

**Theoretical and philosophical aesthetics in Nikolai Karlovich Medtner
's piano compositions**

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Proposal

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General background and motivation for this study

Nikolai Karlovich Medtner (1880-1951) was born in Moscow to parents of German descent. Despite his conservative musical taste, Medtner's piano skills and compositions were highly esteemed. However, being a younger contemporary of Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) and Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), Medtner's art became overshadowed by the mystical qualities of the former and the popular appeal of the latter.

Medtner often referred to himself as "*a pupil of Beethoven*" (Martyn: 1995). I am of the strong opinion that I will be able to offer a more in depth contribution to this study because of countless performances of Medtner's piano music since my undergraduate years at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. I am often asked about the repertoire that I am working on or asked about my programme for an up-coming concert and even to this day, when I mention Medtner, the most common reaction is "What?" or "Who is Medtner?". Nikolay Myaskovsky (1881-1950) wrote the following to his friend Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) regarding Medtner's "*Night Wind*" Sonata, op. 25, no. 2: "...it is a masterpiece, one of the most substantial and outstanding compositions of the present time" (Barrie: 1995). Medtner openly expressed his antipathy and despair towards the modernist direction in which Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951), Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) and Prokofiev were taking music. He expressed his views in his book called *THE MUSE AND THE FASHION: Being a defence of the foundation of the Art of Music*¹. Medtner believed that music should follow basic laws established by the great masters of the past such as- Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)² and Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)³.

Objectives of the study

As already stated, the writer has performed many of Medtner's compositions on countless occasions. It is therefore, of particular interest to delve into and investigate his piano music further from an in depth "academic" point of view. In my opinion, Medtner manages to surpass the physical limitations of the piano. The writer agrees with Christoph Flamm (see Research Methodology and General Study Plan) when he stated (to the writer) that in his opinion, when one plays Medtner's piano music, one gets a sense of a philosopher using the piano as a medium of communication. The writer's objective is, therefore, to illustrate how the theoretical and philosophical components are reflected in Medtner's piano music and also how the overall structural context of specific works is meticulously achieved. This theoretical and philosophical components culminated and developed further in Medtner's later works and this study will also highlight this. In order to achieve this task, the theoretical aspects (covering topics such as "*immutable*" laws of harmony, mentioned in *The Muse and the Fashion*) and the philosophical aspects (which will include topics such as *function of music, beauty and equilibrium, etc*) of Medtner's thinking will be mapped out in this

1 *The Muse and the Fashion* was originally published in 1953 by Rachmaninoff's publishing company, Tair. It was translated from Russian to English by Alfred Swan in 1945 and was published by Haverford College Bookstore, located in Pennsylvania, in 1951. A copy of the book is available on the following website: <http://www.medtner.org.uk/publications.html>.

2 Medtner stated that *the exposition of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavichord, in view of the exceptional complexity of his polyphony, represents the simplest distribution of the whole material for the piano (The Muse and the Fashion)*.

3 Medtner wrote that: *The simplicity of Beethoven's "harmonies" (i.e. Chords) enable us to perceive without difficulty the endless complexity of his constructions in form ("architectonics")*.

study. This will include investigations of: themes⁴, range (including tessitura), rhythm, meter, tempo, dynamics, polyphonic characteristics and texture (including homophonic and contrapuntal), counterpoint, melody, pedaling, harmony, sonority, density, form, structure and the use of specific intervals and modes. According to Swan (1973: 36-37), Medtner displays contrapuntal dexterity and a natural sense of sonata form. Swan further postulates that as in the late Beethoven piano sonatas, melody and harmony in Medtner's music are sometimes interchangeable in aid of form and structure. The writer, therefore, deems it necessary to include the examination of possible intertextuality in Medtner's piano music. This is one aspect not mentioned in *The Muse and the Fashion*, however, this could shed further light to the study. Regarding the philosophical aspects in Medtner's piano compositions, extreme care will be taken to avoid superficiality and lack of solid scientific research practice. Primary sources for Medtner's theoretical and philosophical thinking will be from his books, letters and interviews. Aspects from his piano works from Op. 1 to Op. 60, and unpublished works without opus numbers (including two cadenzas for Beethoven's *Piano Concerto, Op. 58, no.4.*) will be comprehensively examined and incorporated. Many of his lesser known works such as 3 *Improvisations, Op. 2; Arabesques, Op. 7; 3 Dithyrambs, Op. 10; Theme and Variations Op. 55* and 2 *Elegies, Op. 59* have some of Medtner's most striking elements and characteristics which will be discussed in detail in the study. My experience in playing and performing Medtner has led me to fervently believe that every note, rest, dynamic, etc, in Medtner's compositions has been placed carefully and meticulously, not just to create beauty for the listener, but to also serve a philosophical and spiritual aspect. His music is somewhat inaccessible at first hearing. The unique "Medtnerian" rhythms and their overlaps are innovative. Chernaya-Oh (2008) stated that Medtner achieved new approaches to form through the prevalence of mono thematic principle, the increased role of the developmental material in the increased role of the development material in the exposition, the contrapuntal combinations of themes and the modification of the sonata cycle.

Research questions

- How did Nikolai Korlovich Medtner infuse the theoretical and philosophical aesthetics in his piano compositions which are particularly evident in his later works?
- What are the unique aspects found in Medtner's piano compositions which distinguish him from his contemporaries?

Research Methodology and General Study Plan

The main research methods will cover both *source studies and musical analysis*. As mentioned before, the writer has had much experience with Medtner's music through countless performances. To answer the research question, *qualitative research* will be employed. The writer is aware that tracing the above mentioned aspects in written music may be tricky but one of the methods which will be employed (which may be beneficial but also complex) will be to examine analogies and discrepancies between theoretical writings

4 Medtner's views on themes: *The theme is the most simple and accessible part of the work, it unifies it, and holds within itself the clue to all the subsequent complexity and variety of the work. The theme is not always, and not only a melody. It is more than a melody, for as Bach proved it in his fugues, and Beethoven in his symphonies, it is capable of turning into a continuous melody the most complex construction of form.*

and scores. The writer deems it is necessary to also include *musical ontological research* in order to shed further light regarding the qualities in Medtner's music as mentioned before. Regarding the second research question, as stated above, the writer shall use methods of comparison to classify the different music being discussed into stylistic familiarities and differences. One of the methods that will be employed will be the *casual-comparative research* in order to do *illustrative comparison* (such as comparing Medtner's 2nd Piano Concerto, Op. 50, which he dedicated to Rachmaninoff to Rachmaninoff's 4th Piano Concerto, Op. 40, which he dedicated to Medtner). Works from other prominent contemporaries of Medtner will be incorporated. David Collier (1993:1) stated that: *...The emphases of comparative research on diversity (especially, the different patterns that may exist with a specific set of cases) and on familiarity with each case make this approach especially well suited for the goals of exploring diversity, interpreting cultural or historical significance...* A survey of the available relevant literature such as books, published and unpublished articles and essays written by Medtner and those written about him, including newspapers and other available recorded documents such as theses, dissertations and compact disc booklets on the subject will be comprehensively examined. *The Muse and the Fashion* will be reviewed to shed more light on this study. Medtner's second book, *The Guide to the Daily work of the Pianist*⁵, which is aimed specifically at the practical side of piano playing, will be consulted where deemed necessary. Many of the practical exercises and illustrations in this book of Medtner, come from excerpts from some of his own piano compositions. A comprehensive search will be done to ensure that no existing material on the subject was overlooked. Wendelin Bitzan, a PhD student in Berlin under the supervision of Christoph Flamm, is currently working on his thesis on Medtner. His focus is confined, however, to theoretical analysis of Medtner's piano sonatas. Over the years, has collected material pertaining to Medtner and Flamm suggested that the writer consult with Bitzan on this study. Another PhD student is Alexander Karpeyev: part of his PhD thesis on Medtner has been published. Karpeyev will also be consulted. The search will include the use of the Music Libraries available and the "International University Library" research tool. This will include *The Edna Iles Medtner Collection*⁶. Apart from doing the compulsory subjects stated in the KUG requirements for scholarly doctoral studies, the first year will be spent on collecting meticulously and examining the available sources and material as mentioned above. This may include consultations with the Medtner specialist and external supervisor for this study, Flamm in Germany, who has agreed to be the external supervisor for this study. The second year will be spent on rigorous reading and mapping out the possible structure of the thesis. The final year will be spent on typing and completing the thesis.

The following is a list of Sources that have been consulted thus far

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- 5 There are excerpts from this book translated into English by Mme. Olg Conus, (assisted by Alverda Fitzgerald) and published by the Moscow Government Musical Publishing House in 1963. There is also a Master of Music thesis by Liundmila Bondar: *Nicolas Medtner: composer, pianist, and teacher (translation of Medtner's notes compiled into a book, "The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer" by Gurvich and L. Lukomsky, with an introduction by his student, P. Vasiliev*. This thesis was published by the Michigan State University in 2003.
- 6 Edna Iles (1905-2003), was one of the handful of British female pianists to achieve international renown before the Second World War. She was a devoted piano student of Medtner and became one of the championing forces behind the promotion of Medtner's music.

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