къ выявленно новымъ формамъ творчества. Онъ не понимаетъ, что кошмарныя видѣния повседневности слишкомъ задавили эту душу и что она должна, наконецъ, прорваться и засверкать новой музыкой, музыкой свѣтлаго, четкаго ритма, яркой и ясной молодости, стихійной пьянностью Діониса, котораго провидѣлъ Ницше...”

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., “Но Метнеръ не знаетъ даже и того рафинированнаго томленія, въ которомъ растворяетъ условныя формы тонкая тоскующая душа Скрябина.... Метнеръ не пойдетъ за Ребиковымъ, онъ побойтсѣ холода цѣлотноныхъ кошмаровъ; онъ аккуратно поставитъ точку тамъ, гдѣ Ребиковъ застынетъ рыдающимъ вопросомъ смѣлаго диссонанса. Метнеру чуждо чувство, какъ таковое, *только чувство*, которое Ребиковъ написалъ на своемъ знамени, навсегда порвавъ съ архитектурой сонаты.”

“architectonics of the sonata,” but to instead acquire the mastery to express modern chaos in and through the strongest, the most classic, form.

In fact, this is precisely how Popov describes Medtner’s compositional practice. Despite his prejudiced dismissal of him, Popov was the only critic at the time (that I know of), who actually perceived in Medtner’s music a debt to Wagner—but the way in which Medtner uses Wagner strikes Popov as utterly perverse:

Medtner is not afraid of Wagner. He does not fear chaos[!]. He closed the windows, he lit the candles, and now calmly works through the legacy of Mozart and Haydn in his study, turning it upside down beyond recognition. He studies Beethoven, takes, like everyone else, something from Wagner (it is impossible not to do so these days), and writes... sonatas, boldly vying with harmony. Medtner is not afraid of such consonances that would seem incredible to the Classical sonata specialists, but he writes precisely *sonatas*.<sup>110</sup>

Somehow, Popov, in his sarcastic frustration, has penned what most people would take as a compliment—Medtner not only demonstrates mastery of Classical forms, but also boldly innovates within in them by borrowing techniques from opera and fusing them into sonata practice. Clearly Popov had some familiarity with the methods of the Symbolists, not surprising since he is publishing in one of their journals. His complaint has nothing to do with the quality or effectiveness of Medtner’s music, indeed he even acknowledges along with Bely that Medtner “does not fear chaos.” But, like a typical modernist, Popov just cannot believe that someone could possibly write “sonatas” in 1906 (did someone inform Scriabin?), for no reason other than sonatas have gone out of fashion. Such a view was sacrilege to Medtner, who perceived sonata form as the direct, logical outgrowth of the song—the true formal and mystical basis of all music, which itself grew organically from the rules of tonal harmony: “The flowering of harmony inaugurated the flowering of song forms, from

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 60. “Метнеръ не боится Вагнера. Его не пугаетъ хаосъ. Онъ закрылъ окна, онъ зажегъ свѣчи и спокойно перебираетъ въ своемъ кабинетѣ наслѣдство Моцарта и Гайдна, перевертывая его до неузнаваемости. Онъ изучаетъ Бетховена, беретъ, какъ и всѣ, кое-что у Вагнера (нельзя же въ нашъ вѣкъ безъ этого), и пишетъ... сонаты, смѣло соперничая съ гармоніей. Метнеръ не боится такихъ созвучій, которыя показались бы невѣроятными классикамъ сонаты, но онъ пишетъ именно *сонаты*.”



which the sonata form gradually blossomed. The greatest representative of this form, Beethoven, sang his sonatas and symphonies as a single song...”<sup>111</sup>

Despite Emil’s outrage at Popov’s review, he likely would have agreed with the critic’s assessment of Nikolay as a composer renewing the legacy of the German classics. Indeed, Emil not only continually insisted that Medtner was a German composer, but that he was the only one who could bring “Germanic” culture to its culmination, to a perfect end—by finishing in music what Goethe had started in words. In Emil’s mind, Goethe’s greatest achievement was the Chorus Mysticus at the end of *Faust Part II*. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Chorus Mysticus was one of the primary German Romantic sources of Solovyov’s Sophiology. While Bely had begun to equate Sophia with Russia herself in his theoretical essays, Emil sees Goethe’s “*Enig-Weibliche*” (the Eternal Feminine) as Germanic. In his mind, the only possible competitors to *Faust* for the title of pinnacle of Germanic culture are Wagner’s *Parsifal* and Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, but neither of them attained the complete perfection of Goethe himself. To Emil, apparently, only his brother can accomplish the “Unbeschreibliche” and grant musical form to that eternal feminine who will “zieht uns hinan.” He laid bare his expectations in a 1909 letter to his brother:

But only you can write the Chorus Mysticus. Be careful, don’t mess around! And may God grant that I to live to see that moment when you will be the absolutely real conclusion of Germanic creation; and then let everything perish in this terrible confusion of languages, this ethnographic chaos called Europe (+Russia). Parsifal, of course, is Parsifal and not Faust; Parsifal is the last great Germanic creation (or the penultimate, if we count Nietzsche’s Zarathustra). But neither Parsifal nor Zarathustra are complete perfection, since the first was created in [exhaustion], and the second is like a fishing pole for catching those inclined to

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<sup>111</sup> Medtner, *Muse*, 62 (translation altered). “Расцвет гармонии ознаменовался расцветом песенных форм, из которых постепенно расцвела и сонатная форма. Величайший представитель этой формы Бетховен выпевал свои сонаты и симфонии как единую песню...” Medtner affirms the idea that the sonata grew organically from the song elsewhere in his book, e.g., pg. 49: “The complexity of a sonata is genetically linked to the simplicity of song form; song form is linked to the construction of a period; the period—to the phrase; the phrase—to the cadence; the cadence—to the construction of the mode; the mode—to the tonic.” The early nineteenth-century German music theorist A. B. Marx developed an entire theory of sonata form as an organic outgrowth of simpler forms called “*Liedformen*.” Perhaps Medtner’s views are indicative of the use of Marx’s ideas in Russian conservatories.

pure individualism. Perfection is Faust in music; Germany (The Germanic) comes to an end.<sup>112</sup>

Unfortunately for Emil, Nikolay seemed more interested in exploring the union of Germanic art with Russian Orthodox mysticism (and would eventually convert to Orthodoxy after emigration), than in achieving the pinnacle of Germanic culture itself.

But, unlike Popov and Emil, certain critics began to perceive Medtner's development of these Germanic formal practices as its own particular kind of Russianness. Noting that contemporary German artistic life seemed more and more distant from the heady days of Goethe and Beethoven, the great German cultural heritage seemed up for grabs. An anonymous critic writing in 1910 suspects that there is something "not entirely German" precisely in Medtner's ability to keep the old German culture "alive and fresh": "There is probably more German blood in Medtner's veins than Russian, and yet he cannot be considered entirely German in his music. He even departs significantly from contemporary musical Germans. In him, that idealism which artistic and creative Germany has already outlived, seems to be alive and fresh."<sup>113</sup> Along similar lines, Engel suddenly (in 1913) expressed patriotic pride in Medtner's Germanic form—even seemingly abandoning his earlier love of Scriabin due to the latter's increasing obsession with his "Mystery." This was Scriabin's polarizing project to bring about the spiritual evolution of humanity through a multimedia, collective musical performance, in which all conventional musical form and harmony

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<sup>112</sup> E. Medtner to N. Medtner, 15/16 February 1909, reproduced with German translation in Flamm, *Metner*, 250. "Но Chorus mysticus можешь написать только ты один. Смотри, не обмани! и дай бог мне дожить до этого момента, когда будешь совершенно настоящим заключением германского творчества; пусть потом все гибнет в этом ужасном смешении языков в этом этнографическом хаосе который называется Европой (+Россией). Парсифаль—конечно Парсифаль, но не Фауст; Парсифаль последнее великое германское творение (или предпоследнее, если считать Заратустру Ницше). Но и Парсифаль и Заратустра не завершения, т. к. первый создан в утомлении (?); второе как удачка для склонения на свою чисто индивидуальную линию. Завершение--Фауст в музыке; Германия (германская) кончается."

<sup>113</sup> [M.], "Sochineniya N. Metnera," reproduced in Flamm, *Metner*, 283-84. "В жилах Метнера, вероятно, более немецкой крови, чем русской, а тем не менее нельзя признать его в его музыке всецело немцем. От современных же музыкальных немцев он отстает даже значительно. В нем как будто жив и свеж тот идеализм, который уже, кажется, пережит художественно-творческой Германией и усилия возродить который остаются в ней пока тщетными."

would be dissolved.<sup>114</sup> Failing to heed Bely's Symbolist demand for the union of strong formal procedures with the primordial chaos of creativity, Scriabin thus failed to "descend" back down to earth and "objectify the ineffable" in "religious forms and images, and the Mystery lay unfinished. The dichotomy between Medtner and Scriabin seemed stronger than ever, and Engel shows here that he had become a good student of Symbolist theory:

In our time, form in music tends to be given the last, least noticeable place; there are even daredevils who dream of a complete "dematerialization" of sound. But in Medtner, form is materialized with the heavy hardness of iron, with the clear sharpness of marble. His unique sober modernism<sup>115</sup> is flesh and blood of the best precepts of German Classicism. And perhaps among all the famous composers Germany has produced since the time of Brahms, including the illustrious Richard Strauss and Max Reger, there is not a single one in whom the holy flame of these ancestral precepts burns so brightly and so purely as in Medtner, whose birthplace is Moscow.<sup>116</sup>

Aside from anticipating the type of discourse that would surround Stravinsky's turn to Neoclassicism a decade later, Engel could not be more proud that the new home of the "best precepts of German Classicism" was now firmly planted in Russia.

During the winter of 1910-11, Bely was inspired to write his longest article on Medtner, "Snowy Arabesques."<sup>117</sup> He takes up the methods he used for the Sophiological analysis of Russian poetry in his 1905 essay, "Apocalypse in Russian Poetry," and directly applies them to Medtner's

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<sup>114</sup> See Mitchell, *Nietzsche's Orphans*, Chapter 2.

<sup>115</sup> As this example shows, after 1910 the use of the word "modernism" in a positive sense become more common in the critical press (although it still would frequently appear in its normal pejorative sense of anti-Western commercialism). Nevertheless, the designation of "sober modernism" for Medtner's music did not seem to catch on with other critics, as far as I can tell.

<sup>116</sup> Yury Engel, Review of Medtner's concert of 9 February 1913, reproduced in Flamm, *Medtner*, 309-10. "В наше время форме в музыке стремятся отвести последнее, наименее заметное место; есть даже смельчаки, мечтающие о полной "дематериализации" звука. А у Медтнера форма материализована с тяжелой твердостью железа, с ясностью мрамора. Его своеобразный трезвый модернизм плоть от плоти и кровь от крови лучших заветов немецкого классицизма. И, может быть, среди всех знаменитых композиторов, выдвинутых со времен Брамса Германией, включая сюда и таких прославленных, как Рихард Штраус и Макс Регер, нет ни одного, в котором святое пламя этих наследственных заветов горело бы так ярко и так чисто, как в Медтнере, родина которого Москва."

<sup>117</sup> It appears Bely finished this article in early 1911. It was rejected by the newspaper *Morning of Russia* due to its "non-newspaper" nature—and E. Medtner mentions in a letter that he sent the piece to the contemporary arts journal *Apollon*, but, if so, they rejected it as well and it lay unpublished. See Bely-E. Medtner, *Perepiska*, II, 94, 113 (letters #207, 215).

music.<sup>118</sup> Here Bely defines the “image of Russian poetry” as the “Face” of Sophia, which in the past had been “invisible behind the blizzard; the chaos of snowstorms still forms a veil around Her.”<sup>119</sup> Medtner reveals her Face, the true Face of Russian art, within his “snowy arabesques”: Thus Bely claims for Medtner a genuine “Russianness” in his mystical inspiration. It turns out the snowstorm is itself a symbol of this Russianness, this creative chaos that must be shaped: “The howl of the elements, hostile to man from time immemorial, sings, screams, and wails in Medtner’s music—it is as complex as the whirling, intersecting streams of snow in a blizzard.”<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, Bely acknowledges that Medtner’s “Germanness” and his mastery of compositional technique is *essential* for this task (and here he rebuts Popov’s demand for “*only feeling*”):

The content of Medtner’s music is a song of triumphant “madness”... and the greatest madman in art now must be its most perfect technician. To overwhelm technique with feeling means that reason is overwhelmed by the infantile emotional agitation, thus reason is darkened and feeling is castrated... Musical “impressionism” is guilty of both. Musical impressionism is the slogan of all modernist music. Medtner’s music has nothing in common with such musical impressionism. Technique, perfection, and continuity take the place of the profound pronouncements of modern musical innovators... thus Medtner’s music, resolving technique with technique, transforms technique itself into the transparent cover of profound content.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> The basic argument goes thusly: the artist takes the unformed chaos of the earth and shapes it into the body of Sophia so that her Face (countenance) can descend from heaven and take human form, spiritualizing the world. Thus, ecstatic mystical visions of the heavenly Sophia must be balanced by attention to artistic practicalities of her earthly being. Artist creativity becomes the shortest path to religious creation. See Bely, “Apocalypse,” in *Mystical Essays*, 92-93.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 93. Bely first began his longstanding Sophiological project of the interpretation of Russian poetry in his 1903 “On Theurgy,” as seen in Chapter 2. Thus, Medtner’s music always lay at the core of Bely’s Sophiological and theurgic musings from its inception. The 1911 article, “Snowy Arabesques,” thus does not represent a departure from Bely’s thought but a return to its most profound roots.

<sup>120</sup> Bely, “Snezhny arabeski.” Summarized from: “Вой стихий, искони человеку враждебных, поет, кричит, голосит в многосложной, как сети перекрещивающихся рукавов метельных, музыке Метнера. Самый водопад звуков, низвергающийся на нас, напоминает хаос.... Но в брызгах этих потоков встает перед нами семицветная радуга. Семицветная радуга кажется нам сперва произвольным порождением хаоса, случайно начертанным на его ревущих волнах. Но законы преломления света, но связь света с теплом и движением глубже вскрывают перед нами тайный смысл мирового хаоса: что его и нет больше; что хаос есть только не услышанный гармонии полнозвучный хор мировой. Радуга неизбежна там, где ревет перед нами хаотический водопад. Хаос без света и свет без хаоса теперь невозможны. Хаос без света и свет без хаоса не создали бы нам текущего мира сего; хаос есть плоть света. Дух без плоти и плоть без духа — мертвые отвлечения бессильных потуг человеческого ума. Это единство света и тьмы, слова и бессловесного, начала и конца, хаоса и его светлой дочери невольно и подчеркивается перед нами, когда мы слушаем музыку Метнера.”

<sup>121</sup> Bely, “Snezhny arabeski.” “Содержание метнеровской музыки — песнь торжествующему «безумью»... и наибольший безумец в искусстве отныне — совершеннейший техник. Побороть технику чувством — это значит: побороть разум младенческими волнениями чувств, так затемняется разум и оскোпляется чувство; прозрачная пустота разума кажется наполненной содержанием; чувство гаснет в потуге глубокомысленно сказаться. Тем и другим грешит музыкальный «импрессионизм». Музыкальный импрессионизм — лозунг всей

Great madness requires great technique. The depths of “Russian” mysticism demand the heights of “Germanic” forms. East and West must be united. And yet, surging nationalist tensions would soon rip apart the Symbolists’ dream of human all-unity and the cultural interchange at the heart of Symbolism would soon become impossible.

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модернистической музыки. С таким музыкальным импрессионизмом музыка Метнера не имеет ничего общего. Техника, законченность, последовательность становятся на место глубокомысленных вещаний современных новаторов музыки... так музыка Метнера, разрешая технику техникой, превращает самую технику лишь в прозрачный покров глубокого содержания.”

## Conclusion

We ask only one thing: that you believe us, that you believe our confession is a living confession. There is something in common between us, writers and readers—all of us reside in the hungry, barren Russian plains, where evil spirits have led us from time immemorial. —Andrey Bely (1907)<sup>1</sup>

If the history of Russian music is the history of *Russianness* in music, then at first glance Nikolay Medtner seems to have no place. Indeed, what place could a composer, whose music was frequently characterized as Germanic by friends and foe, have in such seminal musicological works as Richard Taruskin's *Defining Russia Musically* or Marina Frolova-Walker's *Russian Nationalism from Glinka to Stalin*? Is Medtner's music just not Russian enough? After all, certain markers of "Russianness" in Medtner's music do exist for those who wish to find them.<sup>2</sup> Yet, compiling lists of national stylistic markers runs into a deep problem—by employing the methods of Russian musical nationalism, we would continue to elevate and legitimize the kind of nationalist discourse which condemned Medtner to obscurity in the first place. As Taruskin argues, "as long as we see nationalism as the issue dividing Russian musicians, we are still in the ghetto that nationalist discourse has created for us."<sup>3</sup> And, as he observes in the case of Tchaikovsky, "there is only one thing worse than being confined to a ghetto, after all, and that is being judged a bad ghetto citizen."<sup>4</sup>

If Tchaikovsky is not Russian enough for the nationalists, then what hope could the Medtner possibly have?<sup>5</sup> After all, he could trace German lineage on both sides of his family—one which

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<sup>1</sup> Andrey Bely, last lines of "Nastoyashchee i budushchee russkoy literatury." "Мы, писатели, как теоретики имеем представление о будущем, но как художники, говоря о будущем, мы только люди, только ищущие; не проповедующие, а исповедующие. Мы просим только одно: чтобы нам верили, что наша исповедь -- живая исповедь. Есть общее в нас, пишущих и читающих, -- все мы в голодных, бесплодных равнинах русских, где искони водит нас нечистая сила."

<sup>2</sup> Frequent pervasive use of the lowered leading tone being the most obvious.

<sup>3</sup> Taruskin, "Non-Nationalists, and Other Nationalists," in *Russian Music at Home and Abroad*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>5</sup> The Soviets certainly tried to apply nationalist criteria to Medtner's music in a small amount of scholarship produced the 1960s-80s, which emphasized his Russianness and even "discovered" debts to folk song in his melodies. But, as a

tried to preserve the language and culture of old Germany, despite being present in Russia for generations.<sup>6</sup> As Frolova-Walker notes, the large German populations of Russia's capital cities were "perhaps the most heavily exploited in the process of constructing Russian national identity (as a negative image, of course)."<sup>7</sup> It is no surprise, then, that critics frequently characterized Medtner's music with age-old stereotypes about German culture (e.g. well-crafted, masculine, dry, objective, Hellenistic—all common tropes). Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Medtners were already partially Russianized and communicated in that language—Emil remarked that his German was worse than his father's,<sup>8</sup> and Nikolay always referred to himself as a "Russian" ["russky"] composer. He explicitly emphasized his status as a Russian in an open letter he sent to newspapers in 1910 following a spat with the Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg during a rehearsal of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in St. Petersburg. Feeling belittled by Mengelberg's condescension and refusal to adopt his tempos, Medtner quit the performance and wrote at the end of his letter, "Not only was a soloist, that is myself, insulted by an overreaching conductor, but, more importantly, a Russian artist was insulted by a visiting foreigner."<sup>9</sup>

As his status as a Russian Symbolist composer makes clear, Medtner belongs to the history of Russian music, even if he does not easily fit into historical narratives dominated by Russian

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result of his 1921 emigration and the subsequent ban from entering the country in 1933, Medtner's music did not profit from the kinds of heavy state promotion that Scriabin, Prokofiev, or even (his fellow émigré) Rachmaninoff received.

<sup>6</sup> On his mother's side were the Thurginian Gebhards—organists and actors who may have been acquainted with Goethe—and the Baltic-German Goedicke, also a musical family of organists and including Medtner's cousin, the composer Alexander Goedicke (Gedike). His father came from a family of Lutheran, Muscovite merchants and he himself held amateur interests in literature and music. For an overview of the family history, see Flamm, *Metner*, 2-4. Emil and his siblings grew up with old first editions of German literary classics, like Goethe's *Faust*, which promoted in him a sense of living connection with his ancestors.

<sup>7</sup> Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> For Emil's complex and evolving sense of national identity, see Kirill Postoutenko, "E. K. Metner: Metamorfozy natsional'noy identifikatsii," in Блоковский сборник. XIII. Русская культура XX в: метрополия и диаспора, 165-69, accessible here: [https://www.ruthenia.ru/reprint/blok\\_xiii/postoutenko.pdf](https://www.ruthenia.ru/reprint/blok_xiii/postoutenko.pdf). In short, he considered himself Russian in his youth and only began to think of himself as purely German in adulthood.

<sup>9</sup> See Metner, *Pis'ma*, 129-130, here "в моем лице было нанесено оскорбление солисту со стороны зарвавшегося дирижера и, что еще важнее, русскому артисту со стороны заезжего иностранца." Obviously this letter may have been motivated by insecurity about his ethnic status in the turbulent final years of the Russian empire, but Medtner did continue to refer to himself as "Russian" in correspondence, especially after emigration.

nationalist discourse. Mitchell suggests that Medtner should be considered an archetypical example of what she calls an inclusive, “Imperial” Russian [“Rossiysky”] national identity—as opposed to an exclusive, ethnically Russian [“Russky”] identity.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, I know of no examples of Medtner, his friends, or even his critics ever using the governmental, bureaucratic word “Rossiysky”—instead they exclusively using the standard, everyday word for “Russian” [“Russky”]. Furthermore, there is no evidence that Medtner conceived of himself as Russian in a different way than Andrey Bely, say, thought of himself as Russian. Mitchell’s use of this dichotomy, however helpful it may be as a scholarly lens, must be considered anachronistic.

The obvious solution to the historiographical headaches caused by nationalist musical discourse would be to seek other contexts within which Medtner’s music emerges as significant—which I did by looking at the central role he played in the cultivation of twentieth-century Russian art song, his role in the early development of Russian theurgic aesthetics, and his involvement in the Symbolist expansion of Russian versification techniques. Another possible area of study would be to trace Medtner’s importance in the early reception history of musical Neoclassicism prior to Stravinsky’s monopolization of that term in the 1920s. Medtner, due to his use of sonata form and the cultivation of what Flamm calls his “Grecian-bucolic” style, was often labelled as a neoclassicist in the 1910s.

Medtner’s status as a “bad” nationalist does not mean he lacks importance for the history of Russian musical nationalism itself. On the contrary, his sheer uniqueness within the Russian musical scene meant that critics were forced to twist and contort the discourse of musical nationalism in order to account for him (if they did not want to deny his Russianness altogether). Medtner’s fundamental belief in the need to artistically unite East and West under a universal Christian culture placed him squarely amongst the Symbolists and other heirs of Solovyov’s ideas. Yet, his use of

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<sup>10</sup> Mitchell, *Nietzsche’s Orphans*, 106-07.



Germanic musical forms and genres caused music critics constant consternation as it contradicted the dominant discourse of Russian musical nationalism. Medtner's case shows the great extent to which issues of national identity at the time transcended questions of personal identity and instead treated nations as integral entities with divinely-ordained purposes on the world stage.

Over the course of this dissertation, I have argued that Nikolay Medtner should be placed within the ranks of the Russian Symbolists and that his music is expressive of its core religious philosophy and aesthetic positions. He helped transform song into the Symbolist artistic genre *par excellence* and subsequently became the premiere Russian composer of song in the first two decades of the twentieth century—even influencing Soviet song composition through the 1930s, despite his ban from the Soviet Union under Stalin.<sup>11</sup> His music reflected and articulated the theurgic ambitions of the age, as conceptualized by Bely and Solovyov, and which Medtner himself carried into emigration. Finally, he managed to productively transfer Symbolist poetics into the realm of music, reflecting deep knowledge of his contemporaries' theoretical works, and put forward a Sophiological account of his own song settings that can be extended across his oeuvre. Medtner's music was certainly less influential on succeeding generations of composers than Scriabin or Stravinsky due to his unwillingness to abandon tonal voice leading practices; nevertheless, it rewards careful study for those seeking insight into the blossoming culture of late-Imperial Russia—one shrouded from view today by subsequent war, revolution, and emigration.

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<sup>11</sup> Medtner's name was discussed in the context of Soviet music through at least the 1937 Pushkin centennial celebration, when many composers turned to song composition and needed models.

## Appendix A

N. METNER. “9 Songs of Goethe for Voice and Piano, Op. 6”  
By Andrey Bely<sup>1</sup>

All the works of Nikolai Medtner bear the stamp of exceptional artistry. Medtner is a first-class composer. If we follow the works of young Russian composers over the past ten years, we will find it difficult to point to anything truly outstanding, except for the works of Rachmaninoff, Scriabin and Medtner. However, the three composers named are incommensurable. While the original talent of Rachmaninoff, having acquired deserved recognition everywhere, does not deepen, remaining within comparatively modest shores, Medtner and Scriabin bring us a new word. This new word is expressed both by conquests in the area of musical form, and in the elaboration of the eternal goals and aims set for music by the great composers of the 19th century. In Medtner and Scriabin, talent is combined with culture and formative education. They are refined cultural talents. Scriabin and Medtner now concentrate in themselves everything that young Russian music can be proud of. They move forward, they are filled with musical thought and an orientation to the future. But culture and seriousness completely separate these two composers from groundless originality. There is a parallel between the conquests in the field of literary form and the development of young Russian music. True artists of literature correspond to these serious talents in music.

Great names like Bryusov, Merezhkovsky, and Vrubel are linked together with Medtner and Scriabin.

Medtner and Scriabin are completely opposite from each other. If we allow comparisons, this opposition is analogous to the incommensurability of the impeccable masculine verse of

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<sup>1</sup> First published in *Zolotoe runo* 4 (1906): 105-107, with parallel French translation. Christoff Flamm reproduced the original text in his *Der russische Komponist Nikolaj Metner* (Verlag Ernst Kuhn, 1995), 264-268. Bely republished the Russian text in his *Arabeski* (Moscow: Musaget Publishing House, 1911). Russian text follows.

Bryusov with the falsely feminine, melodious line of Balmont. Apart from its superficiality, this analogy does not touch upon the elements of Scriabin's and Medtner's work. Medtner is not Bryusov; Scriabin is not Balmont.

Scriabin's creative domain is the most refined, though not always deep, with always complex themes clothed in an original form and requiring a thoughtful approach. Medtner, employing the most complex techniques, is nevertheless brilliantly simple in his main themes. And this healthy, integral simplicity—simplicity through complexity—inseparably connects his work with the general mainstream of music, represented by geniuses like Beethoven, Schumann, and Wagner. Medtner is a serious fighter for the freedom of pure music, something so pitifully withered among modern composers, who are often enslaved by tendencies alien to pure music (R. Strauss). In order not to confuse the genuinely new that Medtner's work gives us with the musical anxiousness and nervousness that surrounds us, the young composer clothes it in a strict, completely definite form. That is why, regardless of the depth and richness of the musical themes cultivated by Medtner, we welcome in Medtner the nobility and severity of his talent as a guarantee of truly major conquests in the field of pure music.

The musical themes cultivated by Medtner, being impeccably simple and strict, in their content give something positive, affirming the values of existence.

Medtner is a true tragedian in music, just as Beethoven was. This element of pure tragedy imparts a prophetic, providential meaning to his themes. Only where there is *faith* in values is struggle possible, and tragedy is a flight through horror. Medtner's themes soar wingedly over the insurmountable abysses of the spirit. Medtner is perhaps the only Russian composer who affirms rather than destroys life. And only such a creator (theurgist) can a true tragedian be. Medtner closely resembles Beethoven and Schumann. He attracts our attention: we can either pass him by,

completely failing to notice the depth of his talent, because his ingeniously simple themes require the most serious attention; or he captivates us forever. There can be no middle ground with him.

But in joining with the great composers of the past, Medtner is separated from them by the chaos of the surrounding conditions of modernity. From chaos he returns to the chastely creative sources of life and music, as if for the second time. Pure music *is resurrected* in him, promising the unquenchable dawn of life. This glowing aura gives Medtner's music a special transfigurative meaning. It is the good news, it is the promise "*of the dear, eternally familiar at all times.*"<sup>2</sup>

"*Joy returns*"—you want to say, delving into the meaning of these musical themes. The touch of unspoken aspirations makes Medtner's music akin to the aspirations arising in the realm of the new religious consciousness of our day. In Medtner's music these [religious] aspirations seem to be liberated from the dogmatic forms and images that violate us. I would like to declare in passing that all the best that has arisen in my thoughts and experiences owes much to Medtner's music, which truly heals the soul with potions known to it and only to it.

There is something in Medtner's music that involuntarily links it with Goethe's poetry. Beethoven did not genuinely coincide with Goethe. Beethoven dwelled in the "stars," without the promise of descending down to earth. In Goethe, on the contrary, the promise of the ineffable gradually resounds for us, now resurrected again in our souls and objectified by us in religious forms and images. The new religious consciousness in its secret sources is providentially connected with Goethe. He possesses a prophetic, immortal, cheerful seriousness. It is with this cheerful seriousness that Medtner's talent is endowed. Goethe speaks as if of this seriousness:<sup>3</sup>

And as long as you do not have it—  
This: die and become!  
You are only a dull guest  
On the dark earth.

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<sup>2</sup> Reference to the passage from Bely's Second Symphony that led to the formation of his friendship with Emil, who linked it with the second theme of N. Medtner's first piano sonata.

<sup>3</sup> In his poem "Selige Sehnsucht." This is the fifth stanza.

That is why Medtner's choice of Goethe's songs for romances is not accidental. It is caused by a familial attraction to Goethe. Medtner and Goethe have an involuntary coincidence in their experiences.

Following the melody and accompaniment during the performances of Medtner's romances, one is involuntarily amazed by the fact that the music for Goethe's songs was not written, but rather taken as if from the songs themselves. And yet, within the limits of Goethe's melody, the composer freely shapes the music.

The cycle begins with the famous "Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh" (so unsuccessfully translated by Lermontov in "Gornye vershiny."). This is followed by the dazzlingly sunny music of "Mailed" and the lunar "Elfen-liedchen." In this sunny and lunar beginning, the music reveals Nietzsche's demonism (which spontaneously grew out of Goethe). "Im Vorübergehn": Here Goethe's magic reaches extraordinary power in simple words. Goethe describes how he wanted to pick a flower, but the flower asked Goethe to transplant it by the roots. Then Goethe passed by. In addition, Goethe wrote a corresponding poem beginning with the same line as in "Im Vorübergehn," but ending with the poet transplanting the flower into his garden. Medtner sensitively perceived the full magical depth of the difference in the otherwise external coincidence of these poems. The setting of "Im Vorübergehn" is deeply tragic. It brilliantly depicts Goethe's passing by a flower. The second poem "Gefunden" is a solemn epithalamium. The poignancy of the music [i.e., the accompaniment] here is reminiscent of the procession from *Parsifal*, while the melody is completely independent.

We must welcome the clever selection and ordering of Goethe's songs with such profound musical settings as one of the few manifestations of true culture.

Метнер Н. 9 песен Гёте для голоса и фортепьяно. Соч. 6.  
 Андрея Белого

На всех произведениях Николая Метнера лежит печать исключительной художественности. Метнер -- композитор первоклассный. Если проследить за произведениями молодых русских композиторов за последние десять лет, то мы затрудняемся указать на что-либо действительно выдающееся, кроме произведений Рахманинова, Скрябина и Метнера. Однако три названных композитора несоизмеримы. В то время, как самобытный талант Рахманинова, стяжав себе всюду заслуженное признание, не углубляется, оставаясь в сравнительно скромных берегах, Метнер и Скрябин несут нам новое слово. Это новое слово выражается как завоеваниями в области музыкальной формы, так и в разработке вечных задач, поставленных музыке великими композиторами XIX столетия. В Метнере и Скрябине соединились таланты с культурой и образованием. Это -- обработанные культурные таланты. Скрябин и Метнер сосредоточивают ныне в себе все то, чем может гордиться молодая русская музыка. Они идут все вперед, они исполнены музыкальной мыслью и будущим. Но культура и серьезность вполне отделяют названных композиторов от беспочвенного оригинальничанья. Есть параллель между завоеваниями в области литературной формы и развитием молодой русской музыки. Истинным художникам литературы соответствуют серьезные таланты в музыке.

Имена Брюсова, Мережковского, Врубеля соединимы с именами Метнера и Скрябина.

Метнер и Скрябин вполне противоположны. Если допускать сравнения, эта противоположность аналогична несоизмеримости безукоризненного мужественного стиха Брюсова с неверно-женственной, певучей строчкой Бальмонта. Кроме поверхностного наведения аналогия эта не затрагивает элементов скрябинского и метнеровского творчества. Метнер не Брюсов, Скрябин не Бальмонт.

Область творчества Скрябина -- утонченнейшие, не всегда глубокие, всегда сложные темы, облеченные в оригинальную, всегда требующую вдумчивого отношения форму.

Метнер, пользуясь всей сложностью техники, в своих основных темах гениально прост. И эта-то здоровая, цельная простота -- простота через сложность -- безраздельно связует его творчество с общим руслом музыки, представленным гениями вроде Бетховена, Шумана, Вагнера. Метнер -- серьезный борец за свободу чистой музыки, так жалко захиревшую у современных композиторов, часто порабощенную чуждыми ей тенденциями (Р. Штраус). Чтобы не смешать то новое, что дает нам творчество Метнера, с окружающей нас музыкальной издерганностью, молодой композитор облакает его в строгую, совершенно определенную форму. Вот почему независимо от глубины и сдержанности музыкальных тем, разработанных Метнером, мы приветствуем в Метнере благородство и строгость его дарования как залог действительных крупных завоеваний в области чистой музыки.

Музыкальные темы, разрабатываемые Метнером, будучи безукоризненно просты и строги, по содержанию своему дают нечто положительное, утверждающее ценности бытия.

Метнер истинный трагик в музыке, каким был Бетховен. Этот элемент чистого трагизма и сообщает его темам какой-то вещей, провиденциальный смысл. Только там, где есть *вера* в ценности, возможна борьба, трагизм -- полет сквозь ужас. Темы Метнера окрыленно несутся над необорными пропастями духа. Метнер -- единственный, быть может, русский композитор, который утверждает, а не разрушает жизнь. А только таким созидателем (теургом) может быть истинный трагик. Метнер вплотную примыкает к Бетховену и Шуману. Он останавливает наше внимание: мимо него или можно пройти, совершенно не заметив глубины его таланта, потому что гениально простые темы его требуют самого серьезного внимания; или же он пленяет навсегда. Среднего отношения к нему быть не может.

Но примыкая к великим композиторам прошлого, Метнер отделен от них хаосом окружающих условий современности. Он из хаоса как бы вторично возвращается к целомудренно творческим источникам жизни и музыки. В нем *воскресает* чистая музыка, суля жизни зарю неугасимую. Этот заревой фон сообщает музыке Метнера особый преобразующий смысл. Она -- благовестие, она -- обетование “о *милом, вечно знакомом во все времена*”.

“*Возвращается радость*” -- хочешь сказать, вникая в смысл этих музыкальных тем. Налет несказанных чаяний роднит музыку Метнера с чаяниями, возникающими в области нового религиозного сознания наших дней. В ней чаяния эти как бы освобождены от насилующих нас догматических форм и образов. Мне хочется заявить попутно, что все лучшее, что возникло у меня в мыслях и переживаниях, немало обязано музыке Метнера, воистину целящей душу ей и только ей известными снадобьями.

Есть в музыке Метнера нечто, непроизвольно роднящее ее с поэзией Гёте. Бетховен не совпадал с Гёте. Бетховен витал в “звездном”, не сходя на землю обетованием. У Гёте, наоборот, постепенно звучит нам обетование несказанного, ныне вновь воскресшее в душах наших и объективируемое нами в формах и образах религиозных. Новое религиозное сознание в тайных источниках своих провиденциально связано с Гёте. Есть у Гёте вещая, бессмертная, веселая серьезность. Этой-то веселой серьезностью наделен талант Метнера. Как будто об этой серьезности говорит Гёте:

Und solange du das nicht hast  
Dieses: Stirb und Werde,  
Bist du nur ein triiben  
Gast Auf der dunkler Erde.

Вот почему выбор гётевских песен для романсов не случаен у Метнера. Он вызван родственным притяжением к Гёте. Есть у Метнера и у Гёте непроизвольное совпадение в переживаниях.



Следя за мелодией и аккомпанементом во время исполнений романсов Метнера, невольно поражаешься тем, что музыка к песням Гёте не написана, а как бы вынута из самих песен. И тем не менее в пределах гётевской мелодии композитор свободно распоряжается музыкой.

Начинается цикл известным “Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh {Так неудачно переведенным Лермонтовым “Торные вершины”}. Затем следуют ослепительно солнечная музыка “Mailed” и лунная “Elfen-liedchen”. В солнечном и лунном начале музыка вскрывает ницшевский демонизм (непроизвольно выросший из Гёте) “Im Vorübergehn”. Здесь магизм Гёте достигает в простых словах силы необычайной. Гёте описывает, как захотел он сорвать цветок, но цветок просил, чтобы Гёте пересадил его с корнем. Тогда Гёте прошел мимо. Кроме того, Гёте написал совершенно аналогичное стихотворение, начинающееся тою же строкой, как в “Im Vorübergehn”, но кончающееся тем, что поэт пересаживает цветок в свой сад. Метнер чутко почувствовал всю магическую глубину различия при внешнем совпадении этих стихотворений. Аккомпанемент “Im Vorübergehn” - глубоко трагичен. Гениально изображено словно прохождение Гёте мимо цветка. Второе стихотворение “Gefunden” -- торжественная эпиграмма. Проникновенность музыки здесь напоминает шествие из “Парсифаля”, при полной самостоятельности в мелодии.

Умный подбор и расположение гётевских песен в такой углубленной музыкальной оправе мы должны приветствовать, как одно из немногих проявлений истинной культуры.

## Appendix B

### The Songs of Nikolay Medtner<sup>1</sup> By the author.

“Es ist dafür gesorgt, dass die Bäume  
Nicht in den Himmel wachsen.”  
--Goethe. Motto from *Der Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 3<sup>rd</sup> part.<sup>2</sup>

Taking advantage of the warm invitation of the House of Song, which also placed at my disposal the pages of its program, I will try to outline in a few words my understanding of Goethe. I hope that in this way I will be able to more clearly present the connection and unity of my songs performed today.

“Be true to the earth, my friends!” – Nietzsche’s slogan was inherited from Goethe. The earth is God’s temple; earthly life is a symbol of Divine life. There is no way to Heaven except through the earth; Without participation in earthly life with its joy and suffering, struggle and death, there is no communion [причастия] with eternal life. Man is the supreme creation of the Earth; humanity is the highest expression of earthly life. “The more you feel like a human being, the closer you are to the gods” – words of Goethe.

Goethe’s work shows the struggle for achieving this worldview. The first “Wanderers Nachtlied” expresses the state of the soul, tired of wandering in search of its fatherland, “a gloomy

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<sup>1</sup> Medtner’s program notes for a 8 January 1909 concert held at the Moscow Conservatory entitled, “The Eighth Evening of the House of Song—Dedicated to the works of Nikolai Medtner”. Notes appeared in Russian and French and are reproduced in Flamm, pgs. 241-243. I reproduce the Russian text below as it appears in Flamm. The concert included the premieres of Medtner new Goethe lieder, Op. 15 (without #4); two of the three Heine poems, Op. 12; the Bely setting op. 13/2; and two further Goethe songs that would become Op. 18/1+2. Also on the program were lieder by Schumann, Brahms, and Wagner. Medtner himself accompanied Maria Olenina-d’Alheim and Anna Stenbok. Flamm reproduced the program on pg. 581.

<sup>2</sup> “It is ensured that trees will not grow into the heavens.”

guest on this dark earth,” sadly haunting the thresholds of life, powerless to cross them (“An die Thüren will ich schleichen”), passing by the earthly in aesthetic contemplation (“Im Vorübergehn”).

There is on the path to the establishment of the earthly, another attitude towards the latter that must be overcome, namely, as a trifle, as amusement (“Die Spröde”); an attitude towards the earth not as a mother and bride, but as a harlot. “Der untreue Knabe” is the state of the soul that takes, but does not give itself. “Die Bekehrte” is the drama of a flower stolen from its native soil and powerlessly withering. In “Vor Gericht” the poet challenges this attitude towards the earth as a harlot.

“Meerstille” is a dead point in the open sea of life; no support underfoot, no connection with the ground; confusion, wandering, melancholy, and pleasure -- everything that replaced real life fell away, died away in one piercing feeling of horror before emptiness and lifelessness, “Terrible, deathly silence!” But the soul, which for a moment comes face to face with death, finds the strength to partake of true life. “The fogs have broken, the sky has cleared... the distances have converged, the earth is now visible!” (Glückliche Fahrt”).

What follows will be a blessing, a consecration of the earth, the earthly, the human—as a prototype of the Eternal Being (“Gleich und Gleich”, “So tanzet und springet”), a solemn epithalamium for the marriage union with the earth (“Gefunden”). The mother’s chest is not crowded for her son and there is no need for trees to grow into the sky: isn’t the Earth itself in Heaven?

With true greatness, the poet meets and accepts death as both a rest (“Wanderers Nachtlid II”; cf., “There I rest with a brief silence” in “So lasst mich scheinen...”)<sup>3</sup> and as a return to the fatherland, and from there he sends greetings to the living (“Geistesgruss”).

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<sup>3</sup> Medtner’s note. He did not set this famous poem, in which the subject does not accept death, wishing for eternal youth.

This is the understanding of Goethe that guided me in writing the songs I perform today. It also reflects the stages of my own development, as they found their expression in art.

I also want to say a few words about opening this cycle of Goethe's songs with Lermontov's Angel. Understood as a prologue to earthly life, it was originally written in the form of an abstract piece of music, without words. It seemed that every word would be too earthly and heavy, too burdensome for the heavenly flight of the soul. But as this construction of abstraction was overcome, the word – this faithful connection with the earth – increasingly turned out not to be a burden, but an obligation, a necessity. Nowadays this prologue is sung and has therefore become a song.

Two songs by Heine and an "Epitaph" by Andrei Bely are also closely related to the set of thoughts outlined. All three are "gloomy guests on the dark earth." One yearns for destruction and meekly puts up with it ("Lieb' Liebchen" and "Bergstimme"); others, rushing towards the Sun past the Earth ("Золотому блеску верил"), die from the arrows of the Sun and from the grave send their love for the Earth and the thirst for reconciliation with it – the hope of resurrection.

Nikolay Medtner

Песня Николая Метнера.  
От автора.

*Es ist dafür gesorgt, dass die Bäume  
Nicht in den Himmel wachsen.  
Goethe. Motto zum 3-ten Theil der Dichtung und Wahrheit*

Пользуясь радушным приглашением Дома Песни, предоставившим в мое распоряжение также и страницы своей программы, я попытаюсь очертить в нескольких словах мое понимание Гете. Я надеюсь, что таким путем мне удастся более выпукло представить связь и единство исполняемых сегодня моих песен.

«Будьте верны земле, друзья мои!» -- этот лозунг Ницше наследовал от Гете. Земля – Божий храм; земная жизнь – символ жизни Божественной. Мимо земли – нет пути на Небо; помимо причастия жизни с ее радостью и страданием, борьбой и смертью, -- нет и причастия жизни вечной. Человек верховное порождение Земли; человечность – высшее выражение земной жизни. «Чем более чувствуешь ты себя человеком, тем ты ближе подобен богам» -- слова Гете.

Творчество Гете указывает на борьбу за достигнутое мировоззрение. Первая «Ночная Песнь Странника» выражает состояние души, утомленной скитаньем в поисках своего отечества, «хмурой гостью на темной земле», тоскливо обивающей пороги жизни в бессилии переступить их (“An die Thüren will ich schleichen”), в эстетическом созерцании проходящей мимо земного (“Im Vorübergehn”).

Существует и должно быть преодолено на пути к утверждению земного еще и иное отношение к последнему, а именно, как к безделице, к забаве (“Die Spröde”), отношение к земле не как к матери и невесте, но как к блуднице. “Der untreue Knabe” – состояние души берущей, но не отдающей себя. “Die Bekehrte” – драма совранного с родной почвы и

бессильно вянущего цветка. В “Vor Gericht” поэт бросает вызов такому отношению к земле, как к блуднице.

“Meerstille” – мертвая точка в открытом море жизни; никакой опоры под ногами, никакой связи с землей; смятение, скитание, тоска и забава, -- все, чем подменялась подлинная жизнь, отпало, отмерло в одном пронизывающем чувстве ужаса перед пустотой и безжизненностью, “Todesstille fürchterlich!” Но душа, ставшая на мгновение лицом к лицу с смертью, находит силы причаститься истинной жизни. «Туманы разорваны, небо прояснилось... дали приблизились, видна уж земля!» (Glückliche Fahrt”).

Дальнейшее будет благословением, освящением земли, земного, человеческого, -- как прообраза Вечно-Сущего (“Gleich und gleich”, “So tanzt und springet”), торжественная эпиграмма на брачный союз с землей (“Gefunden”). На груди матери не тесно для сына и деревьям незачем прорастать в небо: разве сама Земля не на Небе?

С истинным величием встречает и принимает поэт смерть, как отдых (вторая «Ночная Песнь Странника»; ср. “Dort bleib ich eine kleine Stille” в “So lasst mich scheinen...”) и как возвращение в отечество, и оттуда шлет привет живому (“Geistesgruss”).

Вот то понимание Гете, которое руководствовало мною при написании исполняемых сегодня песен. Оно же отражает и этапы моего собственного развития, поскольку они нашли свое выражение в искусстве.

Я хочу еще сказать несколько слов об открывающем цикл песен Гете в Лермонтовском Ангеле. Понятый как пролог к земной жизни, он был первоначально написан в форме отвлеченного музыкального произведения, без слов. Казалось, что всякое слово будет слишком земно и грузно, слишком обременит небесный полет души. Но по мере преодоления этого построения отвлеченности, слово – эта верная связь с землей, -- все более

оказывалось не бременем, а обязательством, необходимостью. Ныне этот пролог поется и постольку стал песней.

Две песни Гейне и «Эпитафия» Андрея Белого также тесно примыкают к изложенному кругу мыслей. Все три – «хмурые гости на темной земле». Один жаждут уничтожения и покорно мирятся с ним (“Lieb’ Liebchen” и “Bergstimme”); другие, устремившись к Солнцу мимо Земли («золотому блеску верил»), погибают от стрел Солнца и из могилы шлют свою любовь к Земле и жажду примирения с ней – надежду воскресения.

Николай Метнер.

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### Education

2025: Ph.D., Musicology, Indiana University Bloomington, Jacobs School of Music. Dissertation: *Medtner the Symbolist* (Advisor: Professor Halina Goldberg), awarded the 2023-24 *Burkholder-McKinney Dissertation Completion Fellowship*.

2012: B.A., Music (Highest Honors), The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

### Teaching Experience

Indiana University Jacobs School of Music:

#### *As Instructor of Record*

Z282: Music of Russia for Non-majors (Fall 2021, Winter 2022, Winter 2023)

M410: Twentieth-Century Russian Music for Undergraduates (Spring 2021)

M501: Proseminar in Special Topics for Graduate Students: 15<sup>th</sup>-Century Masses, Musical Nationalism, Modernism (2017-18, 2018-19, Summer 2019)

#### *As Associate Instructor*

M401-402: Music History I & II (2016-17, Summer 2014-16)

### Publications

2024: "Composing Refuge: Medtner as Theorist." Coauthored with Lucy Y. Liu. In *Theoria: Historical Aspects of Music Theory* 28, 153-166. Denton: University of North Texas Press.

2021: "Renewing Russia Abroad: Nikolai Medtner and Ivan Ilyin." In *Nikolai Medtner: Music, Aesthetics, and Contexts*, edited by Christoph Flamm and Wendelin Bitzan, 291-314. Hildesheim: Olms Verlag.

2019: Contributions to Chapters 16 and 21 of *A History of Western Music*, Tenth Edition, by Peter J. Burkholder, et. al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

2011: Finding Aids for the Nikolay Medtner, Herman Langinger, and Max Rudolf Collections of the Library of Congress, Music Division (online).

### Conference Presentations

2025, November: "Nikolay Medtner and the Development of Soviet Music." Paper presented at the 2025 AMS-SMT Joint Annual Meeting, Minneapolis.

2025, June: "The Jewish Conductor: Serge Koussevitzky in the Anti-Semitic Imaginaries of Emil Medtner and Igor Stravinsky." Paper presented at the *Symposium on Music, Sound, and Anti-Semitism*, New York and online.

2022, November: "Composing Refuge: Medtner as Theorist." Coauthored with Lucy Y. Liu. Paper presented at *Identity in Music Theory and History*, New Orleans.

2022, February: "Performing Neoclassicism: Koussevitzky and Stravinsky's Ode." Paper presented at *Stravinsky in America*, online.

2021, November: "Compositional Techniques that Define Stravinsky's Neoclassical Counterpoint." Coauthored with Lucy Y. Liu. Paper presented at the 44<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Society of Music Theory, online.

2020, November: "The Politics of Russian Music Abroad: Resisting Modernism in Medtner and Ilyin." Paper presented at the 86<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, online.

2019, September: "Stravinsky: Koussevitzky's Composer." Paper presented at *Four Generations of American Scholarship on Russian Music: A Conference and Concert in Honor of Malcolm H. Brown's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, Bloomington, IN.

2017, October: "Exile at the Dacha: Displacement, Nostalgia, and Medtner's *Forgotten Melodies*." Paper presented at *A Century of Movement: Russian Culture and Global Community Since 1917*, Chapel Hill, NC.

#### Fellowships/Grants

2023-24: Burkholder-McKinney Dissertation Completion Fellowship, Indiana University Bloomington

2019: Kennan Institute Summer Research Grant, Wilson Center, Washington DC (Research conducted in Library of Congress archives)

2018: Russian Studies Workshop Predissertation Research Grant, Indiana University (Research conducted in Library of Congress archives)

2017: Title VIII Fellowship for the IU Summer Language Institute (Russian)

2013: Title VIII Fellowship for the IU Summer Workshop for Slavic & Eastern European Languages (Russian)

2011: Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship, UNC Chapel Hill

2011: MAYO Research Grant, UNC Chapel Hill