

Nicolas Medtner - his influence as a teacher

by Michael Jones

In early October 1935 Nicolas Medtner and his wife Anna left France to live in London – at 69 Wentworth Road, Golders Green¹ where he would remain until his death on 13th November 1951, aged 70. Having left Russia in 1921, Medtner settled first in Germany until 1927, and then in Paris until 1935, largely with the help of Marcel Dupré – the dedicatee of Medtner's *Second Improvisation Op. 47* and whose daughter Marguerite was one of his favourite pupils; she even commuted to London to continue her lessons!

But Medtner's connection to England goes back to 1928 when he played his *Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor Op. 50* for both the Royal Philharmonic Society in London and the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, and made his debut recital in the Aeolian Hall, partnered by the soprano Tatiana Makushina, in February that year. The event was a sell-out and created a sensation – Tobias Matthay kissed his hands! Anna Medtner wrote in her diary:

"Yesterday our thoughts went back to Moscow. The way in which they [the audience] greeted and received each piece and constantly demanded repetitions was such for some minutes I thought, no, this was not London, it couldn't be that this was all taking place in an unfamiliar foreign place, where Kolya [Anna's nickname for her husband] was appearing for the first time. The warm welcome, the deathly silence during the performance, had so good an effect on Kolya that he played altogether exceptionally and in a way that even for me was new... For us this was entirely unexpected... He



Edna Iles at the piano, 1930s

got a lot of letters with greetings, expressions of thanks, requests to meet and so on."

Among the requests was to give a BBC broadcast on 27th February (with Makushina) and a reception in his honour at the Royal Academy of Music on the 24th, hosted by Sir Henry Wood and attended by a number of professors who were to take a keen personal interest in Medtner and his music. These included the composer-pianist York Bowen, who liked to perform the *Sonata in G minor Op. 22* in his recitals, and composers Benjamin Dale and Dora Bright. Medtner continued to make other important visits to Britain, not least in order to make all his gramophone recordings between 1930 and 1947 and to give the World Premiere in Glasgow's Stevenson Hall on 5th February 1931 of his *Sonata Romantica Op. 53 No. 1*, one of his greatest works. All his works from Op. 56 onwards were composed in England and published mainly in the UK. Other world premieres given here would include: *Sonata-Idylle Op. 56*, *Sonata Epica Op. 40 for Violin & Piano*,



Nicolas Medtner with Edna Iles

Russian Round-Dance & Knight-Errant Op. 58 (for 2 pianos), *Concerto No. 3 in E minor Op. 60* ('Ballade'), and his late *Piano Quintet Op. Posth* in 1950.

As soon as he was established in London, Medtner needed to earn a living by teaching, and it is this aspect of his work that I wish to focus on in this article, as Medtner's influence on the British composers mentioned above is discussed elsewhere². Pianists and pupils associated with Medtner

were to include Arthur Alexander, later a professor at the Royal College of Music and who would number Malcolm Binns among his pupils, Yvonne Dinwiddy (the daughter of violinist and Medtner champion Arthur Catterall) who taught Marcus Andrews, and Phyllis Palmer, for many years a renowned teacher in Cambridge. But it was the Midlands pianist Edna Iles, the future dedicatee of the Russian Round-Dance, who studied with Medtner for almost twenty years and would continue to champion his works in her Wigmore Hall recitals and BBC broadcasts right up to the Medtner Centenary in 1980³. She had first introduced herself to the composer after his Aeolian Hall concert on 20th March 1930, having first written to him regarding the British Premiere of Medtner's Piano Concerto No. 1 in C minor Op. 33, which she had given with the City of Birmingham Orchestra, conducted by Adrian Boult on 16th February. This was no mean feat, as the work is in an extended and continuous one-movement form of over 30 minutes' duration; but Miss Iles had already proved her worth, having given one of the very first performances in England of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the City of Birmingham Orchestra and Appleby Matthews in 1923 – aged only 17! In 1946 she would perform all three Medtner concertos in a series of three concerts in the Royal Albert Hall with the London Symphony Orchestra and George Weldon, given in the presence of the composer – who inscribed her copy of the Russian Round-Dance with the comment: "To the bravest and ablest besieger of my musical fortresses."

In 1980 I met Miss Iles for the first time when she was preparing to give a Medtner Centenary Recital in the Birmingham School of Music Recital Hall in February that year. In addition to the *Sonata in G minor*, *Canzona Matinata* and *Sonata Tragica* and several 'Tales', she also accompanied soprano Margaret Handford in a number of Medtner's distinctive songs – some set to Russian texts performed in English prose translations by Miss Iles herself, based on Anna Medtner's literal translations. As a friend of the singer I was asked to turn the pages at both the

rehearsals and the concert and I was immediately taken with how the sound of Miss Iles' playing so completely transcended the printed page – her vitality and deep understanding revealed a total commitment and integrity to the music ("scrupulously honest" stated *The Times'* obituary in February 2003). When I enquired how busy she was as a teacher, being the official authority on Medtner interpretation, she replied that she had not taught anybody! In fact she had always wanted to pass on what she had learnt, but it was simply that no-one had approached her for lessons! And so it was arranged that I should visit her home in Solihull for an extended

series of lessons, which continued throughout the 1980s. During the early 1990s things took a more significant turn when I became the go-between when Barrie Martyn visited Miss Iles in the process of working on his substantial Medtner biography⁴ which was published in 1995 in time for her 90th birthday. The book is dedicated: 'To Edna Iles, with respect'. Her death in January 2003, aged 97, received a full-page obituary in 'The Register' of *The Times*, and in 2005 her Centenary was celebrated in a special concert in Birmingham University, attended by the Lord Mayor of Birmingham.

But there is an additional and significant dimension to the Medtner/

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in the presence of the
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Edna Iles story. When World War II broke out in September 1939, the Medtners began to feel anxious for their safety should the 'Blitzkrieg' become a reality. During the summer of 1940 they visited Edna's parents, Herbert and Amy Iles, at their home in Moseley, Birmingham, to express their anxieties, and it was agreed that the London home should be temporarily closed up and the Medtners come to live with them as house guests for as long as was necessary. However, in December 1940, Birmingham itself became a target of the Luftwaffe and the Iles family took the initiative to move out temporarily to a rented house in the village of Wythall, seven miles to the south of Birmingham – where Medtner put the finishing touches to the Russian Round Dance, Knight Errant and his Two Elegies Op. 59 – two of his finest late works. Then in February 1941 they all moved to a much larger house called 'Foreign Park' in the Warwickshire countryside at Wootton Wawen, six miles from Stratford-upon-Avon. It was here that Medtner completed the two-piano score of his Piano Concerto No. 3 Op. 60 'Ballade' in February 1942, and Miss Iles was therefore privileged to be the very first pianist to learn the solo part and rehearse it with the composer on two pianos⁵. A welcome visitor during this period was the renowned pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch who was seeking Medtner's interpretative advice for the forthcoming premiere gramophone recording of Sonata in G minor which Moiseiwitsch was to make in London for HMV on 4th and 11th March 1943. That same year, the Medtners returned to London in April, and despite having endured some serious ill health (two coronary attacks) Medtner was nevertheless able to complete the orchestration of the Concerto in time to give the work's world premiere in the Royal Albert Hall on 19th February 1944 with the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Adrian Boult.

In seeking to get a better understanding of Medtner's music it is essential to become familiar with Medtner's own recordings, which are now available complete from more than one CD label release and which also include some important unpublished recordings⁶. Medtner,

like his friend and supporter Rachmaninov, was a great pianist who kept his faculties to the end despite his developing heart condition. His playing represents the highest ideals of Art: supreme quality of technique, allied to a perfectly-balanced intuitive and intellectual sense of form and feeling. In addition, the unpublished recordings include pieces never before released: Tale in C minor Op. 8 No. 1, Primavera Op. 39/3, Novelle No. 2 in C minor Op. 17, Tale in F# minor Op. 51 No. 5 and the first of 'Three Hymns in Praise of Toil' Op. 49 No. 1 – which in Medtner's hands has a peaceful serenity and sense of religious devotion I have not heard in anyone else's recordings. Above all,



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it is the quality of Medtner's technique and sensitivity that creates such space between the notes, in contrast to the superficial brilliance and facility of many of today's performances. One of Medtner's close associates, Arthur Alexander, has written of Medtner as a pianist:

"Now, in my experience, no one has equalled Medtner in the extraordinary musical clarity of his playing, particularly on crowded and complex music in the lower registers of the piano [...]. Moreover, he possessed to an acute degree the rare power of colouring melodically passages that in the hands of others remained mere notes, and his subtleties of nuance of pedal were unforgettable [...]. But above all [Medtner's] playing throughout was imbued to a remarkable degree with such strongly individual rhythm that, without seeing him, one could always have named the performer's identity."⁷

Concerning Miss Iles' own teaching: When demonstrating a piece she displayed a special grasp of large structures instinctively, which brings me to a very crucial point. There is real rhythmic vitality in Medtner's ideas, coupled with a strong sense of individual character, but here we must touch on an anomaly: 'Al Rigore di Tempo'. What does this mean? It does not mean stick the metronome on and hope for the best! Medtner was especially sensitive to shape and form – his works are perfect in this respect, but if the shape and form are distorted by a lack of structural grasp, or of feeling and understanding, then his music becomes vulnerable. The music must be grasped by one's whole being and not just intellectually and technically assimilated. "Long notes long, short notes short" was a favourite saying of Medtner's – merely playing 'in time' does not convey the meaning. On the question of ideal interpretations Medtner said: "There may be many ways of performing a work but there is always one way which is the best." This is a remarkable statement, revealing a hidden law of musical inevitability whereby every musical work exists in its own archetype and the closer you get to intuitively perceiving this archetype the more inevitable your

performance becomes. This came as a revelation, having been brought up with the fashionable attitude that every performer had a right to his own personal interpretation under the guise of so-called 'objectivity'!

Also, the term 'Fairy Tales' in the British publications is misleading. Medtner's preferred translation of *Skazka* were either the French *Conte* or the German *Märchen*; therefore the English term should simply read 'Tale'. Also, Miss Iles' favourite term for the *Sonata-Conte* Op. 25 No. 1 was 'Sonata-Legend' which I also prefer. Regarding piano technique, Miss Iles had copied out numerous exercises given to her by Medtner from the Russian and central European tradition (Medtner had trained with Paul Pabst, Vassily Sapellnikov and Vassily Safonov). The exercises have been studied in detail by Alexander Karpëyev in his 2014 thesis 'New Light on Nicolai Medtner' as part of his detailed study of the Edna Iles Collection in the British Library, acquired in 1997. Judging by the photos I have seen of Medtner at the keyboard he favoured beautifully rounded fingers

which fit the keys like a glove. Miss Iles tended to convey the impression of flat hands being required, as mentioned in occasional footnotes in the Soviet Medtner Edition, but well developed hands should form a sufficient natural roundedness to glide freely across the textures.

In 1978 Edna Iles delivered a lecture to the British Institute of Recorded Sound (now the British Library National Sound Archive which contains a considerable number of her original discs and BBC off-air tapes)⁸ called 'Nicolas Medtner – Friend and Master'⁹. This is essential reading to gain a bigger picture than what I can describe here; nevertheless I will always feel especially grateful to Edna Iles for so many valuable insights into the music of a still-under-recognised composer whose music yields up its treasures only to those who sincerely wish to extend their full musical faculties to rise to the challenge. Nevertheless, Medtner did receive so much attention, respect and support from musicians and pianists in England that he sincerely felt that



he had made the right decision to make his home here, as he wrote to his brother Emil in February 1936:

"You will see....that clearly they [the British audiences] value me more here than in any other foreign country, and therefore our coming over to England was essential."

Endnotes

- ¹ The house now has a blue plaque commemorating Medtner's time of living there from 1935 to 1951.
- ² 'Nicolas Medtner – An Honorary British Composer – Exploring interlinked connections between Russian Music and Britain'. Journal 'British Music', Volume 42 (2020) published in August, and now also available for direct access on Chris. Crocker's Medtner website: www.medtner.org.uk.
- ³ Edna Iles' last BBC Radio 3 broadcast was recorded in 1977 and broadcast in 1979.
- ⁴ Barrie Martyn: 'Nicolas Medtner – His Life and Music', Ashgate, Scolar Press, 1995, also available in paperback.
- ⁵ This whole story will feature in a forthcoming Channel 4 TV programme 'Great Canal Journeys' in which Michael and Jones and Alexander Karpëyev are interviewed by Gyles Brandreth and Sheila Hancock.
- ⁶ Medtner's complete solo recordings are currently available from, among others: APR 5546 to 5548 (3 CD's) and St. Laurent Studio, Canada on YSL 78-004 to 78-007 and 78-023, 78-024 and 78-027.
- ⁷ Quote taken from 'Medtner as Pianist', pages 93-94 in 'Nicolas Medtner – A Memorial Volume' edited by Richard Holt, London, Dennis Dobson Ltd. 1955.
- ⁸ A sizeable collection of Edna Iles own recordings were released in 2014 on the St. Laurent Studio label, including many Medtner works (including *Piano Concerto no 1*) on YSL 78-210 to 212, and 7-215 and 263.
- ⁹ Journal of the British Institute of Recorded Sound 70-71, April-July 1978.



Michael Jones is a professional pianist who graduated from what is now the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire in 1974 with Prizes for Piano, Advanced Harmony and Musical Distinction. He is also a historian, musicologist, composer's biographer and Executor/Trustee (for Edgar Bainton), contributing articles for many journals and magazines. During the 1980s he studied a sizeable number of Medtner's works with Edna Iles, and after her death in 2003 was appointed to oversee the transfer of her archive of recordings to the British Library National Sound Archive for posterity.

Michael and Alexander Karpëyev were filmed in conversation with Gyles Brandreth and Sheila Hancock on the subject of Medtner's time in Wootton Wawen during World War 2 for the popular TV series 'Great Canal Journeys' - broadcast on 8th and 11th September on More 4.

This year Michael celebrates 50 years 'In Search of Music' and has now performed works in all genres by over 500 composers.