In Support of Nikolai Medtner: An Examination of Five of his Art Songs

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IN SUPPORT OF NIKOLAI MEDTNER: AN EXAMINATION OF FIVE OF HIS ART SONGS

A Monograph

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in The College of Music & Dramatic Arts

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ABSTRACT

The music of Nikolai Medtner was neglected during his lifetime and has remained so after his death. While his piano sonatas and fairy tales receive occasional exposure, his 106 art songs are almost never heard. This monograph examines five of the 27 songs that he, himself, recorded. It is hoped that these analyses will convince readers that his most neglected genre is worthy of study and performance.

A biography of the composer lays out possible reasons for his neglect, including his principled avoidance of the commercial aspects of the music business, writing in a post-Romantic style during an era that viewed that language as old-fashioned, the social and political upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century, the technical difficulty of his works, and their lack of immediate melodic appeal. The biography is followed by an overview of his musical output and style, which leads to an examination of five of his songs: “Elfenliedchen,” Op. 6, No. 3, “Aus ‘Lila,’” Op. 15, No. 5, “Роза,” Op. 29, No. 6, “Die Quelle,” Op. 46, No. 6, and “Winternacht,” Op. 46, No. 5. Each descriptive analysis pays particular attention to the text-music relationship of the individual songs, and an effort is made to highlight distinctive Medtnerian techniques and characteristics that apply to his broader output.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Despite a mild resurgence in recent years, both the name and music of Nikolai Medtner remain largely ignored. History has occasionally neglected composers, relegating much of their music to obscurity, only to see renewed interest from a later generation. It is often through such posthumous interest that pieces now regarded as masterworks entered the accepted canon, elevating their composer’s reputation in the process. The music of Johann Sebastian Bach, while always highly esteemed in musical circles, saw little initial exposure. It was only through the influence and efforts of Mendelssohn, Liszt, and others, nearly a century after his death, that many of Bach’s masterpieces began to enter the canon. Franz Schubert suffered a similar fate—a century after his death, no less a musician than Rachmaninoff expressed shock upon learning that he had written piano sonatas.

I do not propose that Nikolai Medtner deserves the same esteem as J. S. Bach or Schubert, but I will argue that his music is undeservedly neglected and worthy of study and performance. To make this case, I will lay out a number of factors influencing this neglect, including his principled avoidance of the commercial aspects of the music business, the seemingly old-fashioned musical language in which he composed, and the social and political upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century. Next, I will examine five of Medtner’s art songs—his most neglected genre—with the aim of familiarizing readers with Medtner’s style. It is hoped that this monograph will spark further interest in his music.

The five songs were selected based upon a number of factors. They are among the 27 songs that Medtner himself recorded near the end of his life, all of which are freely available at http://www.medtner.org.uk/mp3_files.html. Since so few recordings of Medtner’s songs exist, by
choosing from among this set I give readers the opportunity to not only hear the music, but to hear definitive performances. The five songs provide a representative sampling of both the variety of his songs and their consistent quality. All were recorded with Elizabeth Schwarzkopf in 1950, at the very end of his life, when he was battling a failing heart. They give an indication of the depth of his musicianship and his extraordinary technical mastery of the piano. If such recordings were made in failing health, it is easy to imagine why Heinrich Neuhaus reportedly called Medtner the greatest pianist of his time.¹

I do not argue that these works are worthy of study and performance because of any innovations they may contain. I consider their musical quality and the manner in which they elevate the poetry to be reason enough for deeper study. I have, however, made a point to highlight specific Medtnerian qualities in these works. These are made to familiarize readers with Medtner’s musical language and are often applicable to the other genres in which he worked. The format for examining the five songs in this paper is two-fold: each song begins with a descriptive analysis, making note of the text-music relationship, formal structures, harmonic and contrapuntal language, and distinctive motives. A brief discussion of qualities and characteristics that are broadly representative of Medtner’s musical language follows each analysis. By giving readers both intimate familiarity with these five songs and a more general awareness of his style, I hope to encourage further exploration of his music.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND ON MEDTNER’S LIFE AND CAREER, MUSICAL STYLE AND PHILOSOPHY

In his seminal article on Nikolai Medtner, Ernest Newman proclaimed that “a musician more thoroughly skilled in the mere craft of composition could not be imagined.”\(^2\) No less of a master than Rachmaninoff called him “the greatest composer of our time.”\(^3\) Those who loved him were effusive in their praise, respect and admiration. Unfortunately, in spite of the highest plaudits imaginable from a number of artists and scholars who put not only words, but also time, effort and money into helping his cause, Medtner spent the majority of his life in poverty and obscurity. He devoted all of his time to composition but his style belonged to an older era. “Had he appeared in the days of Schumann, or even Brahms … [he] would undoubtedly have become a world composer” but, as Leonid Sabaneev lamented, “fate has been merciless to Medtner.”\(^4\)

Nikolai Medtner was born on January 5\(^{\text{th}}\), 1880 by the Gregorian calendar. His family numbered many intellectuals and musicians and “the consciously intellectual atmosphere in the home … encouraged … a certain unworldliness”\(^5\) in the boy. This “unworldliness” is in large part responsible for the poverty and lack of recognition that plagued him throughout his life. His obsessive devotion to the piano began with his first lesson at the age of five and his conservative musical tastes were evident before his tenth birthday. He entered the Moscow Conservatory in 1892, studying theory under Nikolai Kashkin and harmony under Anton Arensky. In the senior division, he chose a general course of studies instead of composition, even dropping out of

\(^3\) Martyn, 145.
\(^5\) Martyn, 2.
Sergei Tanayev's counterpoint class. Later, upon hearing Medtner's compositions, Tanayev remarked, ““Until now I thought that it was impossible to become a real composer without having thoroughly learned counterpoint.””\(^6\) Medtner's piano teachers included the Liszt pupil Paul Pabst and the famed pedagogue Vasily Safanov. Upon graduating in 1900, he was awarded the highest honor granted to students. The path was set for him to begin a career as a concert pianist. Safanov even arranged a touring schedule but Medtner withdrew when he learned that, instead of serious music, he would have to play crowd-pleasers. He decided, instead, to devote his life to composition.\(^7\)

At the time of his decision, none of Medtner's music had been published or publicly performed and very few people knew that he even composed. He soon met his future wife, Anna Bratenshi, who exhibited “life-long devotion and self-sacrifice” for Nikolai.\(^8\) Medtner met Sergei Rachmaninoff in 1902 and the two also became lifelong friends and supporters. During their friendship, Rachmaninoff supported his contemporary financially on numerous occasions and never once accepted compensation, saying, ““It is my duty.””\(^9\) 1903 was the year of Medtner's first published work, which garnered the praise: ““Not many composers can boast of such an Opus 1 as Mr. Medtner's *Stimmungsbilder*; these are not tentative experiments in composition but the works of a mature and original talent.””\(^10\) Such a review could have portended a great career, but Medtner's “unworldliness” sabotaged such possibilities. Both his “complete disregard for establishing his reputation” and his decision to use “public appearances essentially [as]
occasions for presenting new works”\textsuperscript{11} combined with his conservative approach towards music to keep both the pianist and composer in obscurity throughout his life. He accepted a job teaching piano at the Moscow Conservatory in 1909, but resigned the next year so that he could spend more time composing.\textsuperscript{12} 1911 saw the completion of his most highly lauded work, his \textit{Night Wind Sonata}, opus 25, No. 2, dedicated to Rachmaninoff.\textsuperscript{13}

The outbreak of The Great War brought universal suffering. In order to escape the draft and the taint of his German last name, Nikolai rejoined the Moscow Conservatory.\textsuperscript{14} Life grew even more difficult after the October Revolution. Food, fuel and other necessities were hard to come by and the State's control of the Moscow Conservatory meant reforms and even less time to compose.\textsuperscript{15} “‘I'm just not composing any more.... It cannot, and it must not, go on like this, as the whole point and justification of my sinful life, I think, is just this, to work on the material given me by God.’”\textsuperscript{16} Anna and Nikolai Medtner did not manage to leave Russia until 1921.\textsuperscript{17}

They moved to Berlin, but their situation hardly improved. He had difficulty finding publishers, performance opportunities and even teaching opportunities. Even worse, the artistic atmosphere of post-war Germany was completely foreign to him and, in fact, hostile. Rachmaninoff provided both financial and emotional support during these rough years.\textsuperscript{18} In 1924 the Medtners left Germany for France.\textsuperscript{19} Shortly thereafter he accepted an invitation from

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 108-112.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 133. The quote is from Medtner, himself.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 147-149.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 155.
\end{flushleft}
Rachmaninoff to tour America, but only with great reluctance: “‘Were it not for Rachmaninoff being there [in America], I wouldn't go there for anything, for all present-day concert life is a dark forest which it is unsafe to enter without a guide....’”\(^20\) In America he met the musicologist Alfred J. Swan, who became a close friend, confidant and supporter of the composer.\(^21\) He also met with great critical and financial success, but this meant little to Medtner:

> Success itself, such, for example, as I had in America, gives me no satisfaction at all, despite its undoubted practical results—brilliant reviews and a certain sum of money. It gives me no satisfaction precisely because it is practical and not to do with ideals. But an artist can get satisfaction only from sympathy with, and celebration of, his ideals.... As I see it, however insignificant an artist may be … for him his ideals are the most precious thing he has.”\(^22\)

His American tour was followed, two years later, by engagements in Russia. Medtner leapt at the opportunity to return to his homeland and, in 1927, he and Anna saw their homeland for the first time in nearly six years. He was greeted as a god, receiving three standing ovations before he began his first recital. All of his Russian recitals were, with the exception of Beethoven's *Waldstein* Sonata, devoted exclusively to his own compositions.\(^23\) When asked to speak at a celebration of the Moscow Conservatory's 60\(^{th}\) anniversary he spoke out against modernism in music: “‘My wishes for this day of jubilee of my own alma mater are for it boldly to lead the fight against the demands of fashion … which … has affected a large part of the musical world.’”\(^24\) He had always been privately vocal about his disgust with “modern” music,

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., 166. The quote is from Medtner, himself.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 167.  
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 173.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 185-186.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 186-187
but this was his first public “defense” of traditional music. Medtner sabotaged his chances to return to Russia by consistently refusing to play before Communist officials.25

Medtner concertized more in the late 1920s and early 1930s than any other time in his life. He wrote that in England “I am apparently not a total stranger … as I am, for example, here [in Paris] and in Germany.”26 His first tour of England was soon followed by a second one and, shortly thereafter, by a second North American tour. Regarding this tour, Medtner wrote: “I very much don't want to go to America, despite the fact that over there, especially in Canada, I am awaited with great interest and even love…. But of course I have to abandon for over half a year my main business, that is composing.”27 He returned to Paris with full spirits, intending to use the money from these tours to sustain himself while composing. Unfortunately, his American check of $2500 bounced. In typical fashion, Rachmaninoff generously paid for the check in full.28 In spite of Rachmaninoff's generosity, funds for the Medtners quickly dried up. By 1931 he had been invited to record in studios on three different occasions. The companies, however, never published these records. The German publishing house that he had used since his emigration to Berlin would not buy his new works, complaining that they were too complicated for public tastes. Medtner wrote his Romantic Sketches for the Young, Op. 54, and Theme with Variations, Op. 55 out of financial desperation: “I have at least decided to bribe my publisher with rubbish unwanted by me but apparently very much wanted by him.”29 These two works mark the only time that Medtner caved in to public taste with his work.

25 Ibid., 186.
26 Ibid., 191.
27 Ibid., 200.
28 Ibid., 205.
29 Ibid., 210.
His fate improved in 1935 when the fellow Russian emigre, Michael Braikevitsch, invited the Medtners to live with him in England. “Everything went off as in a fairy tale.” England had always welcomed Medtner with open arms and a familiarity with his music. “It seems,” he wrote, “that, apart [from] the English and the Russians, no-one wants to know me.” 1935 also marked the publication of *The Muse and the Fashion: Being a Defence of the Foundations of the Art of Music*, Medtner's public confession of his artistic creed. It was published in Russian by a publishing house run by Rachmaninoff's daughter. Anna reported that, in order “to get reviews exclusively about his playing and technique, Kolya was persuaded (with great difficulty) to play only other composers' pieces and none of his own.... The reviews were extremely favourable.” He was offered a fourth recording opportunity, resulting finally in a commercial release. Unfortunately, the outbreak of war shattered Medtner's new dream life: payments from his German publisher disappeared, he had “not a single pupil [and] concerts [had] all been cancelled.” The Medtners lived off of the generosity of friends, in particular the pianist Edna Iles, who had specialized in Medtner's music for many years and invited the composer to stay at her home. The war brought not only financial hardship, but physical hardship, as well. Medtner was diagnosed with coronary thrombosis and suffered from two heart attacks in 1942. The last opus published during his lifetime - his Third Piano Concerto, opus 60 - was completed during

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30 Ibid., 221. The quote is from Anna Medtner.
31 Ibid., 192.
32 Ibid., 216.
33 Ibid., 222.
34 Ibid., 222.
35 Ibid., 231. The quote is from Medtner, himself.
36 Ibid., 231-232.
37 Ibid., 238.
the war (opus 61 is posthumous). In spite of praise such as Sorabji's, who stated that the work was “‘by far and away the greatest work of its kind produced during the last thirty years’”, Medtner's Third Concerto has suffered the same fate as the rest of his music.

The constant dismissal of his genius prompted Medtner to write the following confession to Alfred Swan:

Christ himself said, “No man having lighted a candle conceals it under a bushel or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a candlestick, so that those who come in may see the light.” This raises the question, “Have I lighted a candle in my work?” Yes, I believe I have lighted several small candles, and some of them were lighted by me for the glory of God and so, of course, under the bed is not the place for them. But how to get them out from under the bed is beyond me. Years ago, when I played my music at home or abroad and was surrounded by my friends, I used to be able to find a candlestick, but now every candlestick has been torn down and I have been dispossessed of my native land; here, abroad, modernism has been raging.

Medtner found his candlestick in the unusual form of the Maharaja of Mysore. The Maharaja proposed to form a “Nicolas Medtner Society” dedicated to recording the composer and to spreading his name. Medtner recorded all of his concerti as well as a wide representation of his songs and solo works through the Society. In return he dedicated his Third Concerto to the Maharaja.

Medtner completed one final work before his death. He had begun his Piano Quintet in 1904 but did not finish it until 1948. He specifically forbade publishers from assigning an opus number to the Quintet, telling Edna Iles that “the work was dedicated to God.” The score is covered with Bible passages, as well as paraphrases and quotes of many liturgical chants. The

38 Ibid., 243.
39 Ibid., 244.
40 Ibid., 246. The Maharaja’s own words.
41 Ibid., 248.
42 Ibid., 249.
43 Ibid., 249-251
work is in C major, which Medtner associated with the concept of a hymn. After finishing the work his health began to fail. His life's goal became recording it “with God's help” before death claimed him. Fortunately, the Quintet was recorded in 1949 by the label, His Master's Voice. Unfortunately, the recording has never been published.

His last two years were spent in a state of increasing dejection brought on by the sense that his entire life's works amounted to nothing in the eyes of the world. He even offered to pay friends to listen to him perform. He had been in contact with Alfred Swan, who was translating The Muse and the Fashion into English. Medtner fervently wished to receive a copy before dying. A few days before his death he wrote to the scholar, explaining:

I have become so convinced that all delays (in the publishing of my records, the reprinting of my compositions and so on and so forth) are clear and deliberate spokes in the wheels of my war chariot against contemporary music and aesthetic consciousness.... In this chariot I do not feel at all a general but just a simple warrior, marching not on my own initiative, but at the command of my predecessors (Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Purcell, Bizet, etc.) whose voice I continue to hear with love and as a threat to the whole present-day attitude....Absolutely no-one is interested in my music here.

Nikolai Medtner died on the morning of November 13, 1951.

Alfred J. Swan's English translation of The Muse and the Fashion arrived mere days after Medtner's death. The book is his sincere expression of an artistic creed that is absolutely religious in nature. This religious attitude towards Music explains Medtner's “painful
bewildering when confronted by most phenomena of the 'progressive' musical world”\textsuperscript{50} whose “stifling, explosive ideology … [had] destroyed the connection between the artist's soul and his art.”\textsuperscript{51} Begun in 1932, \textsuperscript{52} Medtner confessed that it “should have been written at least twenty years ago, since [his] agonizing bewilderment at the prevalent creative practice of the present time began more than thirty years ago.”\textsuperscript{53} The book targets “every young musician”\textsuperscript{54} and is divided into two parts. He explains the fundamental nature of (traditional) music in part one and devotes the second part to his thoughts on various philosophical questions concerning music and art. Like his compositions, \textit{The Muse and the Fashion} received almost no attention, critical or public.

His religious attitude towards Music is apparent from the first page. “It is not my words about music that I believe, but in music itself. It is not my thoughts about it that I want to share, but my faith in it.”\textsuperscript{55} He sets up the symbol of Music as a lyre which, over the centuries, has been tuned and fine-tuned by craftsmen such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner. True musicians—those who submit themselves to Music—strive to serve Music rather than making Music serve them. By writing the book, Medtner hoped to retune Music. “In order to save contemporary music, to tune up its lyre in our imagination, every one of us must eliminate from his creative practice, and erase from the fashionable handbooks of harmony all the atonal and polytonal chords that our inner ear cannot embrace.”\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{51} Martyn, 216. The quote is from Medtner, himself.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 216.
\textsuperscript{54} Medtner, 40.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 96.
He begins by explaining that “the language of music … possess[es] certain clearly definable and long defined elements.”57 The notions of tension and resolution, tonic and dominant, diatonic and chromatic, etc. are all rules that Music's servants have uncovered over time. These rules are not arbitrary, rather reflections of eternal laws.58 Of all of these rules, “the most primary, fundamental, supreme 'sense' of music [is] the theme, which is the kernel of form.”59 No rule functions in isolation, but all work cooperatively to express “the first song that once upon a time resounded in the world.”60

Medtner conceives all of Music's rules to be expressions of a primal urgency from Simplicity to Complexity back to Simplicity. This explains not only the resolution of dissonance into consonance, but also formal designs such as sonata form with its tonic to dominant to tonic motion. “Complexity that is resolved into simplicity, as also simplicity that contains in itself potential complexity, is good. What is bad, is a self-sufficient complexity that does not gravitate towards simplicity, as also the pseudo-simplicity that excludes the … problem of coordination.”62 Medtner perceives many of modern music's tendencies as “self-sufficient” isolations of the rules of Music. “Chromaticism … has detached itself from the mode [ionian, aeolian];”63 “Dissonance … has isolated itself from consonance;”64 Dodecaphonic music is “a

57 Ibid., 7.
58 Ibid., 56.
59 Medtner uses the words “sense” and “senses” as one would “common sense” or “common senses.” Any quote of his using the word does not refer to the five senses, but to rules, logic and other “common senses” of music.
60 Ibid., 43.
61 Ibid., 21.
62 Ibid., 15.
63 Ibid., 24.
64 Ibid.
self-sufficient … polyphonic style” and tone-clusters are “an artificial cultivation of new prototypes of chords, which … [have] lost their tie not only with the fundamental formations of harmony, but (by reason of their self-sufficiency) with each other. All of these “self-sufficient” rules turned music, in the form of “progressive modernism…, into formless noise.” “Can a creation be called musical,” he asks, “that does not conform to the fundamental senses of the musical language?”

A true composer is inspired by the *song* and uses the “senses” of music to uncover his composition. Thus, true composers act as a kind of pontiff, bridging the common man to Music. They receive “the transmission of the song … in an uninterrupted connection with the dream (vision) in which [it] appear[s] to man.” The *song* appears to man in the form of a theme, which is “above all an intuition. It is acquired and not invented…. The more faithful the artist has remained to the theme that appeared to him by intuition, the more artistic is this fulfillment and the more inspired his work.” Medtner considered it his duty to uncover that theme and how it develops. He was not manipulating the music, but exposing it.

Medtner’s religious attitude towards Music and his idolization of past masters is clear on every page of his book and in many of his works. He was often considered academic or behind the times because his harmonic language did not stray beyond the late 19th century. Many, however, saw this as a good thing: Ernest Newman considered him “the best argument

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65 Ibid., 62.
66 Ibid., 63.
67 Ibid., 65.
68 Ibid., 39.
69 See note 61.
70 Ibid., 59.
71 Ibid., 43.
72 Martyn, xii.
for nineteenth-century harmony [he had] heard for a long time”\textsuperscript{73} and Joseph Yasser thought that Medtner would herald a “glorious rebirth” of classicism;\textsuperscript{74} Sabaneev considered him “one of the few remaining oases of the old musical outlook”;\textsuperscript{75} and Glazunov gave Medtner a photograph of himself with the dedication: “To the firm defender of the sacred laws of eternal art”\textsuperscript{76}

Medtner’s biography contains many probable causes of his artistic obscurity. Again and again, his refusal to violate personal ideals sabotaged opportunities for recognition and artistic success. These high principles first took their toll when he abandoned a promising career as a concert pianist, recoiling at the thought of toiling in the service of public and commercial taste rather than in service of music. He maintained this almost pathological unwillingness to concertize for the sake of fame and fortune throughout his life, though he was happy to perform in settings that lacked any hint of commercialism. In rejecting a concert career, Medtner denied himself the exposure and name recognition that benefited his dear friend, Rachmaninoff, to say nothing of the composer-pianists Scriabin, Liszt, Chopin, Beethoven, and Mozart. All of them made their initial reputations as performers and used their established concert platform to showcase their compositions.

Medtner’s stubborn idealism also reared its head in a second manner—his unwillingness to compromise his musical language. He wrote in a post-Wagnerian late Romantic style in an era when the abandonment of tradition was in vogue. This would have inevitably limited his "


\textsuperscript{74} Joseph Yasser, “The Art of Nicolas Medtner,” In Holt, 47.

\textsuperscript{75} Leonid Sabaneev and S. W. Pring, “Nikolai Medtner,” under “oases.”

reception among critics, who treated Medtner with the same disdain that they treated Rachmaninoff.\footnote{The fifth edition of Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians infamously dismissed Rachmaninoff as a composer destined for obscurity. \url{http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/10/arts/classical-music-rachmaninoff-makes-converts-of-his-critics.html} (accessed January 7, 2017).} The technical difficulty in performing his works would have further limited their audience. Lastly, since “Medtner’s music, unfortunately, is of the kind that rarely makes … the best impression at first hearing,”\footnote{Marc-Andre Hamelin. The quote continues, “but I’ve found time and again that if you give Medtner time, and if you give him a second chance and a third chance; if you listen, and listen, and listen again, he will reveal himself to you and you will not be able to get rid of him afterwards.” \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnzh7jzlyQw} (accessed January 7, 2017).} many listeners would be unlikely to invest the time necessary to acquaint themselves with his musical language.

In addition to his intractable idealism and the commercial weaknesses of his musical language, global politics also played a role in Medtner’s obscurity. The upheavals of World War I, the Russian Revolution, and World War II destroyed the social infrastructure and cultural institutions upon which he might have relied for performance opportunities and their concomitant public and critical recognition.
CHAPTER 3: OVERVIEW OF MEDTNER’S COMPOSITIONS

Medtner’s mastery of form was evident to all, whether they appreciated his music or not. Tanayev declared that the man was “born with sonata form” and Hofmann praised his first sonata, opus 5, as a “perfect whole.” Even the critic Karatygin, who considered the composer's works to be “without a soul,” conceded that Medtner was a “remarkably clever and richly gifted architect.” Those who love his works see a consistency and maturity across his entire oeuvre. In spite of his classicism, he is regarded as a rhythmic innovator. Alfred Swan stated that Medtner's use of rhythm makes him “a modern of moderns,” and many critics have pointed out the organic nature of his rhythms. All of these traits are apparent in his many works, as is his remarkable pianism.

All of Medtner's compositions involve the piano in some capacity. In a letter to his brother Emil, Medtner explained why: “I quite often think that, were I not a pianist, I wouldn't have managed to set down my ideas at all.” He expounded upon this crutch in a much later letter: “Despite the fact that something may be singing in my head with extraordinary clarity … I nevertheless cannot compose … without an instrument (for no work of mine has ever come into being without the use of one).” His technical facility with the instrument is reflected in the

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79 Martyn, 26.
80 Ibid., 99.
81 Ibid., xii; Gerald Abraham, “Medtner and his Piano Music,” in Holt, 90.
84 Martyn, xii.
85 Ibid., 116-117.
86 Ibid., 156.
supreme difficulty of his writing. Medtner's songs “demand … not only a fine singer but also a pianist of extraordinary talent (and in some cases the equipment of a virtuoso)”\(^87\) and his piano sonatas “may be classified as virtuoso pieces … [which sometimes] present an almost herculean task to the performer.”\(^88\) Many of his Fairy Tales are equally difficult. The virtuoso pianist Grigory Ginzburg said of Medtner’s recording of his opus 14, No. 2 Tale, “March of the Paladin,” that “to play the fairy tale, at such a tempo, with perfection, is nearly impossible.”\(^89\)

Naturally, his three piano concerti are virtuosic. His remarkable pianism is evident in more than just the virtuosity of his works. The pianist Marc-André Hamelin raves about “the unbelievably pianistic nature of Medtner's writing; by comparison, even Chopin's piano music seems technically uncomfortable!”\(^90\) Clarence Raybould draws a similar comparison, stating that Medtner “has written some of the finest piano-music since Chopin!”\(^91\)

His output contains a total of 61 opuses, excluding his Piano Quintet, a cadenza for Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto and a handful of small compositions. He wrote three piano concerti, 14 piano sonatas, three sonatas for violin and piano and one sonata for voice and piano. He has 106 songs to his name and 38 Fairy Tales, 58 character pieces, and five shorter works for violin and piano.\(^92\) Of all of his compositions, his Sonatas have garnered the greatest respect. They “represent some of the last serious works in the 20\(^{th}\) century to be composed in the


\(^{88}\) Elmore, 97.

\(^{89}\) Natalya Kalendarev, “Medtner; His Beliefs, Influences and Work,” (D. M. A. diss., University of Washington, 2005), 56.


romantic tradition,“⁹³ and his Night Wind Sonata, opus 25, No. 2, has been called “the greatest piano sonata of modern times.”⁹⁴ A number of artists have recorded his complete sonatas, including Marc-André Hamelin, Geoffrey Tozer, and Hamish Milne.

If his sonatas occupy the most respected seat among his output, Medtner’s songs occupy the most neglected. No complete recordings have ever been made, and only a small handful of albums devote themselves exclusively to these works. The prevalent attitude holds Medtner’s music in low esteem. By examining his most neglected genre, I hope to show not only that his songs are deserving of both scholarly and artistic consideration, but to call into question the long-held disregard for the composer.

Only his favorite German and Russian poets were used for his songs, with poems by Pushkin and Goethe composing more than half of the texts. His love for these two poets was cemented at an early age. After studying versification in his early twenties, he told his brother Emil, “[I] have [now] acquired a certain technique in reading verse generally. Earlier I had lacked this technique to appreciate it, whereas now I see that there is a certain technique here as absolutely indispensable as a musical technique is in reading notes. And now, when I opened Goethe, I went off my head with delight.” With other poets, he found “no originality in their form, only in their ideas and moods.” The one exception being Pushkin: “…With him you feel originality in everything.”⁹⁵

His songs reflect his deep understanding of the poetry, but the music is never subservient to the text. He describes the ideal relationship between text and music in The Muse

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⁹³ Elmore, 13.
⁹⁵ Martyn, 20-21.
and the Fashion: “[a] poetic text … beget[s] a purely musical song which flows along, sometimes uniting itself with the text, but never forsaking its own musical bed.”\(^{96}\) This attitude towards the text-music relationship can be seen in his frequent use of preludes, postludes and interludes for architectonic reasons and his avoidance of strophic form.\(^{97}\) His vocal lines, likewise, sometimes stray from their poetic foundation through the use of *vocalise*, the singing of textless vowels or syllables. He even wrote a *vocalise* sonata and suite for soprano and piano.

Malcolm Boyd feels that Medtner's songs fall somewhere between the worlds of Brahms and of Wolf.\(^{98}\) Again and again critics referred to the unique interdependence of voice and piano in his songs. “The piano part is as important and individual as the voice part, yet the two make an unbelievably perfect unity.”\(^{99}\)

His masterful ability to evoke the mood of a text and to elevate its poetry ranks him alongside the greatest composers of art song. The five works examined in this paper represent a small sampling of Medtner’s contribution to the genre and span the first half of his career, from his early *Nine Songs after Goethe*, Op. 6 (1901-05) to *Seven Poems*, Op. 46 (1922-24). They range in topic from the frivolous “Elfenliedchen,” Op. 6, No. 3, and the playful “Aus ‘Lila,’ (‘So tanzet…’”) Op. 15, No. 5, to the exuberantly profound “Winternacht,” Op. 46, No. 5, and the intimately profound “Роза,” Op. 29, No. 6. Definitive recordings of each song, performed by Medtner, himself, and Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, are freely available at http://www.medtner.org.uk/mp3_files.html. It is recommended that readers listen to these recordings alongside each analysis.

\(^{96}\) Medtner, 125.  
\(^{98}\) Ibid., under “Wolf.”  
Elfenliedchen, Op. 6, No. 3

Elfenliedchen
Um Mitternacht, wenn die Menschen erst schlafen,
Dann scheinet uns der Mond,
Dann leuchtet uns der Stern,
Wir wandeln und singen,
Und tanzen erst gern.

Um Mitternacht, wenn die Menschen erst schlafen,
Auf Wiesen an den Erlen
Wir suchen unsern Raum
Und wandeln und singen
Und tanzen einen Traum

(Goethe)

Elves’ Ditty
At midnight, as people are sleeping,
In the glimmering moonlight
And the glow of the stars
We frolic and sing
And dance with glee

At midnight, when people are sleeping,
We seek our place
By the alder trees in the meadow
And frolic and sing
And dance a dream.

(Translation by Daniel Liebeskind)

This attractive early lied is an ideal introduction to Medtner’s art songs. Its text describes the enchanting world of elves, unseen by men, and their mischievous nature is depicted throughout the song. The introduction immediately throws us into a wild bacchic dance. Its jaunty left-hand rhythm establishes the dance, while the right-hand’s swirling sixteenths add a cloak of mystery to each harmony by vacillating between F-sharp, G-sharp, and A, the G-sharp clashing with every chord. The bass expands outward in chromatic motion: D, C-sharp, B-sharp, C-sharp, D-natural. This is mirrored in contrary motion at the octave and the sixth where D moves to D-sharp, and E, then back down to D-sharp and D-natural, while B-sharp in the right-hand swells to C-sharp, then D-natural before returning via C-sharp to B-sharp. Hairpin dynamics track this chromatic expansion and contraction. Combined with the dancing left-hand, the leggierissimo e sotto voce right hand, and its colorful G-sharps, these elements create an otherworldly
swirl of shifting harmonies and dynamics that is highly evocative of the magical elves. The elfin dance ends as suddenly as it began: a descending harmonic minor scale fades into solitary *staccato* eighth notes separated by rests. It is as though the secretive elves had vanished without a trace. A C-sharp dominant seventh in measure eight resolves to F-sharp minor in measure nine, establishing the tonic as the voice enters.


Medtner’s sense of rhythmic play becomes apparent after the voice enters. Despite many contemporaries condemning him as an epigone and a writer of uninteresting music, his mastery of rhythm and form were almost universally recognized. Upon the singer’s entrance, the left-hand rhythm from the introduction subtly shifts. Combined with the right-hand’s syncopations and frequent strong-beat rests in the left, this creates a halting quality to the music, keeping the listener off balance until both voice
and piano join rhythms in the middle of measure 14. Until that moment the piano has steadfastly emphasized the third beat of every 6/8 subdivision and the harmony has never left the tonic, creating a hypnotic sense of suspended time. The joining of voice and piano in the middle of measure 14 (highlighted with a sforzando) jolts us out of the singer’s hypnotic dance. The sudden appearance of downbeats and the singer’s renunciation of her earlier dotted rhythms for a stream of eighth-notes creates a rush of momentum towards the dominant that highlights the excitement of the elfin dance.

Example 2 “Elfenliedchen,” Op. 6, No. 3, measures 9-16. Syncopation and accompanimental texture giving way to accented strong beats in both voice and piano.

A ten-measure interlude (mm. 17-26) follows, transitioning from the minor tonic to its relative major. In Medtner’s hands, this functional transition is anything but formulaic. The piano begins with an ordinary restatement of the melody, but then the voice joins in vocalise and the two dance a duet in stretto before chromatically
descending into A major over the introductory material. In using vocalise during what is functionally a piano interlude, Medtner further emphasizes the mysterious and playful nature of the singer. Such purposeful manipulation of form for dramatic purposes can be observed across his oeuvre.


The second stanza begins identically to the first, but in the relative major. Whereas a lesser composer may have transcribed the initial phrase with only the necessary changes to return to the tonic, Medtner once again shows his mastery of form
and sensitivity to poetry. The music changes after the first few measures, building in intensity with a 5-bar push to the dominant whose climax comes one measure earlier on the word Raum ("space," "area"). This miniature musical climax is worth investigating in depth as such dramatic climaxes can often be found in Medtner’s works.

The bass line rises from E in measure 29 all the way up to C-sharp in measure 33, the home key’s dominant. But on his push to the dominant, Medtner sets the high F-sharp of measure 32, sung to the word Raum, as the climax. Medtner sets up this point of arrival both rhythmically and harmonically. Measures 29-30 had a harmonic rhythm of two changes per measure, or once every beat. He sustains the dissonant harmony of measure 31 for the entire measure. By changing that measure’s meter from 6/8 to 3/4, the augmented harmonic rhythm feels even longer as it now lasts for three beats. Harmonically, this measure demands resolution. It is a B-flat augmented-third colored by a passing G-sharp in the bass. The piano switches from arpeggios to block chords and expands its range to cover three octaves, while the singer is instructed to sing staccato, articulating every note. Even the rhythm of the fragmented melody plays a role in the drive to Raum. The three-note motive in measure 29 begins two thirds of a beat after the downbeat; the next measure begins one third of a beat after the downbeat, and measure 31 begins on the downbeat. All of these serve to emphasize the long-held F-sharp on Raum in measure 32. Unsurprisingly, that F-sharp is also the singer’s highest pitch. These factors make the augmented sixth’s resolution at measure 32 feel like a strong arrival. By emphasizing the word, “Raum” and arriving at it through such a dramatically significant chord, Medtner highlights the otherworldliness of the elves. Indeed, the actual dominant to tonic resolution some two measures later feels drably mundane.
Having finally touched upon the tonic, Medtner immediately leaves it with a second interlude that begins identically to the first, only this time in the relative major. The *vocalise* section, however, reprises the miniature climax’s material, ending, as before, with the phrase, “*Wir wandeln und singen, und tanzen einen Traum.*” Medtner again deemphasizes the actual dominant to tonic resolution with simple block chords and a vocal rhythm of constant eighth-notes. The introductory material returns to bookend the song, this time against a low F-sharp sung to the word, “*Traum*” (dream) for six measures. It is as if the previous 90 seconds were just a dream.

This *lied* features a number of musical and compositional characteristics found in many of Medtner’s other works. Most notable, perhaps, is his use of *vocalise*. He would later write a *Sonata-Vocalise*, Op. 41, No. 1, as well as a *Suite Vocalise*, Op. 41,
No. 2, the latter comprising five separate movements with descriptive titles. While his inspiration for this opus came from Rachmaninoff’s precedent, Medtner clearly appreciated the voice as an instrument independent of text before Rachmaninoff’s influence. In the winter of 1919-1920, at the dacha of his friend Troyanovskaya, he played through Schumann’s *Fauenliebe und Leben* with his wife and friend taking turns singing. Medtner asked them to continue singing through the cycle’s lengthy postlude by doubling the piano part on vowels.\(^{100}\) Aside from his *Sonata-* and *Suite-Vocalise*, Medtner also made use of the technique in many of his songs, most notably Op. 37, No. 1, “Вессоннйца” (Sleepless), which concludes with nine measures of *vocalise*.

Common to all of his art songs is a respect for the scansion of a poetic text, whether in German or Russian. The most telling example from “Elfenliedchen” would be the two different settings of the phrase *tanzen einen Traum*, which occur in measures 34 and 42-43. By switching to 3/4 time in measure 34, the vocal line naturally emphasizes the strong syllables on each word: *tan-zen ei-nen Traum*. When he set those same words in measures 42-43, which are in 6/8 time, he kept their natural rhythm by inserting a quarter-rest between *tanzen* and *einen*, thus allowing *Traum* to fall on the next downbeat with *einen* serving as its upbeat, so that each strong syllable is on a stronger beat than its weaker syllable.

A recurring feature of Medtner’s piano writing can be observed in measures eight and nine as the tied F-sharp that is part of the scalar line in measure eight assumes chordal function in measure nine. Virtually all of his pieces display this idiomatic device.

\(^{100}\) Martyn, 150.
Given Medtner’s frustrated letters to family and friends claiming that he could not compose without a piano in front of him, this technique probably came naturally to his fingers. A telling footnote in his *Vergessene Weisen*, Op. 38 cycle instructs the performer that these held notes “are by no means accented.”

Example 5. “Elfenliedchen,” op. 6, No. 3, measures 41-43. Fidelity to scansion, vocal pedal point, and coda.

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101 Martyn, 156
Medtner sometimes uses pedal points in the voice at moments of transition. In “Elfenliedchen” these occur over the interlude (Example 3) and postlude (example 5). A similar instance will be seen in “Aus ‘Lila’” (Example 7) discussed in this paper, along with other of his songs, including and “Вальс” (“The Waltz,”) Op. 32, No. 5 and “Элегия” “Elegy” Op. 52. Lastly, his music abounds with rhythmic complexity and nuance. The subtle shift of left-hand rhythms after the voice enters, the declamatory use of hemiola in the miniature climax, the initial syncopation of the melody; all of these are characteristic of Medtner’s rhythmic mastery.

Aus ‘Lila,’ Op. 15, No. 5

Aus ‘Lila’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German Text</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So tanzet und springet</td>
<td>Just dance and leap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Reihen und Kranz,</td>
<td>In crosses and rows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die liebliche Jugend,</td>
<td>Dance is so befitting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ihr ziemet der Tanz.</td>
<td>For lovely youths.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Am Rocken zu sitzen
Und fleißig zu sein,
Das Tagwerk zu enden,
Es schläfert euch ein.

Drum tanzet und springet,
Erfrischt euch das Blut,
Der traurigen Liebe
Gebt Hoffnung und Mut.

(Goethe)  
(Translation by Daniel Liebeskind)
A brief poem extolling the virtues of play over work, the playful innocence of “Aus ‘Lila’” comes to life in Medtner’s setting. While dance-like rhythms abound in his music, they are particularly appropriate in this song. The left-hand hops up a G major scale in the introduction while the right skips through pre-dominant chords before cadencing into C major, just in time for the singer’s entrance. Both singer and pianist intrude on each other’s rests in a flirtatious duet. The singer’s phrase begins in breathless syncopation—rests separate every word. As she continues, each successive phrase grows longer and more lyrical, ending with a phrase that covers two whole lines of the poem. These are sung in a single breath to a melody that spans an entire octave. During the initial phrase, the pianist and singer continually interrupt one another. As the singer trades clipped phrases for longer *legato* lines, the two hands of the piano perform their own duet in contrary motion, returning to the skipping dance rhythm of the introduction, which they maintain during the singer’s long phrase.

(Example 6 continued).

The dance gives way to a brief *poco piú vivo* section for the second stanza. As in Schubert’s “Gretchen am Spinnrade,” the right hand of the piano imitates a busy spinning wheel. As the singer grows weary of her imagined work, however, the piano tires. Like a music box winding down, the phrase droops in pitch, finishing with a chromatic descent into a French sixth that sputters out a measured trill in both voice and piano, *molto diminuendo* and *poco ritenuto*. But the singer wastes little time imagining dreary work, and effortlessly transitions into her earlier carefree dance with a vocal pedal point over the piano’s restatement of the introduction.

The song’s ABA’ structure mirrors the ternary form of the poem. Medtner finds a number of ways to make this final statement of the salutary effects of dancing more emphatic. The piano part is even more active than before, with full chords in the left hand, instead of the single bass notes we first heard, and double neighbor tones in the inner voices, where we initially heard only silence. His rhythmic playfulness can be seen in the treatment of the song’s last two lines—a lyrical statement spanning an octave. This material first appeared in C major, but now Medtner raises the fifth of the tonic chord to G-sharp, creating an augmented triad while the vocal line is restated a third higher than its original appearance. At the song’s climax, G-sharp is enharmonically repurposed into the A-flat of a D half-diminished seventh chord, a tritone higher than any previously sung note. The measures on either side of this summit (mm. 22 and 24) are sung in emphatic
hemiola. The piano maintains its 6/8 dance rhythm in measure 22, but joins the singer in hemiola by measure 24, maintaining its flirtatious relationship with her by playing in syncopation. The piece ends in triumphant C major, its hopping dance closing with an arpeggiated flourish.


Harmonic analysis is often difficult in Medtner’s music. He was more than willing to dilute a vertical harmony for the sake of a horizontal bass line (or, less often, for other horizontal lines), leading to ambiguous harmonies. The G major scale in the bass of the introduction (Example 6), for instance, provides the most logical harmony for the introduction—the dominant. But that horizontal scale does not support a single dominant harmony until just before the voice enters. Ultimately, the introduction mostly
consists of predominant harmonies over a dominant scale. Medtner’s music abounds with
half-diminished sevenths and augmented sixths, not all of which serve a predominant
function, such as the D half-diminished chords in measures 23 and 24 that resolve to
tonic harmonies. Medtner’s counterpoint sometimes makes individual harmonic analysis
difficult, as with the chords in measure 24. An A augmented chord with a major seventh
“resolves” to a non-functional French sixth, which becomes a D half-diminished seventh,
which “resolves” to the tonic, C major. Such functionally ambiguous harmonies are not
uncommon in Medtner’s music.

Medtner’s writing is idiomatic for the piano and lies comfortably under the
fingers, regardless of technical difficulty. Take the arpeggiated flourish of the
penultimate measure, for example. Though the hands cross, each portion of the arpeggio
lies comfortably under the fingers, and the longer-note value Cs in the middle of measure
27 and in the final measure are given natural accents by the crossing hands. Such
passages are physically enjoyable to play, and the pianistic writing lends itself to musical
playing. Another example of Medtner’s pianistic writing can be observed in measures six
and seven. The “sliding” notes in the right hand of measure six are much more difficult to
play than the work’s closing flourish, but are pianistic and comfortable for the hand,
onetheless. Though not slurred, Medtner established an implied two-note slur for that
rhythmic pattern in the introduction. A physical release is necessary to maneuver from
the upbeat to the downbeat in the right-hand, because of the distance between the two
chords. The left-hand octaves require the same release in order to reposition the thumb.
Tying the preceding sixteenth-notes to these upbeats creates a down-up motion, resulting
in a two-note slur articulation. Although the right-hand of measure six into seven may
look awkward, it is actually very pianistic. The two-note slur articulation results in a physical release and slight rebound after the second note, making it easy to reposition for the *staccato* note that follows. This is particularly easy in the first iteration of the bar, where the first and second fingers can slide from black notes down to white notes. Far from being awkward, the writing is satisfyingly pianistic.


![Music Example]

**Die Quelle, Op. 46, No. 6**

Die Quelle

Unsere Quelle kommt im Schatten,
Duft'ger Linden an das Licht,
Und wie dort die Vögel singen,
Nein, das weiß doch jeder nicht!

Und das Mädchen kam zur Quelle,
Einen Krug in jeder Hand,
Wollte schnell die Krüge füllen,
Als ein Jüngling vor ihr stand.

Mögen wohl geplaudert haben,
Kam das Mädchen spät nach Haus:
“Gute Mutter, sollst nicht schelten,
Sandtest selbst ja mich hinaus.

Geht man leicht zur Quelle, trägt man
Doch zu Haus ein schwer Gewicht,
Und wie dort die Vögel singen,
Mutter, nein, das weißt du nicht!”

The Stream

Our stream emerges
In the shade of aromatic linden trees;
And simply no one could know
How the birds sing there!

The maiden came to the stream
With a jug in each hand,
She wanted to fill them quickly
When a young man suddenly appeared.

They certainly must have chatted
Because the maiden returned home late:
“Good mother, you shouldn’t scold me,
You, yourself sent me out.

“One leaves carefree for the stream,
But returns bearing a heavy burden.
Mother, you simply couldn’t know
How the birds sing there!”
In this witty poem, a young girl journeys out to fetch water and encounters a young man at the stream. Though not explicitly stated, Chamisso implies a sexual encounter. The young girl returns home a woman who “carries a heavy burden” but “knows how the birds sing.” Medtner set Chamisso’s poem (op. 46, No. 6) in an ABCA’ form with a prelude, interludes, and a postlude. The right- and left-hands trade a tender melody in the introduction against vacillating E augmented major seventh and F-sharp minor harmonies. The introduction gives no indication of a tonic until a German sixth in measure three resolves, via a 4-3 suspension, to the song’s first dominant chord. The tender melody, distant harmonies, musical indications (piano, semplice), and delayed tonic create an atmosphere of wistful melancholy.


Allegretto (Andantino) commodo $\frac{1}{2} = 52$

The singer’s opening *semplice* antecedent phrase carries declamatory weight with its syllabic setting, endless succession of eighth-notes, repeated pitches, and plodding accompaniment. The consequent phrase, marked *espressivo*, contrasts strongly with its counterpart. It sports a lyrical melody, a less syllabic setting, rhythmic variety,
and emphasis upon differing beats. This tender moment acknowledges the singing of the birds (die Vögel), which symbolizes the young woman’s budding sexuality.


A brief interlude, identical to the introduction in all but cadence, separates the first and second verses. As the maiden sets out for her journey to the stream, the music picks up the pace, poco piu leggiero (mosso) and blossoms into the relative major. The piano accompaniment establishes E major with right- and left-hand chords displaced by a sixteenth-note. This rhythmic displacement creates the sensation of a doubled musical pulse, heightening the phrase’s energy. The singer’s range expands, frequently spanning an octave for a single line of text. She trots from B4 down to B3 in mostly stepwise
fashion, then from C-sharp4 to C-sharp5 in the same manner. She repeats her stepwise journey a third higher than before to arrive at D-sharp5. The active melody evokes the carefree innocence of a fairy-tale child. One could easily imagine Hansel and Gretel or Little Red Riding Hood strolling through the woods, oblivious to the possibility of danger. With the words, “Wollte schnell die Krüge füllen,” (“She wanted to fill the jugs quickly”), the texture changes. The harmonic rhythm doubles at measure 21, while *staccati* thirds cascade down the right hand. Each increase in harmonic rhythm and diminution of note value builds excitement. Measure 23 features one last doubling of harmonic rhythm before its headlong rush of modulation abruptly stops in the distant key of D-sharp major, heralding a young man’s arrival with martial fanfare.

The first verse featured mostly eighth-note motion; the second, motion by 16th-notes. 32nds dominate the third. A stream of parlando 16th-notes in the vocal line are supported by 32nd-notes in the piano. Compared to the song’s previous textures, measures 26-27 sound especially active. A flurry of notes, eight non legato 32nds in the right-hand and four staccato 16ths in the left-, embellish each harmony. This playful (giocoso) passage is almost giddy with excitement, simultaneously conveying the maiden’s hurried return home and the high of her sexual encounter with the young man. The chord progression further emphasizes this excitement: a series of V-I resolutions is repeatedly broken by common-tone modulation to the mediant, and every chord is in the major
mode. This progression maintains through the following two measures, though plodding two-note slurs return when the maiden reprimands her mother. Their simpler texture and calmando quality evoke the maiden slowing down as she returns home, and her up-and-down melody sounds like a gentle admonition.


A brief interlude separates the third and final verse. Its boom-chuck texture and portamento articulation—another term for portato—almost sound like the maiden catching her breath. The chromatically ascending tritone in its chord progression conveys a sense of gearing up before the singer launches into her moralizing fourth verse, a modified version of the first. Whereas the first verse realized its harmonies in plodding eighth-notes, the fourth fleshes them out with legato thirty-second notes and an active left-hand,
imbuing them with a Romantic sweep matching its new melody. Medtner set the word *schwer* (“heavy [burden]”) to the singer’s highest pitch, an E-sharp that clashes with the piano’s lone B-natural, a tritone apart. He further highlights this moment by approaching and departing from the word by a perfect fifth and minor sixth, the largest melodic intervals in a song composed mostly of steps.


Though Medtner uses word painting sparingly in his songs, another example occurs just two measures later. The trill of birdsong emerges from the accompanimental texture under the word, “*Vögel*” (“birds”). “*Singen*” (“sing”) outlines a D-sharp major triad over D-sharp major chords, harmonically linking birdsong and the sex it symbolizes.
to the Jüngling. These final measures also give retrospective meaning to the wistful melody from the opening measures (see Example 9). The measured trill in its second and third iteration ties it to the trill of birdsong, and thus to maiden’s sexual encounter. These reminiscences come in measures 38 and 39 as the young lady, now a woman, informs her mother that she (the maiden) does know how the birds sing. With its final trill, the accompaniment drifts into a dreamy postlude that quotes the third verse. This postlude, like Schumann’s best, continues the poem without saying a word. From this postlude, we know that the young lady’s thoughts are not at home, but back in the forest.

Medtner is known for the degree of detail marked in his scores. He uses at least three different kinds of pedal indications in this song: a simple *Ped.* mark, a *Ped.* with a star indicating precisely when to lift the pedal, and a *Ped.* followed by a wavy line, perhaps indicating to hold the bass notes while clearing clashing harmonies in higher registers, or else to simply add the damper pedal’s coloring to the given passage. Within the contrapuntal introduction, each voice has its own articulation and distinct dynamics. Specific performance instructions are given in measures 26-27, where both voice and piano are instructed to perform with a *vivo* quality, but the voice’s lively quality should be *parlando*, whereas the piano’s should be *giocoso*. Both hands play detached in those same measures, but the right-hand is *non legato*, and the left *staccato*. His instructions for tempi are equally detailed. He instructs *poco calmando* in measure four, *poco allarg.* in measure 23, *poco rit.* in measure 31, and *poco largamente* in measure 35. All four indicate a mild slowing of tempo, but imply qualitative differences. In this vein, Medtner has a penchant for unusual expressive terms. The five songs featured in this monograph include marks such as *sussurando* (whispering), *sotto voce* (as in indication for the piano, not the voice), *languido* (languid), *slentando* (gradually decreasing in tempo), and *perdendo* (dying away). Beyond these five songs, one can find directives such as *vocalezzare* (an indication for the singer to sing textless vowels, or *vocalise*), *con molto tenerezza* (with great tenderness), *addolcito* (growing sweeter), *sordamento* (deafly), *sfrenatamente* (without restraint), *lesto* (quick), *sognando* (dreaming), *mancando* (lacking, absent), *quasi echo* (like an echo), *sdegnoso* (contemptuous), *scordato* (forgotten) and more in his music. For all of his attention to detail, it is worth noting that he does not always follow them in his own recordings. Any deviation in his recordings of
the songs could be interpreted as accommodating the singer, but deviations can be found in his recordings of his solo music. Measure 40 of the score to his Fairy Tale, Op. 51, No. 1 shows a clear *decrescendo* through the entire measure, yet Medtner *crescendos* through that passage in his recording and the result is both musical and satisfying. It would seem that, for Medtner, the many details in the written score were not an end to themselves, but a means to communicating the music’s underlying drama.

**Роза, Op. 29, No. 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Роза</th>
<th>The Rose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Где наша роза,</td>
<td>Where is our rose,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Друзья мои?</td>
<td>My friends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Увяла роза,</td>
<td>It died,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Дитя заря.</td>
<td>The dawn’s child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Не говори:</td>
<td>Don’t say:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Так вянет младость!</td>
<td>“That way the youth dies!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Не говори:</td>
<td>Don’t say:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Вот жизни радость!</td>
<td>“This is the joy of life!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Цветку скажи:</td>
<td>Say to the rose:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Прости, жалею!</td>
<td>“I am sorry,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>И на лилею</td>
<td>And show us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Нам укажи.</td>
<td>the lily.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Pushkin)*

*(Translation by Vera Zholondz)*

This poem focuses on beauty and life, rather than their inevitable decay. A rose symbolizes beauty and love and, in the context of this poem, it also symbolizes life. By calling it “the dawn’s child,” Pushkin also hints that it is beauty decayed too soon, like a talented life cut short, or simply the death of a child. Medtner’s setting features a number of motives that return in symbolic counterpoint in the coda. Profound depth lies beneath the simple surface of this song.

It opens with quiet falling thirds in the piano. Their rhythm and contour compose Motive A. They evoke a gentle sadness and their simplicity creates a
contemplative air. This is neither a dirge nor a sentimental emotional display; it is a sad musing. The vocal phrase begins with a series of long and short notes that outline a descending D minor pentascale. This descending outline of a D minor scale and that general rhythm make up Motive B. The isolated imperfect authentic cadence into measure six lends an almost Gregorian quality to the sparsely textured phrase. Its consequent cadences deceptively into the mediant. Medtner extends this deceptive cadence for two measures, as though the piano were lingering on the memory of the dearly departed rose. Then, by lowering the bass to an anticipatory D in the middle of measure nine, he deftly modulates into G minor.

The silence under the words, “Не говори” (“Do not say”), lends that statement rhetorical weight. The chordal accompaniment that follows provides declamatory emphasis to the phrases, “Так вянет младость!” and ”Вот жйзнй радость!” (“That’s how youth dies!” and, “Here is the joy in life!”) The first of these proscribed thoughts cadences authentically back to G minor. Medtner derails the tonal foundation of the second pessimistic declamation, however, providing a musical rejection of that poisonous attitude. What might have been a weak cadence into G minor is soured by an A in the middle of the right hand that holds through each chord. This results in such non-functional harmonies as the F-sharp minor chord with a diminished seventh on beat three of measure 13 that “resolves” to a bitter harmony containing both A-natural and B-flat. It is as if the music, itself, were saying, “Do not think these thoughts. That is not the right perspective.”


The piano joins the voice in imitative polyphony for the following phrase, “Цветку скажи: Прости, жалею!” (“Say to the rose, ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry!’”) Its static G minor 7 harmony sounds comforting after the previous phrase’s denial of that tonality. Motive C consists of the rhythm and descending leap of the opening four notes. The
entire phrase is bracketed in Example 18 to highlight the imitative polyphony between voice and piano. At the end of that phrase, in measure 16, its B-flat bass moves to a whole-note B-natural while the rest of the piano sadly cadences from A7 to D minor. Motive B can be found in modified form in the internal moving voice of the left-hand.

Example 18. “Роза,” Op. 29, No. 6, measures 14-16. Motive C consists of the first four notes, but the bracket is extended to show the full imitative counterpoint. A modified version of Motive B is found in the left-hand’s inner voice in measures 15 and 16.

Then, low in the piano, a single C-natural sounds, heralding the life- and beauty-affirming attitude of the poem as both voice and piano take a running leap from C4 to C5 in an outline of a D minor 7 chord, Motive D. Against this uplifting new tune, all four voices of the piano reprise and then reject each previous motive in skillful counterpoint. The piano’s bass and tenor reprise the mournful second motive in a duet with one another. As the singer brings the quiet rapture of her final phrase to a close, both bass and tenor reject this motive and the pessimism it symbolizes by reversing their downward contour into an ascent. The two join at the octave, outlining this ascent in groups of four, displaced across multiple octaves. Their displacement mirrors Motive A’s contour, turning the somber motive into one of exultant joy. Meanwhile, the piano’s alto
voice begins a restatement of Motive B against the soprano, which repeats Motive C. They play in duet once in F major, cadencing with the other voices into a melancholy D minor. They repeat their duet a second time, higher and in A major. This time, all four voices in the piano cadence into D7, which resolves into G7, the secondary dominant of the relative major. The piano now embraces Motive D in an exultant forte rejection of the pessimistic view posed earlier in the song. Together, all four voices weave their contrapuntal way over the remaining measures, dwindling from forte to pianissimo and closing with a perfect authentic cadence, the only PAC in the song.


This song’s elegant simplicity belies its profound depth. The musical texture evolves over the course of this song. It begins with simple dyads, providing the barest of
harmonies and minimal counterpoint (Example 16). As the singer declares that we must avoid pessimism, these dyads give way to block chords in a homophonic texture (Example 17). Medtner sets the sad farewell to the rose in imitative counterpoint (Example 18). When the optimistic alternative is finally presented, in measure 17, the texture blossoms into four-voice counterpoint. Despite the song’s profound depth, no awareness of it is necessary to enjoy the music. The listener can feel the sadness of the opening lines and the spiritual exultation of the closing ones. Роза’s merit lies as much in its simple beauty as in its profound depth.

Winternacht, Op. 46, No. 5

Winternacht
Verschneit liegt rings die ganze Welt,
Ich hab’ Nichts, was mich freuet,
Verlassen steht der Baum im Feld,
Hat längst sein Laub verstreuet.

Der Wind nur geht bei stiller Nacht
Und rüttelt an den Baume,
Da rührt er seinen Wipfel sacht
Und redet wie im Traume.

Er träumt von künft’ger Frühlingszeit,
Von Grün und Quellenrauschen,
Wo er im neuen Blüten-Kleid
Zu Gottes Lob wird rauschen.

Winter night
The entire world lies covered in snow
I have nothing to bring me joy,
A tree stands alone in the field,
Having long since shed its leaves.

Only the wind moves in the still night
Shaking the tree
Stirring its top so that
It speaks as if in a dream

It is dreaming of the coming Spring
Of greenery and of rushing waters
When, in a new cloak of foliage
It will rustle in praise of God.

(Translation by Daniel Liebeskind)

The extreme dissonance and veiled tonal center of “Winternacht” may seem at odds with Medtner’s reputation as an epigone and a critic of “modern” music. The score is rife with altered chords and deceptive cadences. For all of its dissonance, however, the song never abandons its tonal foundation.
A menacing three-note motive (Motive A) sets the tone of the piece. A quarter-note and an eighth-note a perfect fourth above it lead to a dotted-half note a semi-tone higher. Together they outline a tritone, though the interval occasionally varies. Almost every measure of the song bears this stamp in bare left-hand octaves. It also forms the basis of the distinctive altered dominant seventh seen in measures 7-13. Medtner makes this connection clear when, in measures seven through nine, the three-note motive transitions via arpeggio from a melodic E, F, B-flat to a harmonic F, B-flat, E over an E7 chord in the left-hand.

Example 20. “Winternacht,” Op. 46, No. 5, measures 1-10. Introduction. Each bracket is another iteration of the menacing three-note motive. Note how the arpeggios of measures seven and eight gradually transfers the motive from a horizontal to a vertical sonority.
The introduction creates a threatening sense of desolation. Its tritones and semitones imbue the music with menacing dissonance, and its long measures (9/8 time in *lento*), slow harmonic rhythm, and sparsely textured final measures convey the oppressive stillness of Eichendorff’s wintry landscape. The lack of a key signature, E pedal point, and altered dominant all hint at an A minor tonality, but the chord deceptively resolves to D minor when the singer finally enters. Her long, uninterrupted lines in 3/4 time sound like a ghostly wail against the piano’s layered texture. Her resolution into D minor offers hollow relief from the deadly winter as the chord is colored by a dissonant E. When a second attempt at resolution meets with the same discord in measure 16, the music begins to modulate, and a brief interlude follows. The measured octave *tremolos* in the piano part, undoubtedly inspired by the stirring wind, ascend into the piano’s higher registers through both an *accelerando* and the diminution of note values. This provides a transition into the second verse, which is characterized by a stream of *tranquillo* sixteenth notes in the piano.
A *tranquillo* stream of sixteenth-notes permeates the second verse, adding an eerie quality to the already frightening music, which quickly begins modulating. Each new altered dominant hollowly resolves to a chord panged with dissonance. The vocal line climbs higher with every resolution, moving from A-flat in measure 25 to B-flat in measure 27. The bass starts creeping upward once the singer reaches C-sharp in measure 29. This constant modulation and ever-rising vocal line accumulate a tension that demands resolution with increasing urgency. When the bass finally settles upon B-flat in measure 31, the singer floats on a high G against a three-note *quasi trillo* in the piano. E, F, and G comingle in the treble register against a B-flat in the bass. All are held with a pedal that is lightly colored by Motive A’s ascent through measure 31, resulting in an otherworldly sound. This ethereal atmosphere is maintained for two measures, before the unexpected return of the E altered dominant dispels the singer’s dreamscape. It arrives under the word, “*Traume,*” (“dream”) sending the singer plummeting from her heights to land, via tritone, at G-sharp4. Our urgent need for resolution is denied by this cruel deceptive cadence.
The dynamic level of the second verse never rises above $p$. For 34 measures Medtner has avoided a solid tonal center, and harmonic imperatives for resolution are either subverted, as with the deceptive “cadence” in measure 33, or undercut by their multitude of dissonant added notes. Everything in this piece, so far, fosters unease in its listeners.

As with the previous stanzas, the third begins by layering the menacing three-note motive in the left hand against an altered E dominant 9th that deceptively resolves to D minor. Just as the D tremolo prepared the running sixteenth-notes in the second verse, that verse’s dying trill prepares the texture of the third verse. G and F continue to alternate as the right hand vacillates between a first inversion E diminished triad and the F, B-flat, E triad derived from the menacing motive. These triads pulse in urgent triplets.
over the left-hand. As with the second stanza, the third quickly begins modulating, its forward momentum heightened by the direction, *sempre (poco a poco) appassionato e cresc.* With every measure, the voice climbs one pitch higher than before. G at the start of measure 37 climbs to A by measure 38. B-flat rises to C. In measure 41, with the indication *molto cresc.* the voice reaches D, then E in the next measure. Throughout, the melodic and rhythmic content is subtly changing so that no iteration is identical. Again, as in the previous verse, the constant modulation and ever-rising vocal line build tension, its need for resolution heightened by the many times it has been denied.


The intensity continues to build, the singer reaching a high F, and finally a G on the words “*Gottes Lob*” (“praise of god”) as the pianist’s left hand abandons the three-
note motive, ubiquitous until this moment, replacing it with ecstatic octaves spanning three octaves. The first tonic harmony in the song finally appears in measure 45. It is A major, reinforced across six octaves as the tree bursts forth its rapturous paean. The last four measures cover the entire range of the piano, all to be sustained by the damper pedal. In the penultimate bar, the pianist silently depresses an A major chord in the instrument’s rich middle register and changes the pedal, capturing the reverberations of this brief, but thunderous coda. “Winternacht” ends pianissimo with only the echo of its ecstatic dream, as if to remind the listener that the earth-shattering explosion of life they just experienced all took place within the waiting mind of a tree, standing alone and naked in a snow-covered world devoid of life.

Medtner’s setting is through-composed, though each verse shares many similarities. All three are linked by the menacing motive in the left-hand (Motive A), a two-measure pattern of tension and release that begins with an altered dominant ninth (diminished 7, flat 9) resolving deceptively to the subdominant (Motive B), and lengthy
vocal phrases that are built upon rhythmically and melodically similar two-measure units (Motive C). These two-measure vocal units all begin with an upbeat that rises by step, fall from the first downbeat in predominantly stepwise motion, arrive at beat two of the second measure by skip or leap, and accent beat one of the first measure and beat two of the second with long notes. These two-measure units usually coincide with the two-measure pattern of tension and release established by Motive B.


As can be seen in example 25, each verse in “Winternacht” is more active than the last (the tranquillo sixteenth notes from verse two, though faster than verse three’s triplets, lack the latter’s energy and dynamic range). This tripartite musical structure reflects the poem’s own structure, which begins with a general description of a dead winter landscape then progressively narrows its focus until we are inside the mind of a single tree, manically dreaming of a springtime bursting with life and energy. Medtner’s study of versification (see footnote 96) enabled him to closely mirror both poetic form and content in music.

Medtner’s piano writing is almost always technically challenging while it avoids empty virtuosity. The same is frequently true of his writing for voice and violin. For Medtner, the musical idea was always more important than the technical difficulties necessary to realize it. In this song, the challenges for the singer are considerable. The wide span of some phrases, such as that from measures 31-34, not only tests a singer’s breath control, but her evenness of tone as she ends on a long treble G-sharp after spending more than two measures singing pianissimo in her upper register. The final exultant phrase is written to be sung for six measures to the word, “rauschen,” but Elizabeth Schwarzkopf takes a breath after two measures, singing “ah” for the remaining four in her recording with Medtner. Finding a proper tempo can prove challenging, as the singer may struggle with long phrases if the tempo is too slow, yet the mood of the text will be compromised if the tempo is too fast. This is especially difficult in the second stanza where a tranquillo quality must be maintained without playing too slowly. Fortunately, Medtner is very sensitive in his vocal writing, building breathing spaces in
the melody with well-placed rests. This allows the singer to proceed without interrupting the flow of the larger phrase.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Nikolai Medtner, as with the vast majority of composers, has become a footnote in music history. None of his works have entered the canon. Although his solo piano music sees occasional recordings and performances, his numerous songs remain almost completely unknown. Many causes unrelated to the quality of his music have influenced his neglect, from his principled refusal to partake in commercial aspects of the music business, to writing in a post-Romantic language during an era that viewed that style as old-fashioned. By examining works from his most neglected genre, and by choosing songs for which definitive recordings by the composer exist, I hope to convince readers that his music is worthy of study and performance.

Poetry played an important role in Medtner’s life. His intellectually charged upbringing exposed him to the great musical and literary masters, and the consumption and discussion of poetry remained integral to his adult life. As with music, his literary taste belonged to a prior era; more than half of his songs are to poems by Pushkin or Goethe. The five examined in this monograph only hint at the diversity of his songs and show a consistently high quality of craftsmanship. “Elfenliedchen,” Op. 6, No. 3 reveals an early fascination with vocalise, his preservation of a text’s scansion, and the naturalness with which he manipulates form to suit musical and dramatic purposes. “Aus ‘Lila,’” Op. 15, No. 5 is a great example of Medtner’s rhythmic inventiveness and the delightful pianism of his writing. “Die Quelle,” Op. 46, No. 6 and “Роза,” Op. 29. No. 6 reveal a profound text-music relationship that is even more apparent upon analysis. Crucially, these songs are both accessible and beautiful, even if we do not consider their

The songs examined in this monograph are of a quality unbefitting their neglect and belie many of the common criticisms of his music. Far from being drily academic, his settings breathe life into the poetry and communicate emotion, drama, and meaning as skillfully as Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, or Wolf. They show great variety, employ colorful and unconventional harmonies, manipulate form and rhythm in interesting ways, and elevate the poetry to new heights. Throughout the songs, Medtner displays a masterful ability to evoke a mood or create an atmosphere. It is hoped that readers, upon discovering his most neglected genre to be of such high quality, will begin to question his neglect and to explore more of his music.
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