MEDTNER

Violin Sonata No. 3, 'Epica'

Three Nocturnes • Fairy Tale, Op. 20, No. 1

Laurence Kayaleh, Violin • Paul Stewart, Piano

Nikolay Medtner (1880–1951)
Complete Works for Violin and Piano, Vol. 1

The piano works of Nikolay Medtner are finally achieving the recognition they merit, but not so his compositions for violin and piano. A great pity, for they encompass music of great beauty and power, gratifying for both performer and audience. Medtner's scores are unique: distinctly Russian, unabashedly Romantic and full-bodied, yet intellectually devised and highly disciplined, every note and detail having a purpose or, in the composer's words, "a destiny". Close acquaintance and repeated listenings reveal his extraordinary craft. The five violin and piano works occupy a special place in Medtner's œuvre and fill an important gap in the limited Russian violin and piano repertoire.

Nikolay Karlovich Medtner was Moscow born-and-bred, although his ancestry was German. He received initial piano lessons from his mother, and at the age of twelve was accepted into the Moscow Conservatory. Sergey Taneyev, his counterpoint teacher, observed the boy's early fascination for complex polyphonic textures (always a notable Medtnerian feature) and famously remarked that he was "born with the Sonata Form coursing through his veins". Medtner graduated in 1900 with the Conservatory's highest honour, a Gold Medal for piano, and although destined for a career as a concert pianist, composition was his true calling. Medtner continued performing throughout his life, but with rare exceptions – he was a celebrated interpreter of Beethoven – played only his own works in public. Sergey Rachmaninov became a staunch supporter and loyal friend, and was largely responsible for introducing his music to audiences throughout Russia and abroad. Rachmaninov considered Medtner "the greatest composer of our time", and dedicated his *Fourth Piano Concerto* to him.

The year 1907 found the composer in Germany where many superb settings of Goethe, one of his favourite poets, were written: the *Twelve Goethe Songs, Op. 15* and *Six Poems of Goethe, Op. 18*. Among the poems originally considered was *Nachtgesang*, which Schubert had set in 1814. Sketches for a vocal version were made but, unsatisfied, Medtner fashioned them into an instrumental "song without words"; thus was born his first work for violin and piano, the *Three Nocturnes, Op. 16*. Goethe's poem, with its evocative reference to a stringed instrument, appears as a preface to the published score:

O lend, from your soft pillow,
Dreaming, half-an-ear!
To the playing of my strings
Sleep! What more do you want?

To the playing of my strings
The host of stars
Blesses eternal feelings;
Sleep! What more do you want?

Eternal feelings
Lift me, high and glorious,
Above the earthly tumult;
Sleep! What more do you want?

From the earthly tumult
You remove me,
You open the way to this coolness;
Sleep! What more do you want?

You banish me to this coolness,
Lending me an ear only in your dream.
Ah, on your soft pillow
Sleep! What more do you want?

(Translation by Maria Jerabek)

The three pieces, in D minor, G minor and C minor, are in A-B-A form, each building to an impassioned climax. Throughout, the composer's skill in motivic development is much in evidence. The prevailing sombre mood is relieved only, at the end of No. 3, by a coda in C major, a tonality which had religious significance for Medtner.

Given their première in 1909 by the composer and his violinist-brother Alexander (to whom they are dedicated), their success led to Medtner being invited to join the staff of the Moscow Conservatory.

The *Skazka*, generally translated as "Fairy Tale" ("Tale" or "Legend" is more accurate), was a form Medtner virtually made his own; the 38 for piano solo are among his best-loved works. *Fairy Tale, Op. 20, No. 1*, composed in 1909, was a particular favourite of the composer. In the key of B flat minor, it is compact, highly charged and dramatic, its passionate *fff* climax marked *con dis-perazione*. He once instructed a student to "begin it at once, impetuously … as though appealing to someone with a fervent entreaty". Jascha Heifetz's excellent transcription, dedicated to Horowitz, was published in 1949 and lacks none of the original's emotional impact.

In the decade before the Russian Revolution, Medtner lived a prosperous life, well-established in the world of music. The events of October 1917 changed all that. Dispossessed and suffering extreme hardships, Medtner and his wife were granted visas to leave Russia only in late 1921. They never returned, except for a brief concert tour in 1927. After unsuccessful attempts to establish a career in continental Europe, in 1935 Medtner settled in England, a country where he found many admirers. Around this time, the composer was greatly affected by the death of his elder brother, Emil. The two had been extremely close despite sharing a most unusual relationship: Medtner's wife Anna had been previously married to Emil. Medtner had always felt a certain guilt over his brother's failed marriage; his last and grandest work for violin and piano, *Sonata in E Minor, 'Epica', Op. 57*, bearing the dedication "To the memory of my brother Emil", was intended as both a homage and an act of atonement.

Completed in 1938, the obvious "Russian-ness" of the *Third Sonata* is due in part to Medtner's recent conversion to the Orthodox faith (he had been raised a Lutheran) and also his growing acceptance of permanent exile from Russia. A bleak *Introduzione* begins the first movement with alternating chords in the piano, a "motto" which recurs at telling moments. From this grows a mournful melody stated by the violin in double-stops, the Aeolian mode emphasizing a sense of sadness and despair. The movement proper is in strict sonata form, containing much vigorous material, extensively developed; in a concluding passage marked *Maestoso*, the introductory material is hauntingly restated. The *Scherzo* is folkloric, almost jazz-like, one of its themes surprisingly resembling a tango. The chordal "motto" ends this movement and begins the next, an *Andante* of heartbreaking beauty (again in the Aeolian mode), followed immediately by a short and robust variant of the *Introduzione*. The main body of the *Finale*, marked *Allegro eroico,* is filled with deliberate allusions to folk-dances and Orthodox liturgical chants; "the whole of Russia suddenly poured into me", remarked the composer of its inspiration. A canonic passacaglia dominates the central development, and only a dreamy *quasi cadenza* interrupts the headlong drive to life-affirming closing chords. Medtner and the British violinist Arthur Catterall gave the première of this magnificent work in London, just before the outbreak of World War II.

After the war Medtner resigned himself to a quiet life of composition and teaching. His conservative idiom was out-of-step with the times, critics were increasingly indifferent, and performances of his music grew fewer. A serious heart condition limited his own concert appearances. Unexpectedly, his fortunes took a turn for the better when an Indian prince, the Maharaja of Mysore, expressed a strong interest in Medtner's work. An unusually cultivated man and a fine pianist (as was his sister), the Maharaja was dismayed to learn of the composer's circumstances and founded a Medtner Society to promote and record Medtner playing his own works. Between 1947 and 1950 this extraordinary endeavour yielded a legacy which documents Medtner's magisterial playing and definitive interpretations. In gratitude, the composer dedicated his crowning achievement, the *Third Piano Concerto*, to the Maharajah. Medtner spent his last months confident that posterity would never forget him.

Paul Stewart, 2007

Laurence Kayaleh

This exceptional artist has performed as soloist in most prestigious world centres including Paris, Prague, Brussels, Zürich, Tokyo, Washington, Cleveland, Saint Louis, Sofia, Montreal, Bern, Caracas, Moscow, Modena and Geneva. She has appeared with distinguished orchestras such as the Zürich Tonhalle, the Russian National, the Lamoureux Symphony, the Cleveland Symphony, the National Symphony, the Saint Louis Symphony, the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra, the Montreal Symphony, the Basel Symphony Orchestra and the Mexico City Orchestra led by conductors of the calibre of Slatkin, Pletnev, Dutoit, Kogan, Venzago, Novak and Wakasugi. Recognised as "The Royal Bow" by world critics, she was awarded the Grand Prize at the Stresa International Competition and has been a guest artist at major world Festivals (Lucerne, Blossom, Cervantino, Ottawa). Selected as an honoured member of the "Who's Who Historical Society", Laurence Kayaleh plays a 1742 Guarnerius which belonged to the famous violinist and pedagogue, Carl Flesch. *Photo: Michael Slobodian*

Paul Stewart

Since his orchestral début with the Toronto Symphony in 1981, Paul Stewart has become one of Canada's busiest pianists, appearing frequently as guest soloist with major orchestras, in solo recital, and in collaboration with such artists as Maureen Forrester, Jessye Norman, Ben Heppner, James Campbell and James Ehnes. He is also one of the handful of pianists who champion the music of Nikolay Medtner, whose works he has performed on four continents. In 1996 he made two highly successful débuts: in London's Wigmore Hall with a programme of Medtner and Rachmaninov, and at the Moscow Conservatory, playing Rachmaninov's *Fourth Piano Concerto* with the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra, a performance subsequently released on an acclaimed CD. Other recordings include music by Beethoven, Schubert, Liszt, Ravel, Britten and Medtner (the *"Night Wind" Sonata*). In addition to his performing career Paul Stewart is a professor of piano at the Université de Montréal, Canada. *Photo: Janusz Sliwka*

NAXOS

MEDTNER: Violin Sonata No. 3 • Nocturnes

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If the piano works of Nikolay Medtner are finally achieving the recognition they merit, the same cannot yet be said for his compositions for violin and piano. This first of two discs of Medtner's five violin and piano works opens with his last and greatest work for these instruments, *Sonata No. 3, 'Epica'*, completed in 1938. Unashamedly Romantic and distinctly Russian with its frequent allusions to folk-dances and Orthodox liturgical chants, the *Sonata* reflects both Medtner's recent conversion to the Orthodox faith and his bitter acceptance of permanent exile from his homeland. This bleak and mournful work includes an *Andante* of heartbreaking beauty. The sombre yet impassioned *Three Nocturnes* were inspired by Goethe, one of the composer's favourite poets.

Nikolay MEDTNER

(1880–1951)

Complete Works for Violin and Piano • 1

	Violin Sonata No. 3 in E minor, Op. 57, 'Epica'	**46:34**
1	Introduzione: Andante meditamente –	3:01
2	Allegro	13:48
3	Scherzo: Allegro molto vivace e leggiero	7:06
4	Andante con moto	9:24
5	Finale: Allegro molto – Allegro eroico	13:08
	Three Nocturnes, Op. 16	**13:50**
6	Nocturne No. 1 in D minor: Andante con moto, sempre leggiero	4:50
7	Nocturne No. 2 in G minor: Largamente	4:46
8	Nocturne No. 3 in C minor: Moderato	4:13
9	**Fairy Tale, Op. 20, No. 1, in B flat minor (arr. Jascha Heifetz)**	3:14

Laurence Kayaleh, Violin • Paul Stewart, Piano

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