

Nikolai Medtner 141st Birthday Concert Wednesday 6 January 2021

A concert celebrating the composer's 141st birthday through his piano music

Jenny Lu (Piano)

Selective Skazki (Tales)

Skazka 'Narrante a piacere' Op.26 No.3

Skazka Op.34 No.2

'When what we call our own, departs from us forever' – Fyodor Tyutchev

Skazka Op.34 No.4

'There once was a poor knight' – Alexander Pushkin

Forgotten Melodies

Canzona Matinata (Morning Song) Op.39 No.4

Sonata Tragica (Tragic Sonata) Op.39 No.5

Nikolai Medtner (1880 -1951) was a Russian-born pianist, composer and a contemporary to Sergei Rachmaninoff. Like Chopin, Medtner's compositions concentrated on the piano, consisting of numerous solo piano works, 14 piano sonatas and three piano concerti, but also more than a hundred lieder and chamber duets with the violin. During the communist revolutionary period in Russia, he first fled to France and later lived and died in England. The collusion of self-exile, an unbending personality and complex harmony and textures rendered Medtner's compositions to be not widely accessible. The value of his compositions was nevertheless recognized by supporters such as Rachmaninoff, who advocated that Medtner was 'the greatest composer of our time'.

Skazki Op.26 No.3 (1912)

'Narrante a piacere'

Skazki Op.34 (1916 –1917)

No.2 'When what we called our own, forever departs from us'

- Fyodor Tyutchev

No.4 'There once was a poor knight'

-Alexander Pushkin

In 1905, Medtner first associated the term 'Skazka' with his compositions, which appeared in the form of a pair of character pieces in Op.8. He would compose over a hundred of Skazki (plural for Skazka) across his creative output (in 33 collections). Medtner devised the genre Skazka from the Russian narrative literary form that broadly ranges from legends of oral tradition, children's fables to epic poetry. The most appropriate English translation for the term is a tale.

Mistakenly translated as fairy tales to increase publicity during their early publications and therefore suffering distorted connotations, the inspiration of these condense character pieces transcends children's literature. Surveying the epigraphs in Medtner's Skazki, quotations from Shakespearean tragedies, poems from Romantic poets Johann von Goethe, Fyodor Tyutchev and Alexander Pushkin are the most frequent.

Op.26 contains 4 skazki, the third of which is marked 'narrante a piacere' (narrating at will) and unfolds a poignant folk-like melody. The simplicity and memorability of the theme make the piece one of Medtner's most popular compositions.

The second skazka from the Op.34 set (1916 –1917) bears an epigraph ‘when what we called our own, forever departs from us’. It musically depicts the opening stanzas of Tyutchev’s poem Peace through an ostinato that illustrates the poem’s river motif as the poet stands at the bank of a river and allows his sorrow to flow with its relentless torrents.

The fourth skazka in this collection of four pieces prompts a quotation from Pushkin’s the Poor Knight. Pushkin’s poem narrates the chivalrous tale of a paladin knight who fought for religious aspirations instead of worldly desires. Two slow pacing, solemn themes govern this composition: the first portrays the role of the pious protagonist while the subsequent pietoso theme depicts an angelic prayer. The piece concludes in a depiction of an exuberant succession of Christmas church bells, heralding the knight’s salvation.

Forgotten Melodies Op.39

No.4 Canzona Matinata

No.5 Sonata-Tragica

Op.39 is the second of Medtner’s three cycles of *Forgotten Melodies*, which are collections of music that derive their inspirations from the composer’s musical sketches kept like a diary throughout his life. *Canzona Matinata* (Morning Song) is the second last piece in this opus. Carefree and nostalgic, the piece depicts youth as the morning of life and joins *attacca* onto although contrasts drastically with *Sonata-Tragica*. Medtner insisted that these two pieces should always be performed together.

Sonata-Tragica (Tragic Sonata) is the closing piece in Op.39 *Forgotten Melodies*. It is a single movement sonata that launches its opening subject with three abrupt chords that simulates blows of fate. From this forward material bears a more reflective and expressive secondary theme, winding the melody to a major key. However, ere long this *dolce* (softly and sweetly) subject becomes melancholic as Medtner weaves in it a quotation of his delicate *Canzona Matinata* (Morning Song) from earlier in the opus, which reminisces youth and hope in the dark composition. The pending doom of the piece evolves fragments of the main themes into an emotionally intense turbulence and explodes into a poignant recapitulation where the morning theme never returns. A breathless coda succeeds in furious denouncement of the earlier lyrical subjects and concludes the Sonata with the blows whence it was born.

I believe that *Sonata-Tragica* musically summarizes Medtner's creative and personal life in his search for beauty and hope in the bleak hardship of the reality of life. In doing so the composer reminds his audience the role of music in times of uncertainty and despair. This echoes the quest of the wandering soul in Lermontov's poem, *the Angel*, searching with an angel's song of Heaven in the land of living through his fragmented memory and a longing for rest in beauty. Medtner quotes Lermontov's poem as a preface to his musically autobiographical book *the Muse and Fashion* in recognition of its ideological twin. I have attached this poem that gave spirit and title to the present concert, as an appendix below for your amusement.

The Angel - Mikhail Lermontov (Translated by Yevgeny Bonver)

The angel was flying through sky in midnight,

And softly he sang in his flight;

And clouds, and stars, and the moon in a throng

Harkened to that holy song.

He sang of the garden of God's paradise,

Of innocent ghosts in its shade;

He sang of the God, and his vivacious praise

Was glories and unfeigned.

The juvenile soul he carried in arms

For worlds of distress and alarms;

The tune of his charming and heavenly song

Was left in the soul for long.

It roamed on earth many long nights and days,

Filled with a wonderful thirst,

And earth's boring songs could not ever replace

The sounds of heaven it lost.