

# Medtner: Piano Sonata no. 1

JIM'S PRESENTATION – 2ND JANUARY 2021

- I Allegro
- II Intermezzo. Allegro
- III Largo divoto —
- IV Finale. Allegro risoluto

## Lucas Debargue

Recorded in the Sendesaal 1, Funkhaus, Nalepastraße, Berlin, February 1–5, 2016

Nikolai Karlovich Medtner (5 January 1880 – 13 November 1951) was a Russian composer and pianist. After a period of comparative obscurity in the twenty-five years immediately after his death, he is now becoming recognised as one of the most significant Russian composers for the piano.

A younger contemporary of Sergei Rachmaninov and Alexander Scriabin, he wrote a substantial number of compositions, all of which include the piano. His works include fourteen piano sonatas, three violin sonatas, three piano concerti, a piano quintet, two works for two pianos, many shorter piano pieces, a few shorter works for violin and piano, and 108 songs including two substantial works for vocalise. His 38 Skazki (generally known as “Fairy Tales” in English but more correctly translated as “Tales”) for piano solo contain some of his most original music.

— *From Wikipedia*

When one considers the life of Nikolai Karlovich Medtner it is impossible not to be amazed by his strange, tragic and yet marvellous destiny. He was recognized in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century as one of the most important composers and was, with Scriabin and Rachmaninov, an extremely influential, almost ‘cult’ figure for a whole generation of the Russian intellectual élite. He was also a great pianist and an outstanding musical thinker. His personality was completely divorced from everyday life, but the depth and power of his intellect, entirely absorbed in music, philosophy and the history of culture, were deeply respected by such contemporaries as Nikisch, Rachmaninov, Furtwängler, Koussevitsky, Glazunov and Prokofiev. There is thus something of a paradox in the fact that for the last thirty years of his life, when he lived in the West, he remained practically unknown to the general public and spent most of his life in abject poverty.

His music is the subject of a similar paradox. More than half a century of composing saw his style change remarkably little; critical reaction, however, differed wildly. Some thought of him as an innovator where others considered him an arch-conservative. Some felt he was the heir to the great Germanic tradition, while others spoke of his Russian soul and his ability to capture in his music the atmosphere of Russia at the turn of the century. It would seem, then, that neither the composer’s personality nor his musical style can be analysed within the limits of a single tradition, be this even the rich tradition of a Russia or Germany. This ambivalence stems from Medtner’s own origins. Since Peter the Great had, in the words of Pushkin, ‘opened a window into Europe’, thousands of foreigners had been living in Russia. This strange community, which juxtaposed European roots with the changing environment of Russia, formed a unique part of Russian life and produced many remarkable figures—men of art, science and politics.

Medtner’s ancestors probably left Germany in the eighteenth century, and he was born in Moscow. Both his personality and his music evince a combination of Germanic tendency to weighty philosophizing and typically Moscovite spirit. The beginning of Medtner’s artistic activity came at a time which many consider to have been one of the high points in the history of Russian culture. This era is known as the Silver Age, or the Russian Renaissance. At the turn of the century the arts, music and philosophy were flourishing in Russia; the revolution of 1917 brought this unique period to an end. Like Scriabin and Rachmaninov, Medtner expressed the raw nerve of this momentous time: his contemporaries noted the ‘psychologically intense, demonic’ character of his music. Yet the composer used the ‘eternal laws of music’ alongside these more elusive, transient and indefinable principles. Much later, in 1930, in his book *Muse and Mode* he analysed with scientific precision the basic elements of the language of music (melody, harmony, rhythm), interpreting them in the spirit of the classical tradition of the nineteenth century and repudiating the whole development of modern music. Thus Medtner’s music is not easy to understand because of its complicated combination of entirely different elements: the fusion of German roots and Russian spirit, the quest for new musical expression and dedicated conservatism, a rare intelligence and almost childlike naïvety.

What was the genesis of Medtner's style? He considered himself a follower of Beethoven and the best of his work reflects the great polyphonic skill, the detailed development of short compact motifs, and the severe spirit and concentrated depth of the late Beethoven sonatas. No less important for Medtner was German Romanticism in general and Schumann's legacy in particular. Goethe (with whom Medtner's great-grandfather was acquainted) was a permanent source of inspiration for him. Medtner was often compared with Brahms and there are indeed comparisons to be made: the deep seriousness of his music, some of the special harmonic features, the interest in intricate cross-rhythms, and piano-writing. Nevertheless, it would be a great mistake to consider him neo-Brahmsian. Medtner never imitated anybody and was, moreover, not noted for his interest in Brahms's music. The similarities are rather the result of their independent development of the commonly inherited Romantic tradition.

Comparison of Medtner and Rachmaninov is more justifiable. They were great friends for most of their lives and they influenced each other in many ways. Medtner was enchanted by the beauty of Rachmaninov's melodies and Rachmaninov was highly impressed by Medtner's quest for new harmonies and rhythms. It is significant that Rachmaninov dedicated to Medtner his Fourth Piano Concerto, the most explicit instance of this mutual inspiration.

The best of Medtner's music represents something very special, and it is unmistakable: the melodies and harmonies are inimitable in the way they are drawn from the piano, an instrument cherished by Medtner as much as by Chopin. Today, forty years after Medtner's death, we see that the heroic, self-sacrificing work to which he devoted his whole life was not in vain. His music, imbued with the strength of his powerful spirit and the beauty he believed in, is discovering a new life.

— From *Hyperion Records*

Cyclical procedures are central to the **First Sonata in F minor op. 5** by Nikolai Medtner. Admired by Rachmaninov, Medtner is a composer whose star has begun to shine again. "Taneyev said that he was born with sonata form coursing through his veins," recalls Debargue, for whom "the great cycles of 20th-century Russian sonatas include ten by Scriabin, nine by Prokofiev and fourteen by Medtner."

Debargue was fourteen when he discovered Medtner while visiting a music shop where he routinely spent all of his pocket money: "I opened a copy of the op. 5 Sonata and heard the opening bars in my head. It spoke to me at once and left a deep impression. The whole work is imbued with a great sense of enthusiasm." At the Tchaikovsky Competition [in 2015], the audience was unable to stop itself from applauding at the end of the opening movement.

Medtner spent several years working on his First Sonata, finally completing it in 1903. It opens with an impressive *Allegro* that Debargue describes as "a sonata in its own right". Its initial motif is first stated tranquillo, then agitato, and seems to "derive directly from Bach's First Invention". This motif is repeated on frequent occasions, creating the sensation of an irresistible and endless current. Its second subject is marked "cantabile" and recalls "both the beginning of the final movement of Tchaikovsky's *Symphonie pathétique* and Scriabin's First Sonata" – the two sonatas are very alike in terms of their atmosphere. The two subjects finally merge in a moment of intense expression that culminates in veritable outbursts of passion. An *Intermezzo* resembling a vaguely ghostly march is followed by a rich-toned *Largo divoto*, which Debargue describes as "the most Russian section" of the piece and which is filled with an orchestral grandeur. The following chords sound strangely similar to those that Debussy was to write ten years later in his *Prélude La Terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*. The final *Allegro risoluto* is especially brilliant. It brings together various strands from the earlier movements and ends by striking a triumphantly radiant note.

"I think it makes more sense to champion a work like this, which is inspired but barely known, rather than pieces with which we have become over-familiar." We may be left wondering why this sonata has never found a place for itself in the mainstream repertory. While a few recordings exist, they are buried deep within complete sets of the composer's works and have had few opportunities to stand out. Although it was championed by the great Josef Hofmann at the beginning of the 20th century, there is no doubt that it has lacked a more recent advocate, but it has undeniably found one now in Lucas Debargue.

— Bertrand Boissard, from the CD booklet