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NIKOLAI MEDTNER

BY LEONID SABANEEV

I want to say a few words concerning one whose great and noble work is unjustly and strangely allowed to remain in obscurity. This composer, who began more than brilliantly, was at one time a candidate for the hegemony of Russian music in alternation with Scriabin, and then was somehow flung violently from those heights—not by the qualities of his talent, but, if I may thus express it, by the musical taste of the world dating from the period of the war. That period has proved to be really fatal for music: the impetuosity characteristic of our age has permeated musical creation and infected it with an insatiable desire for originality, for unlikeness to the past. Music and composition have become a sport, at which betting takes place as to who will write the most extraordinary stuff, as to who will subvert, *en passant*, most of the old laws of the musical profession. As it is usually not difficult to upset laws in music, the tempo of the achievements has become so rapid that no flying records can equal it. And there is nothing surprising in the fact that in the background of this mad chase into which the sphere of musico-creative work has been converted, a few big and deeply sincere musicians—who have been perplexed observers of what was going on, and who have had no desire to sacrifice their work to the headlong rush which is now the mode—have seemed amazingly old-fashioned and remote.

The composer to whom I refer is Nikolai Medtner, the friend and companion of Rachmaninov, who likewise repudiated modernism. Medtner's compositions are almost unknown to the general public. Born in 1879, and therefore a man of mature age, he made a brilliant start, as already stated. In him were blended the depth and philosophical temperament of the German (he is half German by descent) and the lyrical soul of the Slav. Over his creative work—which, as regards form, seemed to be technically perfect when first it was presented to us—hovered the shades of the great founders of German art: Beethoven, Bach, Brahms. Medtner began his activities when musical impressionism was making its conquests, at the outset of that craze for innovation, the fruits and dismal consequences of which we are now reaping, and with heroic resolution he came forward as a convinced conservative, an enemy of impressionism, a partisan of the old and mighty tradition of art. To the diffusiveness of impressionism he opposed a clear-cut steadiness of rhythm;

to an unconcealed nervousness and ecstasy an austere restraint of thought and feeling, equally remote from the extreme rapture of Scriabin and the æsthetic gastronomy of Debussy. Medtner at once became a man of note in Russia, but the attitude of Russian advanced musical thought, then pre-eminently captivated by the passion for novelty, was somehow not always friendly to a composer whose daring was not displayed in the revelation of the new, but in its haughty rejection, in defiance of the fashionable taste. Nevertheless by 1910 Medtner had a large following, who not only admitted him to the ranks of genius, but compared him to Scriabin, and even awarded him the preference as the wiser and more profound phenomenon.

His creative work, confined to the sphere of the pianoforte, is stamped with a severe and ascetic grandeur. Imaginatively he comes of the world of Beethoven's last compositions, of the inspiration of Brahms, of the severe style of Bach. From the very beginning his work bears the impress of power and profundity of thought. His popularity, increased by his fame as a superb pianist (in this respect he may be compared to Rachmaninov as regards expressiveness and virility of style), soon became so considerable that, as already mentioned, the question arose as to the supremacy of Medtner or Scriabin—those two dominators of the musical ideas of pre-war Russia.

Medtner's genius, profound and meditative, essentially philosophical, deeply romantic in its trend, was always markedly behind the times. Had he appeared in the days of Schumann, or even of Brahms, this great and serious artist would undoubtedly have become a world composer. But the present has too little contact with such temperaments as his; it lives on the showy and sensational, and in Medtner's work there is nothing of either. Like his friend Rachmaninov, he has made no concessions to modernity: he has repudiated it—not so much as an external form of expression as a fundamental mood. Medtner's genius is utterly foreign not only to advertisement, which is so widespread in these days (and has, indeed, become a necessity), but even to any desire to thrust itself forward, to glorify itself. Exceedingly modest and unassuming, and taking pride in these qualities, it relies entirely on the righteous judgment of history to put every one in his proper place. Idealists may think that such will be the case, but contemporary life teaches us the opposite.

A great romantic (and music has always been pre-eminently the language of romance), a great classic in his regard for form, Medtner, although he produces nothing sensational, nor astonishes the ear with unexpected cacophonies, with a sudden irruption of trivialities, with ingenious quests of the ultra-novel, undoubtedly gives us something original, new, and beyond question his own. And his own is not sensational; in our noisy and tempestuous age it does

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not 'hit the eye,' it is not clamorous, but this does not prevent its being new and original, in the way in which Beethoven, Schumann, and Wagner were essentially original. Medtner lies wholly on the plane of that old music which to this day, as he has the courage to admit, is for him the only real music. Stravinsky's tonal 'fun of the fair,' Prokofiev's inveterate buffoonery, Scriabin's drawing-room ecstasy, Debussy's perfumed tone cuisine, Richard Strauss's martial plebeians, Schönberg's musical adventurousness—none of these entice him. For him these things are all strange and belong to the sphere of the 'non-musical.' Beethoven's spirit, the spirit of the last Quartets, reigns over Medtner's Sonatas, over his monumental Sonata in E minor, over his grandiose Sonata in A major: the spirit of old Bach over his 'Nocturnes for Violin': the spirit of Schumann and Wagner over his 'Legends'—those fantastic and poignant tonal grotesques. Medtner's is a *serious* talent; it is none of his business to provide musical smiles, jokes, or sarcasms; his operations are confined to the sphere of moods, either painful or philosophically profound. His vocal compositions carry on the ancient line of the song, which began in days of old with the immortal arias of Schütz and Bach. His favourite poets, who inspire him to song, are Goethe, Nietzsche, Tyutchev (the first Russian symbolist poet), and Pushkin and Fet (supreme in the poetic art of Russia). His best achievements, the crowning points of his austere creative work, are, I consider, his Pianoforte Sonatas and Legends, and his songs. The five songs to words by Pushkin and Tyutchev, Op. 37 (particularly No. 1, entitled 'Bessonnitsa'*), bear the indubitable impress of that real genius which is now lost to music, obscured by the ideas of sensation and effect, it being considered admissible nowadays to confuse these with genius.

Fate has been merciless to Medtner, as it always is to the real geniuses of thought and feeling, as it was to Beethoven, Wagner, and Berlioz. Medtner has acquired no popularity. On the European horizon his creative work has passed unnoticed; his merits have always been entirely beyond the limits of the crude receptive faculty of the contemporary public and critic, and even of composers and musicians. He and his work belong to another sphere, to another age, when the perceptions were more subtle and the tastes more penetrating; when criticism was concerned with mastery and not merely with sensations. He now lives at Paris, almost forgotten, almost unrecognised, save by a little group of friends. This great musician languishes in an atmosphere quite foreign to that musicality which he is accustomed to regard as the only musicality. The latest compositions written by him here at Paris (a Violin Sonata and a Pianoforte Concerto) convince me that in him we have a musician of the rank of

those great musicians of the past, of whom we hardly seem to think nowadays with sufficient clearness and consciousness. The Violin Sonata (his second) is a monumental work, with an elevation of thought worthy of Beethoven, with an inflexibility of the stern musical will which again reminds us forcibly of the composer of the ninth Symphony. Beethoven was cut off from the musical world by his deafness, and was likewise forgotten by the musical world of his day, which flung itself on the alluring blooms of Rossini's art. Medtner is estranged and isolated, not by deafness, but by a complete rupture with the contemporary musical outlook. And, like old Beethoven, he creates without regard to his surroundings, even *in spite of* them, evidently believing that the hour will come, the modern 'gods' will be forgotten, and music will again worship at its old fountain-head. Then his music may be resurrected and will find the way to comprehension. But will it be resurrected? Will history retrace its steps? Or will the process of musical degeneration, which is connected with the destruction of the romantic outlook and the wrecking of idealism everywhere—will it henceforth triumphantly hack a path for itself over the corpses of those heroes who have incautiously put themselves in its way, and have conceived the audacious idea of staying and overthrowing its blind force?

Personally, I consider that we have in Medtner one of the few remaining oases of the old musical outlook—when music was music and not a sport; when it still served as the language of expression; when it was permissible and not ridiculous to feel, and to disclose one's feelings. Medtner left Russia in the revolutionary years, thinking to find in Europe a more congenial musical atmosphere: it is evident that he was greatly disenchanted. But the process of musical 'de-psychologization' is a comprehensive one—it includes not only Russia and individual countries of Europe—it is world-wide. We are entering upon a new era, an anti-musical era, in which, generally speaking, there will of a surety be no place for music. Hence I have little belief in the advance of Medtner, for whom I have a deep and heartfelt sympathy, since, like him, I am imbued with sentiments of contempt and disgust for the latest cries of the musical fashion—even of actual hatred for this poverty-stricken new art. Those musicians who have not yet been carried away by the herd sense and the collective hypnosis of self-glorification and advertisement, and so have not allied themselves to this so-called 'new' art—which is nothing more than a kind of stock-jobbing with inflated bonds on the universal musical 'change'—such musicians should at once interest themselves in Medtner, a genuine composer who is fully commensurable with the greatest Russian masters, with Tchaikovsky and Moussorgsky, and should support him and his work in every way.

(Translated by S. W. Pring.)

* 'Insomnia.' An edition of these songs with English text, by M.-D. Calvocoressi, has been, or will shortly be, published by J. H. Zimmermann, Leipzig. (Translator's note.)