

Inaugural lecture 26/02/03

Medtner and the Muse

My first cursory encounter with Nikolai Karlovich Medtner as a student was a disappointment. At the time, though not long dead, and buried just a few miles from the Academy, he was virtually forgotten in the west and, although he had been politically rehabilitated in Russia, he remained a shadowy figure even there. My own teacher dismissed him as a note-spinner and I had heard a rumour that the great Sviatoslav Richter had looked at his work and pronounced it 'uninteresting'. It was then the fashion to glibly package composers in pairs: thus, books appeared on Haydn & Mozart, Bach & Handel, Bruckner & Mahler and so on. And I have to admit that the root of my disappointment lay in my discovery that Medtner was not much like Rachmaninov.. In retrospect, I realise that I probably misunderstood Rachmaninov almost as much. But my own blindness has in the end been to some degree helpful in that I now believe that it is in their differences that these two friends and colleagues can best be understood. That they were both staunchly conservative in a time of musical turmoil is almost too obvious to mention. But while Rachmaninov was in essence a nostalgic composer, Medtner was (at least by his own reckoning) evolutionary, even empirical. Consequently, while Rachmaninov was content to more or less ignore the radicalism which raged around him, Medtner railed against it as an affront to his most cherished and sincerely held beliefs.

He did not study composition at the Moscow Conservatory but only piano and, of course, the compulsory theoretical subjects; and his upbringing was not saturated with Tchaikovsky and the nationalists, but somewhat

independent of the prevailing ethos at the conservatory by reason of his family background. Although he angrily refuted suggestions that he was anything but Russian through and through, his family retained (either genetically or culturally) a lively interest and knowledge in the art of their by now distant German antecedents. Later in life, he claimed (and not entirely humorously) that he was 'Beethoven's pupil'. It was from this milieu that Medtner formed his vision of the role of the artist and subsequently of his own vocation as a composer. It was an essentially nineteenth century view of art as an ennobling higher purpose, and one which acknowledged the role of intervention from on high in both a religious sense and a pagan one; that is to say from God and from the muse of Greek mythology, more particularly as embodied in the works of Pushkin and Goethe. Hence the urge to pursue and fulfil his gifts took on a moral imperative to an extent that today, in our more pragmatic age, would be considered both self deluding and self indulgent ..if an artist must suffer (and consequently his family and friends who support him too) then so be it. It was this stubborn idealism that led him from an early age to abandon all commercial considerations by seldom agreeing to perform any music but his own and by resigning from stable employment teaching piano at the conservatory, thereby exciting both the admiration and exasperation of his friends. I am reminded of George Bernard Shaw's definition of a true artist as 'one who will let his wife starve, his children go barefoot, his mother drudge for his living at seventy, sooner than work at anything but his art'.

His Muse as he called it, must have been a persuasive siren indeed to sustain him unswervingly throughout a life which, from the point of his departure from Russia in 1921 (and, on occasion, even before that), was one of almost continuous rejection and near-oblivion when considered

alongside the immensity of his gifts. The repeated references to his Muse in his letters read quaintly rather than pretentiously and stem from his devotion to poetry, which again seems to have grown naturally from his upbringing. In his many songs he turned only to the greatest poets, overwhelmingly Pushkin, Goethe and Tyutchev but occasionally Fet, Heine or even Nietzsche, and never to the sentimental lyricists beloved by amateur salons which were still a feature of Moscow life in his youth. And many of the ideas he expressed about music seem to derive from these sources too. His first published composition was a dual setting, for piano (Opus 1) and for voice (Op.1a) of a poem by Mikhail Lermontov called *The Angel*. To give a very coarse précis, the poem tells of a man's soul roaming the earth in vain pursuit of a song to match that sung by the angel who bore him there from heaven. Although it numbers among a select band of near-perfect opus ones, the piece itself does not concern us here, except that by choosing this particular text Medtner seems (at the age of 20) to be already questioning the source of creative inspiration.

The idea of a 'closer alliance between music and poetry' was not new; it had been proclaimed in as many words by Liszt half a century earlier. But Medtner seems to have been drawn to great poetry not just as source of imaginative stimulus but also for its ability to distil the essence of thought and feeling in the simplest and most direct manner without abandoning the language of normal human interrelation. Simplicity was his goal but he recognised that it could often only be reached by a long and tortuous process. The grail for him was, in his own words, complexity which resolves itself into simplicity. Symbolism was meaningful only if it appeared in an apparently naïve state; if contrived it was an affectation. He liked to say that he composed more with an eraser than a pencil and in this respect we can see similarities of method and

purpose with his idol Beethoven whose sketches also reveal that natural simplicity was only achieved after long and hard struggle. The gestation period between the idea and its realisation in both composers can sometimes be measured in years, even decades. The dreamlike opening of one of Medtner's last works, the 3rd Piano Concerto, strikes the listener as a serene moment both of simplicity and of naïve symbolism, captured on the wing (again it takes its starting point from a poem by Lermontov). But he told a friend that this theme had come to him when he was nineteen years old but only now had it found its destiny. If 'destiny' seems a rather grandiose word, we should remember that Medtner maintained that 'a truly vital theme contains in itself, as in a kernel, the whole form of the composition'. The notion of Beethoven as his 'teacher' is more than pretension. Sergei Taneiev, the *éminence grise* of Moscow's musical elite at the time, respected by conservatives and modernists alike, remarked that 'Medtner was born with sonata form'. Form in itself is not difficult to learn and indeed can be no more than a crutch for an impoverished imagination, but what Medtner does seem to have learnt or inherited from Beethoven is altogether more unusual; that is a rare ability to mould and adapt those forms to the unfolding structural and dramatic exigencies of each particular work. His sonatas vary in duration from just six to over forty minutes; so clichéd taunts about new wine in old bottles are more than unfair. One critic, at a loss to describe the unique qualities of Medtner's music dubbed him 'the Russian Brahms, (Brahms himself had suffered the jibes of the contemporary modernist camp for his Beethovenian stance). It was a label that Medtner hated, striking as it did at both his individuality and his Russian credentials... But privately, he conceded some understanding of how it may have come about. After the premier of his monumental and tragic 1st Concerto, he wrote to a friend ... 'I believe that Brahms could never have dreamt of such music. I say

this not in a boastful sense – he is a fabulous master. Rather that my muse could be the sister or perhaps the daughter of Brahms's – I wouldn't argue with that.'

The obsessive references his 'muse' lead us to look with particular interest at his setting of Pushkin's poem with that very title – 'The Muse', Op.29 No.1, and indeed something curious emerges from it. At the words 'solemn hymns handed down from the gods', an incantational phrase with three portentous upbeats appears which occurs again and again at crucial junctures in Medtner's music. [*Illustrate*] ...in the slow introduction to the 2nd movement of his Sonata Ballade (said to represent the sojourn of John the Baptist in the wilderness), in the 1st movement of his massive 2nd Violin Sonata, and most tellingly in his most overtly religious work, the Piano Quintet.. and they can be heard again in more than one of the pieces I shall be playing later this evening.

Composers are usually loath to divulge the external stimuli which prompted this or that work, for the fairly obvious reason that it may invite a wholly inappropriate narrow and literal response from both listener and performer. Hence Rachmaninov never divulged publicly the pictures behind his Etudes-tableaux though we know they existed in his imagination both from his choice of title and from his correspondence with Ottorino Respighi who was to orchestrate some of them. It seems certain that Medtner, with his profound love of literature and his elevated view of art as an outlet for man's spiritual imagination, was particularly prone to such suggestion. Occasionally he gives clues by giving a title to his piano pieces or quoting a line from a poem. Only recently our own visiting professor, Alexander Satz, pointed out something which for years had escaped my notice – a thematic relationship between two of

Medtner's *Skazki* (Fairy Tales) and the 1st movement of his 2nd Concerto, which in turn suggests some programmatic connection. Medtner was not immune to Wagner, whose *leitmotifs* he interpreted through his own prism as 'the leitmotifs music itself, illuminated and developed by Wagner's genius'.

It may be that in time, some scholar will uncover in Medtner a system of codes and ciphers, both conscious and subconscious, such as Eric Sams unearthed some years ago in Schumann.

Eventually, he attempted (with immense effort) to set down his creed in a book 'The Muse and Fashion', in itself a heavily loaded title. It was written at a time when Medtner and his wife were living in France in extreme poverty and obscurity. Indeed, were it not for the intervention of friends such as Rachmaninov and the French organist and composer Marcel Dupré, they might well have gone under. I mention this only to point out that there are possibly external reasons for his state of mind beyond artistic outrage. In any case it was a largely pointless exercise to the world at large, because the battle between modernists and conservatives had long been won and lost.

If the book were no more than a polemic against modernism then it would make tedious reading indeed.. And there is much in it which seems self-serving or self-justifying. But Medtner's was a formidable mind and he was possessed with the obstinacy of purpose which marks both the genius and the zealot.. Hence his argument, his search for 'the eternal laws of music and art' led him to investigate the very heart of the matter. The deepest mysteries of music as the expression of the human spirit and the nature of inspiration – in fact those things which more conventional analysts shun like the plague. It was his contention that modern

radicalism was a contraction rather than an expansion of musical language, that the laws of harmony were not invented but deduced from the works of Bach, Beethoven and Wagner. This is why I said at the outset that his own music is not so much nostalgic as born of an unshakeable faith in the infinite possibility for renewal and rebirth in each generation of the fundamental laws of music. And by music he did not just mean the accumulated legacy of the great masters, but what he calls ‘its soil and roots in the most elemental forms of melody and harmony.’

However, to promote this idea as a rational argument was not so easy. He thought that he detected a fallacy, a false premise, in the defence of modernism which claims... ‘Great geniuses are nearly always misunderstood by their contemporaries therefore, if my music is incomprehensible, it is merely on account of my genius.’ Now this is not intellectual rocket science, in fact it’s little more than a twist on the playground logic that says ‘all cows are brown; this is brown; therefore it is a cow.’ But he strikes home with a few truisms that are harder to dispute – on the patent absurdity of encouraging young musicians to (as he puts it) create a new history of music each time they set pen to paper. And he points out, in the lofty manner of Dr Johnson, that discovery in all fields of knowledge is only important inasmuch as it uncovers something real, existing in itself and merely awaiting discovery. This accords with Medtner’s own experience or sensation of discovering themes and also their destiny, as mentioned already in connection with the 3rd Concerto.

Of far greater interest than the anti-modernism diatribe, are such insights into Medtner’s own philosophy and his thoughts on the purpose of artistic creation. To the hardened Medtnerite, it is not hard to see that much of it derives directly from his knowledge and interpretation of his

favourite poets. The text of Lermontov's poem *The Angel* which, as we have already seen, was the idea behind his first published compositions also forms the opening paragraph of the book. He further alludes to it throughout the book as an allegory for the composer's quest or vocation. Furthermore, the perfectly credible contention that the urge towards artistic creation stems from man's recognition of his individuality as a prison from which he can escape only by reaching out to the hidden sensibilities of his fellow men, finds many resonances in Pushkin and, especially, in Tyutchev who postulates a fundamental, atavistic instinct in man to express the inexpressible.

Another philosophical concept which surfaces time and again in these pages is of man's aspiration to make unity of the everchanging diversity of our world. It is a thought frequently encountered in Goethe and one familiar to Beethoven in particular. In a wider sense it is an ideal which has drawn the most rational of intellects towards God and one which has an obvious allegorical application to the process of composing music.

Here I stand talking about music, yet I could not agree more strongly with Medtner's own belief that (I quote) : "It is impossible to talk about music. It talks itself, and does so precisely at the moment when words fail."

He argues that music is a language that has evolved in much the same way as other languages have and always will evolve and, as such, depends on consensus as to the accepted meaning of its elements. To destroy or distort it in the interest of progress is tantamount to abandoning the entire vocabulary of everyday speech with all its conventions and

inflections in the hope that some great new thoughts will emerge from the ensuing Tower of Babel.

It was an ethos that was almost wholly opposed and derided in critical circles at the time of the book's publication (1935), a time when serious and gifted musicians gave up any notion of composing for fear that the language that was natural to them would invite ridicule, even accusations of moral infirmity; a time too when even a major radical of the 1920's Bela Bartók, was consciously trying to simplify his language to make it more accessible, only to earn the scorn of the avant-garde for pandering to the American public or 'losing his bottle' as we might say today. The fate of such a radical and independent thinker might have lent some support to Medtner's contention that the whole modernist movement was no more than a slavish addiction to fashion, but Medtner's ivory tower was by now so impregnable that he would almost certainly have been unaware of Bartók's problems. In his isolation, he would also have gained little comfort from Schoenberg's oft quoted statement that 'there is still good music to be written in C major'.

Many of the philosophical ideas which Medtner inherited from the poets have far more distant roots in ancient Greece and in Germany after the Age of Enlightenment. Although they often feature in the ramblings of dilettantes, their application to an evaluation of the art and science of music by a great creative musician is unique in my experience. It does not make for light reading; in fact it has been dismissed by people genuinely sympathetic to Medtner's work as abstruse and deeply boring. And I would not say that these charges are entirely without foundation, but I do find that it provides a challenging antidote to the analytical methodology

that has grown into such a monstrous industry in America and Western Europe over the past thirty years or so.

Why should our understanding of music be better served through analysis by symbolic association, deconstruction, schematic representation or any of the paraphernalia of late twentieth century criticism – than it might be by Medtner’s method of calm philosophical evaluation of the balance between intuition and mastery, unity and diversity, contemplation and action, repose and motion and by unashamedly subjective response to their emotional impact and clarity of expression in the ‘*ur*’-elements of song and ‘horizontal’ harmony ?? Should we understand music as human beings or as lawyers forever on guard for infringements of predestined ‘guidelines’ inevitably ordained by contemporary, often fleeting notions of propriety (which is more or less what Medtner meant by ‘fashion’).

I have never striven to ‘promote’ Medtner’s music because for many years I have felt confident that its worth is self-evident at least to the receptive ear. I have been lucky to have lived at a time when many of his younger friends and associates were still alive. Manoug Parikian, for instance, with whom I worked for some years had played the 2nd violin sonata with Medtner himself as a young man. And I was privileged to get to know Medtner’s pupil, friend and tireless supporter Edna Iles who died just a month ago. It was she who first told me one of Medtner’s favourite sayings which has somehow lingered in my memory... “Inspiration comes when thought is saturated in emotion; and emotion is imbued with sense.”

After many false dawns, it seems that his time may have come. Long out-of-print scores are being reissued and in some cases even re-edited. More

pianists are playing his works and, although I have never urged students to take him up, I find both here and abroad, that they do in increasing numbers which bodes well for his future. And this I feel is happening in a pleasingly natural way, without hype or strenuous PR so there is no bubble to burst. Whether he was simply a man born out of his time, a self-regarding egotist, a criminally neglected genius, a social misfit or King Canute trying forlornly to stem the tide of progress – none of this matters now. If cutting edge modernity were the touchstone of greatness, then Bach and Mozart would have to cede rank in the pantheon of composers to Gesualdo and Ives. Malcolm Boyd discerned in Medtner ‘a priestly quality which some find off-putting’. His aloofness from the real world probably had many causes. Recent revelations of early events in his personal life for which he felt need to atone may have played their part too. By all accounts, he died a very disappointed man, a figure of both pathos and dignity. In one of his last letters, written just ten days before he died, he describes himself as a foot soldier following in the steps of his leaders Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Bizet and Purcell. What an odd selection... but one which perhaps was intended to illustrate the limitless diversity and freedom permitted by the ‘eternal laws’.

Probably he should not have written the book, and left us to draw our own conclusions as to his beliefs and purpose. In its pages he insists that music is self sufficient and needs no explanation beyond itself. “The chaste artists of past centuries,” he wrote, “hid from the public all that belonged to the process of their creation, sharing with it only the results. All the concepts and senses of the musical language...stood in no need of being pushed forward as armaments defending the position of their authors.”

Finally, I return to one of Medtner's revered poets, Fedor Tyutchev who, in his poem *Silentium* says that 'a thought spoken is a thought defiled', likening the idea to a man who 'seeing a pebble shining in a stream' reaches into the water to grasp it but merely disturbs the mud and clouds the perfect image.

A good thought on which to stop talking and play some of Medtner's Skazki...

Recital Programme

Skazka in C sharp minor Op35 No4 *Allegro appassionato e tempestoso*

Prelude (Hymn) *Allegretto tranquillo* &

Skazka (The Beggar) *Narrante* (from *Romantic Sketches for the Young Op54*)

Skazka in C minor Op 8 No 2 *Recitato - Allegro*

Skazka in F minor Op 14 No 1 (Ophelia's Song) *Andantino con moto*

Skazka in E minor Op 14 No 2 (March of the Paladin) *Allegro marciale*

Skazka in G Op 9 No 3 *Allegretto vivo, odoroso*

Skazka in D minor (1915) *Allegretto abbandonamente*

Skazka in C Op 48 No 1 (Dance Tale) *Allegro risoluto* Note: Medtner's original Italian tempo indications, which are often mis-spelt or grammatically incorrect, have been preserved.