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MUSICAL FOUNDATION



THE
MEDTNER SOCIETY

Volume Two



MEDTNER'S THIRD CONCERTO

MEDTNER'S Third Pianoforte Concerto was written during the last World War but has no connection with it other than the fact that doubtless he was influenced in the particular way in which the creative imagination is stimulated by catastrophe on such a scale. That is, by the seeking of some sort of mental refuge from the horrors that the war inflicted. In the latter respect, the composer sometimes had to snatch up his manuscript and dash for the shelter, the greater part of the work being written in London and the rest in Warwickshire. The influence of such turbulent events is doubtless a contributing reason for the particularly dream-like enchantment of much of the music, though Lermontov's Ballad, the Roussalka, had something to do with it, as the first movement is related to it ; hence the title, "Concerto Ballade." Yet Medtner's themes, generally speaking, express the feeling of one "who through the long winter, dreams of spring and summer's gold." But though the song of the Roussalka was about the enchantments of a magic land, the music of this movement, as indeed of the work, as a whole, is in no sense programme music, but essentially abstract like Beethoven's G major, Rachmaninoff's D minor or Mozart's C minor Concertos and, as such, is susceptible of whatever interpretation the listener may feel inclined to put on it. There is thus no need to enter into the symbolism of the poem or Medtner's adaptation of it. All, therefore, we need to trouble about is the music itself and we can interpret it according to our predilection.

Technically, it is a remarkable work, how remarkable in this respect will be realised most vividly by following the music with a score but, alas, at the moment, no scores exist. Musically, it is music of moving beauty and haunting poignancy. A curious technical feature is that the composer often gives a strong melodic idea to First Violins alone and he is fond of giving each member of the string quintet an individual role so that it often plays a part as independent as in chamber music. This, of course, is the outcome of an original mind teeming with ideas. It can be said that every bar is significant in Medtner's scores and, given a performance of the care the wealth of pregnant detail demands, every feature of the music, however small, makes its effect. As an example of the way in which the elements of the music are woven into a homogenous whole, I may quote the passages during which the Violas and 'Cellos, with Bassoon play theme 6A and the Piano 6B ; this is followed by the Ritournelle (First Violins), other strings contributing relevant material, with Flutes and Clarinet playing 6B and the Violin part merging into 6D. Medtner's mind is one of the most fertile in music and as his exceptional rhythmic sense and invention match his innate musical feeling, it follows that his work repays close study. It might be said that his rhythmic vitality and inventiveness have been a barrier to the popularity of his music because, for one thing, they make his piano music too difficult for the average amateur and, for another, the wealth of rhythmic device sometimes serves, until the music is familiar, to screen the underlying depth of

musical feeling and the melodic and harmonic features. But that is not always the case and certainly not in the three piano concertos, which are all as immediately accessible to the ordinary music lover as are the Greig, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff works which enjoy deservedly such esteem but which, nevertheless, monopolise the concert room unduly. No composer has, I think, welded together the elements of melody, harmony and rhythm more indivisibly than Medtner in these three works. Medtner does not value colour and sonority for themselves but, considering them as adjuncts to the musical thought and form, he gives them a relative place, second to essentials. Hence, he does not prolong his climaxes nor does he ever forget that the idea is all important and he, therefore, without exception, makes it the chief link in the movement of the music. The subtlety of the chromatic writing and syncopation is remarkable. The Third Concerto, however, it is no exaggeration to say, is one of the most melodious works ever written and the chief themes are glowingly expressive. Medtner has not only a rare gift of intertwining and juxtaposing his themes and thematic phrases, but he also endues them with new significance by subtle alteration. The piano writing in these three works is brilliant and subtle, with a wide range of effects and resources, both tonal and rhythmic. The first movement which is entirely original and individual in form, moves in a kind of dream world, with occasional intrusions of human stress and passion; the rest of the work, gravitating towards the moving D flat melody, intended as a hymn of thanksgiving, leaves the enchantments not unmixed with sorrows and apprehension of the first movement, and in something of the manner of Strauss's *Death and Transformation*, resolves into spiritual harmony. But purely as music, the Concerto is, as I said before, a work of intense and majestic beauty. The last movement is, with the exception of the Hymn melody and some other details, in true sonata form.

As in the other Concertos, the themes are common to every movement but no composer, I think, has given his themes more distinctive versatility, so that the same theme becomes almost a new one, while retaining its identity. The evocative Ritournelle, or motto-theme, intervening in the work repeatedly, and cropping up in many subtle ways, imparts a striking unity to the Concerto, as its interventions are always pertinent and organic. Although the detail of the music is so rich and profuse, the whole gives no trace of overloading, but makes the effect of that simplicity which characterises the greatest art and impulse and spontaneity are the keynotes of the music. In order words, it is a striking example of the art of concealing art. Medtner has said that in his concertos the themes resemble characters in a drama and that perhaps is the most enlightening hint as to their function and significance, explaining the fact that while obeying the requirements of form, they, nevertheless, do not operate mechanically. The whole work is, to quote a writer on Medtner's art generally, "massive in exposition and profound in content." Often when one writes of a composer whose work is not generally known, one's statements cannot carry full conviction for the simple reason that the music can rarely be heard. In this case, however, the music is here to confirm or belie what has been said here about it. The Concerto is dedicated to H.H. the Maharajah of Mysore.

Note.—The thematic quotations have been copied by the writer from an MS. copy of the score and details, unnecessary for the purpose obtaining here, have been omitted.

I. PIANOFORTE CONCERTO (BALLADE) IN E MINOR. No. 3, Op. 60.

First Movement—Con moto largamente—poco a poco più mobile.

No.1 Horns (in octaves)

[illegible]

No. 3



Andante

piano *crescendo*

No. 4 *dolce espressivo*



Violins

No. 5



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dramatic support and a chromatic run by the Piano and a further utterance of No. 2 (Trumpet), followed by sustained chords. After another cadenza (Piano), Violins and Piano (*molto allargando*) treat of No. 4 in canon form, and, some agitated passage-work, in the rhythm of the Ritournelle (Tympani) follows. The Piano quietly quotes No. 4 (Solo) and then the Ritournelle again rings out, Brass, then Woodwind.

First Movement (continued)—*Cantando, espressivo, tranquillo*.

Side Two

The Piano is foremost, with an expressive and glowing paraphrase of No. 4, in E minor,



with 'Cellos, intoning the main subject, No. 2, after which the music seems to proceed from No. 3. After a reference to No. 2 ('Cello), First Violins, in a fully scored passage (Woodwind and Strings (*Allegretto con moto*) ardently taking part) indulge in passionate treatment of No. 4, while the Piano executes brilliant figuration. First Violins then invoke the mysterious motto theme (No. 1) in A minor, which the Piano, however, appropriates, only to entrust, quickly, its message to Violins and Flutes, accompanied by harmonised Woodwind and String accompaniment, the Piano contributing chromatic broken octaves. This ends in a beautiful *Ritenu*to phrase for the latter with a whisper from the Clarinet. An acceleration of *tempo* heralds a climax, which is not long coming, the full orchestra uniting in a magnificent peroration, in which the Brass section is uppermost, the whole being based on the pregnant No. 2 which imperiously asserts its power, while No. 3 is also set in high relief. When peace returns, the Piano (*Cantabile portamento*) returns to No. 4 (L. hand), with chromatic work (R.H.) and No. 4 is also heard from Woodwind. The echoes of this are heard intermittently and then during transitional passages (Piano), Violas and 'Cellos presage a new theme, which is soon heard from Piano and Violins (No. 6) thus :—

It will be seen that the first half of the Piano part corresponds to the second of the Violins, (though it is varied), while the second half of the Piano part has its counterpart in the first of the Violins, (again slightly varied). Both these Piano and Violin parts are played simultaneously. Echoes are heard from Oboe and Bassoon.

*First Movement (continued)**Side Three*

The Ritournelle is sounded, in climax by Trumpet and then the Piano turns to another lyrical statement of No. 6, in which echoes of 6D are prominent, this ending with chromatic passages, and theme in L.H. Violins echo No. 6C and play the main rhythmic figure, *staccato*. Once again the Piano embarks on a melodious excursion with a derivative theme in A flat major:—



No. 6A recurs (Piano), Solo Violin and Flute, then First Violins, whereupon further appearances in the Strings, during the last of which, No. 6C is heard (again, inverted) from the Piano (L.H.), lead to a poignantly expressive variant (First Violins) of 6A.



in between the phrases, Piano recalls No. 4. A picturesque treatment of No. 6 brings the side to an end.

*First Movement—A tempo (Allegretto)**Side Four*

Again we hear the Ritournelle (First Violins), the Piano appropriating it, this time in A major fused with 6D, (No. 8A), a subtly varied and plaintive version of it with one of those magical turns at the end which transform the mood and illustrate the plastic genius of the composer:—



Note : No. 8A has no connection with No. 8, having been interpolated by the writer afterwards.

Horns reinforce the rhythm expressively and Strings round off the effect eloquently. Then the whole orchestra indulges in an agitated disturbance of the idyllic mood, Trumpets and Woodwind proclaiming the vital No. 2, while Trombones dominantly support it and follow with a descending figure, after which a rhythmic *cadenza* brings the movement to an end. There is a silence, as after a broken dream. . . .

Second Movement—"Interludium." Molto sostenuto, misterioso.

'Cellos, Basses and Bassoons revert to the ineluctable rhythm of the Ritournelle, while the Piano becomes the medium of No. 2. The Trumpet presages the theme (see No. 10) of the Finale, and the Piano proceeds with trenchant chords. The music merges into march rhythm and the Piano, with a *cantabile* melody, also anticipates No. 10, and subsequently leads, in a march-like section of weighty significance ("*poco largamente appassionato*")—in the rhythm of the Ritournelle—indulging in majestic gestures of a syncopated character, during which thrustful reminders of No. 6D (see No. 9A below) are prominent. This emphatic rhythmic figure is successively underlined by Horns, Trumpets and Piano, afterwards from other instruments, and prepares the way for the Finale. No. 9B is heard three times (Bassoons, 'Cellos and Basses) simultaneously with 9A (Piano) and sets the rhythm of the Finale theme (No. 10).



Third Movement—Finale. Allegro molto, Eroico.

Side Five.

The Finale starts with No. 9A vigorously asserted by the orchestra. The Piano then



plunges into the full statement of No. 10 (E minor) being the main theme of this movement which is in Sonata form.

Woodwind carries it on, with brilliant passage work (Piano) based on the theme, which develops into assertive, accented chords. Strings and Woodwind capture the piano rhythm. Suddenly, the Ritournelle looms, this time joyously as though its dream-like illusory remoteness of the First Movement had acquired human warmth and intimacy. A new rhythm develops and the music acquires a feathery lightness of spirit. Sustained Chords (First Violins) mark a halt and the key changes to the dominant B minor, *grazioso ma molto ritenuto*, the Piano having a scherzo-like theme related to No. 13:—



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Third Movement. Andante con moto tranquillo.

Side Seven.

The Hymn is now heard (Piano, with String harmony) in D flat and in its full form :—



This theme is, as it were, an incrustation on the form of the work and its warmth of heart, its noble harmony, and its sublime beauty foreshadow the drawing together of the various elements of the music in its final stages. The orchestra, after Horn and Trombone have anticipated a new melody by a figure suggestive of the Ritournelle, sings the D flat melody (First Violins), which is rounded off by an expressive Woodwind passage (Trumpet predominating) and then the Piano enters again with the fervent new melody referred to, which has grown out of No. 15, the grateful spirit of which it consummates :—



First Violins take it over, and then Piano again. Flutes and Oboes (No. 4) introduce a transition section and soon a climax based on the first phrase of the Hymn occurs (Brass) and thenceforward earlier voices speak, until, after the Trumpet utters a reminder of the Ritournelle, the Piano feels its way towards No. 2 in anticipation of the Recapitulation.

Note : Nos. 15 & 16 are later on combined.

Third Movement.

Side Eight.

No. 2 is reintroduced by Horn and Piano, which anticipates No. 10 in vigorous chords, while First Violins recall Nos. 4 & 5, and in a virile *Tutti* No. 3 returns. The Recapitulation begins, with No. 10, which is energetically featured by Piano, first and, after First Violins, in a different rhythm. The now scherzo-like, No. 1, steals in with Piano escorted by Clarinets, in different guise :—



and a *Ritenu*to leads to a Piano *cadenza*, based on this theme in three-four time and the music, with different contributions, takes on a light, carefree character. No. 12 appears again, in its original form, first, from the Piano and then Violas. Spirited exchanges leap to a *Tutti*, in which the agonised chord, heard previously (side 5) peals out, a long sustained chord emerging, and then a descending disjointed passage (Woodwind and

Strings) of rhythmic piquancy (see Nos. 11 and 13) is repeated by Piano, *pesante*. The all-important rhythm of the Ritournelle reasserts itself.

Finale. Poco piu espressivo e rubato.

Side Nine.

After a resolute passage (Piano), the latter is soon joined by Orchestra, which recalls early themes, among them, No. 5 and No. 4, which are heard successively from Oboes and Bassoons, Flutes and Clarinets, Trumpets, Strings and Clarinets, then upper Woodwind, after which the Piano executes a rhapsodical passage, terminating in thrustful chords, which culminate in an exalted enunciation of the Hymn melody (No. 15) by First Violins, with the Piano underlining the melodic notes (*Maestoso ma passionato*), and in a richly scored *Tutti*, the complementary theme No. 16 majestically rings out, with Trumpets and Trombones triumphantly affirming the melody. The piano comes to the front again and after vibrant phrases, recalling No. 6 and exchanges with Violins, begins a *bravura* (octave) ascent, which leads to the *Coda Maestoso* in which it engages in a joyful stressing in bell-like tones of the Hymn melody, with Violins emulating it, while from the Violas, a little later joined by Bassoons and Brass, we hear the accents of No. 3. This joyful utterance in which we hear for the last time the Ritournelle, brings the work to an end.

II. IMPROVISATION. Op. 31, No. 1.

A set of brilliant and expressive variations, in the mood of improvisation. The theme, in B flat minor, is heard immediately and the more it is heard, the more it reveals its beauty. The first Variation, *Allegretto capriccioso, danzando*, is light-footed with semi-quavers, alternately one and two notes (R.H.) and *staccato* upward, single-notes, L.H. Second variation: *Sempre accelerando con gradazione* elaborates the theme with repeated notes (R.H.) semi-quavers, and the L.H. part has ascending chords of harmonic import. It has a buoyant tripping character.

Side Two

Variation three has the theme in L.H., *quasi Valse (Con grazia e poco capriccioso)* and is waltz-like in atmosphere, with some chordal passages, heavy and light, while a sort of *Coda* to it hides the theme in fluent (R.H.) semi-quavers with (after fourth bar) emphatic octaves (L.H.). The next Variation, starting in B flat major, *Giocondamente*, is syncopated and gay in spirit. Fifth Variation, *Allegro assai*, in D flat, is very brilliant and is mainly built on rushing thirds, in semi-quavers, R.H., the pattern, an up-and-down one, being repeated, with slight differences, four times; after which, two variants of an elaborate character, are heard. A beautiful modulation introduces the grave postludial *Coda*, which, after some lovely harmonic changes, returns to the tonic, B flat minor.

III. SONATA VOCALISE, WITH MOTTO, "GEWEIHTER PLATZ" (GOETHE). Op. 41.

This work consists of an Introduction, which is a setting of Goethe's poem, "*Geweihter Platz*" (Sacred Spot), which describes how the "Graces" secretly descend from Olympus

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and visit the place where wood-nymphs are dancing in the monolight, watched by the unseen Poet, while they join in the dance with "grave, mysterious gestures" and sing beautiful songs. The Poet relates what he sees, all that heavenly is and all that earth's fascination can offer, to the Muses, who, lest the Gods be offended, counsel him to tell of these things discreetly.

The greater part of the work is in C major and Medtner's music, which moves with easy freedom in the voice part and is notable for its resilience of rhythm and pure, classic idiom, admirably reflects both the grave dignity and the lyric grace of the theme. The main motive is a remarkable embodiment of these qualities and has a kind of archaic beauty and idyllic charm.



After the Introduction, the voice is used as an instrument, having first, a flowing theme in six-eight time. The main theme is soon heard (voice), and the vocal outline is varied, rhythmically and melodically, with all the composer's masterly fertility of idea and fancy. The piano part likewise is full of expressive melody and rhythmic interest and the two are harmoniously combined throughout. The music modulates at times and pronouncedly so (middle of side 2) and (side 3) when the main theme is heard in E flat major and then (*sostenuto espressivo*) in B flat minor. Leaping chords then take it into F minor. The main subject is then repeated in F major, after which an ascending passage takes us into C major once more and the music ends tranquilly.

The work is full of poetic feeling and classic calm.

*Issued for THE MEDTNER SOCIETY by THE GRAMOPHONE COMPANY, LTD.,
Hayes, Middlesex, England.*