

**Second PhD Presentation Topic:**

*Intertextuality and Narrativity in Medtner's  
Toccata: Piano Concerto No. 2, op. 50 in C minor*  
(1880-1951)

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**SECOND PRESENTATION**

## Introduction

In my first presentation, I introduced the topic of my thesis: *Investigating Nikolai Medtner's Piano Concertos*. Medtner's sonatas and concertos form an imperative part of his oeuvre. The core of my dissertation is delineated to his three piano concertos.

Medtner's dual cultural heritage (Russian and German) is highlighted by influences from composers such as Beethoven, Chopin, Grieg, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, Schubert, Schumann, Scriabin, Tchaikovsky and Wagner, including poets such as Fet, Goethe, Heine, Lermantov, Nietzsche, Pushkin and Tyutchev. Christoph Flamm (1995: 69) also stresses Medtner's mutually beneficial friendship with the Symbolist poet and theorist, Andrei Bely. Even though Medtner was mostly auto-didactical, shortly after his graduation (around the beginning of 1901) Medtner had consultations and discussions regarding form and structural problems with Sergej Taneev (Flamm 1995:5). However, Medtner's natural talent provided him with original and individual strategies for overcoming formal and structural conundrums in his concertos. Moreover, due to their multiple allusions and references to other musical and literary works, Medtner's concertos require an elaborate theory of musical intertextuality and narrativity. Therefore, my study proposes following research questions to:

- Given the numerous hermeneutic and semantic implications, dependent on historic and structural context in Medtner's piano concertos, to what extent could an intertextual and narrative approach be applied in highlighting them?
- How did Medtner react to formal and overcome architectural and structural conundrums in each of his piano concertos?

I have already completed the first draft of Chapter 3 of my dissertation where I introduce and give a history of intertextuality (See Appendix). This chapter also includes comprehensive arguments regarding the pros, cons, flaws, contradictions, merits and solutions that many relevant theorists and writers have outlined regarding intertextuality and narrativity. These include Harold Bloom, Michael Klein and Nikolai Medtner. I am currently working on the first draft of the fourth chapter of my dissertation where I provide a genre history of the piano concerto until the late Nineteenth-Century with particular emphasis on Russia. Furthermore, Chapter 4 shall also provide a comprehensive account of Medtner's concertos incorporating principles and methods already discussed in the third chapter. My aim is to complete the first draft of my entire dissertation before the end of this year.

In today's presentation I shall:

- Briefly highlight the form of the first movement of Medtner's Second Piano Concerto
- Exemplify the merits of the above-mentioned approach by discussing the intertextual and narrative and implications of the opening bars of the *Toccata*, the first movement of Medtner's Second Piano Concerto.

Medtner's Second Piano Concerto in C minor, Op. 50 is dedicated to Sergej Rachmaninoff (a gesture which Rachmaninoff reciprocated with his Fourth Piano Concerto, Op. 40, in G Minor). It was completed during the composer's first two years in France, between 1925–26. However, Medtner most likely began working on this concerto already in Russia in 1921 but abandoned the project for several years. Medtner gave the premiere of this work during his Russian tour of 1927. The concerto embodies a testament of Medtner and Rachmaninoff's deep friendship. It has three movements which perspicuously alludes to neoclassicism triggering a broad spectrum of intertextual and narrative implications:

- First movement: *Toccata, Allegro risoluto – Coda*, c minor, 4/4, 445 Bars
- Second movement: *Romanza, Andante con moto*, A-flat major, 3/4, 224 Bars
- attacca Finale/Third movement: *Divertimento (Rondo), Allegro risoluto e molto vivace – Coda. Vivo* (MM  $\text{♩} = 116$ )<sup>1</sup>.

Richard Holt (1955) describes this concerto as “a compound of the classical and romantic styles”.

### **The neoclassicism conundrum**

Many music historians have avoided using the term “neoclassicism” due to its controversial implications and connotations. Part of the problem lies in the French translation “classicisme” which translates to “classic<sup>2</sup>”. “Néoclassicisme” may also translate into “classicism or neo-classic<sup>3</sup>” causing difficulties and tensions in grasping the epoch. The exact time line for “neoclassicism” is not clear but generally considered to have begun with Igor's Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* (1919-1920) and ended with his opera *The Rake's Progress* (1951).

Stravinsky argued that a composer can in his way, only say again what has already been said (Stravinsky & Craft 1982:129). This process was more overt in the music that is commonly

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<sup>1</sup> This concerto's “ancestry” and intertextual “community” may be traced back to composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Grieg, Liszt, Mozart, Rachmaninoff, Schumann, Scriabin and Tchaikovsky.

<sup>2</sup> In German “Klassik”.

<sup>3</sup> In German “Klassizismus” or “Neo-Klassik”.

called neoclassical, but it also shaped, in more subtle ways and despite the apparent stylistic diversity, most music from the first part of the twentieth century.

The evolution of musical styles, of course, involves, in the most obvious sense, a series of reactions and responses to musical predecessors. But the relationship between “a music” and its predecessors became a matter of particular urgency in the early twentieth century. The term “neoclassicism” is, however, hardly adequate for all these tendencies. I am in no way attempting to put Medtner under the tumultuous “neoclassicism” umbrella. However, it would be injudicious to ignore the “looking back” elements demonstrated in his second concerto. By consciously or sub-consciously re-reading past music at a certain distance, intertextuality became a main feature of neoclassical music coupled with other techniques of referentiality and self-reference.

### *An intertextual and narrative approach*

Medtner would have probably disagreed with the intertextual and narrative analysis of his concertos. However, from a substantial examination of Medtner’s words about music, there are many hints of intertextuality and narrativity that he downplays probably in the hope of perpetuating the belief that music is absolute<sup>4</sup>. In his writings, metaphors for drama, narrative, psychology, and emotion struggle against statements that deny extra-musical content. For the purposes of this presentation, my intertextual and narrative analysis is delineated only to the first movement of his second piano concerto, *Toccata*.

Klein (2005:113) suggests that one should take an “attitude of suspicion” and contends that successful composers and performers have every motivation to uphold a position that grants autonomy to music and authority to its [music’s] composer. One might suppose that Medtner secretly believed in the narrative, dramatic, and emotive content of music, but felt loyal to absolute musical narratives “whose structures of pitch, rhythm, and form point only to the creative power of its composer”. Another account might see the contradictions in Medtner’s texts as symptoms of the “problem of absolute music”. Was Medtner being a product of Russian musical training but heavily steeped in the Austro-Germanic tradition, willing to accept an aesthetic that removed crucial signifying features from music?

My analysis of Medtner’s Second Piano Concerto (*Toccata*) shall highlight what Harold

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<sup>4</sup> Medtner, N. (1935). *THE FASHION AND THE MUSE: Being a defence of the foundation of the Art of Music*. Trans. Swan, J.S (1951). Harverford: Harverford College.

Bloom dubs “anxiety of influence<sup>5</sup>”. I will show how the concerto gains its signifying capacity through a code that runs through both Medtner’s own works and those of other composer. In search of the “expressive<sup>6</sup> logic”, my analysis will suggest alternative musical narratives for the concerto<sup>7</sup>. Hillis Miller (1995:72) infers that since no story perfectly fulfils its function, another story is always necessary. Northrop Frye (1957:97) notes that “poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels”. Responding to that statement, Ricoeur (1998:287) highlights that narrative structures are borne upon a tradition of narrative. A narrative is read and understood intertextually with other narratives. My analysis shall make no claims that particular intertextual references have indeed been incorporated during the composing of the concerto, or that Medtner intended the musical action to be read in such a way. All references (musical, textual, biographical and historical) are, therefore, the intertext through which I am approaching a narrative analysis of Medtner’s concertos (Klein 2005:121).

As opposed to his First Piano Concerto, which is in “Two-Dimensional sonata form”, Medtner’s Second Piano Concerto is heavily steeped in his conservative principles. Why then, would Medtner, assign the term *Toccata* to the first movement of his Second Piano Concerto, which though being a first movement concerto, is a hybrid of the late romanticism epoch?

During the second half of the 1920s, Medtner spent a couple of years in France where there was a plague of “neoclassicism”. One might assume that Medtner, being a fervent defender of what he calls the eternal laws of music, was caught between a rock and a hard place. On a spiritual plain, Medtner yearned to propel his conservative artistic beliefs and ideologies, which were cemented at the core of his ethics. On the other hand, his ever increasing financial struggles, most probably impelled him to attempted to please the French public in order to make money and support his family.

Medtner’s *Toccata* embodies the style attitudes of the past and the ideals of the musical past that he considered to be completely lost. Christoph Flamm asserts that for Medtner, the employment of *Toccata* is a mere illusion; a provocative allusion that awakens intertextual

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<sup>5</sup> *The Anxiety of Influence* (Bloom 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Term “expressive” covers primarily affective meanings (sadness, apprehension, et cetera) but may also cover dramatic situations or ideas (outburst, transcendence, et cetera). The analysis of these expressive states will be both hermeneutic and semiotic. Hermeneutic because it focuses on “what” this music means and semiotic because it is concerned with “how” this music means (Klein 2004:27).

<sup>7</sup> This is in accordance with the concept find in the works of Edward Cone (1974), Robert Hatten (1994), Gregory Karl (1997) and Fred Maus (1998).

references to Prokofiev.

In one of his piano lessons, Prokofiev presented Medtner's somewhat "toccata-like" second *Skazki* (Tales) Op. 8 in C minor (1904-1905), which ironically his teacher dismissed as being too modern.

Therefore, the following complex rhetorical intertextual questions arise:

- Could Prokofiev have composed his well-known *Toccat*a (1912) as a reaction again his teacher's "short-sightedness"?
- During his years France, did Medtner compose this *Toccat*a as an illusionary reaction against Prokofiev's highly acclaimed *Toccat*a, Op. 11 (1912) to "keep-up" with the inescapable "neoclassicism trends"?

My intertextual analysis, therefore, implies that Medtner's atypical employment of a "toccata" for a concerto's first movement is an ironically provocative illusion of the "toccata" genre. I propose that Medtner's *Toccat*a is actually an "anti-Toccata", ironically parodying the *Toccat*a genre. It creates a critical dialogue and awakens genre-specific horizons of meaning. "Toccata" implies brilliant piano writing with constant staccatos and a perpetual rhythmic force. However, the angular contours of the main theme, rather than fulfilling this genre-specific expectation, immediately opens up intertextual and intratextual considerations as observed in the opening of the following works:

Example 2: Medtner Piano Concerto in C minor, Op. 50 (*Toccat*a), Bars 1-3.

2й КОНЦЕРТЪ. 2<sup>tes</sup> CONCERT.

I. Toccata.

Н. Меднеръ, Соч. 50.  
N. Medtner, Op.50.

Allegro risoluto.

Piano.

orchester.

The image shows the first three bars of the score. The piano part is written in a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The orchestra part is also in a grand staff. The piano part has a driving, rhythmic character with many staccato notes. The orchestra part provides a harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo is 'Allegro risoluto'. The score includes various performance instructions like 'sostenuto', 'poco riten.', 'a tempo', 'ff', 'f', and 'p'.

Example 3: Medtner Piano Sonata in G minor, Op. 22. (1901-1910), Bars 1-4.

**COHATA.**  
Sonaie.

Н. Меднеръ,  
N. Medtner, Op. 22.

**Tenebroso, sempre affrettando.**

Piano.



Example 4: Rachmaninoff Piano Sonata in D minor, Op. 28. (1907), Bars 1-7.

**SONATE.**

**I.**

S. Rachmaninow, Op. 28.

**Allegro moderato** ( $\text{♩} = 76$ ).



The structural relationship between the three openings is uncanny. Firstly, all the examples are in a minor key. Moreover, they are all in minor tonalities with flats and have a fifth relation: C minor-G minor-D minor. The *Toccata's* militant opening and fatalistic character also echoes Rachmaninoff's Fifth Piano Prelude in G minor from Op. 23 (1901) with the indication, *Alla marcia*. The *Toccata's* opening also has the typical Medtnerian rhythms (from the way rests and off-beat accents are distributed, reinforcing the pulsating nature of the phrases).

Furthermore, all three openings are “Auftaktig” (with upbeats) and demonstrate concise motives which develop into a new idea. For example, in the *Toccata*, the declamatory soprano melody in the piano part: G-E-flat-G G-G is varied into G-E-flat-G-GG-CG-GG.

In Medtner’s G minor Sonata, the rapid chords moving in octaves from D-G-D then E-flat (soprano) over the D (bass), are now varied by going to C-G-C in octaves (C minor) and a C Major seventh chord without inversions. The motive then rises higher to F-B-flat-F but to a Bb minor chord followed by an E-flat seven-nine chord that seems to get a prolonged punctuated rhythm as seen at the end of this example. However, the Rachmaninoff’s sonata, commences with octaves D-A-D followed by a simple A major seventh chord resolving to a D minor chord. Rachmaninoff further repeats the opening “chord” with an anticipated octave A and the same A major seventh chord again resolving to a D minor chord. At the end of the example, Rachmaninoff then changes the A major seventh chord and the final D minor chord by adding thirds in both chords. Note the dotted eighth-note rests after the first motives in both of Medtner’s compositions which slightly contradict Rachmaninoff’s as if to ironically highlight that “Rachmaninoff refused to wait just a sixteenth “rest” longer”.

*Climamen (adaptation)*, Bloom’s first “revisionary ratio” constitutes a poet’s “reaction-formation” against precursor’s text through the trope of *irony*. The writer fastens on the precursor’s text’s inability to comprehend the negation of its own expressed vision, a negation which the new work includes just as if it were implicitly “there” in the earlier work as observed above. Medtner does not fulfil the expectations of the *Toccata* genre but ironically alludes to it.

In Rachmaninoff’s sonata, we observe a monodic voice and in Medtner’s works above, the voices are more harmonic. Furthermore, within the monodic opening of Rachmaninoff’s sonata, we hear the menacing death bells, as stated by *Faust*: “Dann mag die Totenglocke schallen”. Medtner first “climamenizes” Rachmaninoff’s text in his Piano Sonata op. 22 but with opening to his second piano concerto further climamenizes himself with a triumphant gesture triumphing over *Faust* by Goethe, which Rachmaninoff’s first piano sonata was inspired by.

## Conclusion and Prospects

The aim of this presentation was to provide a general overview of some of the intertextual

approaches I am incorporating in my examination of Medtner's piano concertos. In my next presentation I shall discuss Medtner's Third Piano Concerto in E minor, Op. 60 (*Ballade*), which is the non plus ultra of all his concertos and one of his most advanced compositions. It has structural, semantic and hermeneutic parallels to his *Sonata Ballade* for solo piano in F-sharp Major, Op. 27. The Third Piano Concerto, more than most of Medtner's other instrumental compositions, has strong literary connections (referencing Mikhail Lermontov's *Rusalka*) and vast programmatic dimensions opening up fruitful intertextual implications. Christoph Flamm (1995: 142) highlights that Medtner's position in history, which was tainted by a neglected niche and facets of Russian Symbolism, calls for an in-depth examination. Medtner's Third Piano Concerto together with his Piano Quintet in C Major, Op. posth, positions him amongst the foremost of the symbolist composers.

# Appendix

## Chapter 3

### Intertextuality: Medtner's *Anxiety*

3.1 Introduction and history

3.2 Korsyn versus Bloom

3.2.1 *Clinamen (Adaptation)*

3.2.2 *Tessera (Retro)*

3.2.3 *Kenosis (Appropriation)*

3.2.4 *Daemonization or Hyperbole (Parody)*

3.2.5 *Askesis (Pastiche)*

3.2.6 *Apophrades (Simulation)*

3.3 Scherzinger versus Bloom and Korsyn

3.4 Straus versus Meyer, Rosen, Bloom, Korsyn and Scherzinger

3.5 Taruskin versus Bloom, Korsyn and Straus

3.6 Taruskin versus Bloom, Korsyn, Straus and the *neoclassicism conundrum*

3.7 The Muse and the Fashion: Medtner versus Bloom, Korsyn, Straus and Taruskin

3.8 Introduction

3.8.1 Part One

3.8.2 The fundamental senses of the musical language in their interrelation.

3.8.5 Medtner on Influence

3.9 Michael Klein

3.9.1 Intertextuality restraints and "structural appeal"

3.9.2 Codes

3.9.3 Influence and Intertext as "unheimliche" signs

3.9.4 Narrative and Intertext

3.9.5 Klein on Poetics

3.10 Vande Moortele's *Two-Dimensional Sonata Form*

3.10.1. Introduction

3.10.2. Vande Moortele's Framework and Terminology

3.10.2a. Levels of form

3.10.2b. Analogies between levels

3.10.2c Vande Moortele's Projection of hierarchies

3.10.2d Vande Moortele's definition of integration, process and tension

## Sources

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