

GREGORY SMITH

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE ISSUES IN RUSSIAN PIANO MUSIC

PROGRAM NOTES TO ACCOMPANY THE RECITAL CDS

CONTENTS

Recital no. 1: The Russian Piano Miniature.....	1
Recital no. 2: The Russian Etude.....	4
Recital no. 3: Piano Music Displaying Extra-Musical Themes: Programmatic Music and the Russian Elegy.	8
Recital no. 4: The Russian Piano Sonata.....	13

RECITAL NO. 1
RUSSIAN PIANO MINIATURES

THURSDAY 21 JUNE 2001, 7 PM

ANATOL LIADOFF (1855-1914)

Prelude, opus 11 no.1

Prelude, opus 39 no.4

KONSTANTIN STEPANOVICH SOROKIN (born 1909)

Three Dances from the ballet *The Ugly Duckling* by Hans Christian Anderson
(Opus 30a)

(1) Minuet

(2) Sarabande

(3) Gavotte

Dance, opus 29 no.2

ALEXANDER SCRIABIN (1872-1915)

“Reverie” from 3 *Morceaux*, opus 49

Scherzo, opus 46

2 *Poèmes*, opus 32

(1) Andante cantabile

(2) Allegro. Con eleganza. Con fiducia.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

Six Moments Musicaux, opus 16

(1) Andantino

(2) Allegretto

(3) Andante cantabile

(4) Presto

(5) Adagio sostenuto

(6) Maestoso

DIMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

24 *Preludes*, op.34

No.2: *Allegretto*

No.5: *Allegro vivace*

No.9: *Presto*

No.10: *Moderato non troppo*

No.20: *Allegretto furioso*

“Nineteenth-century Russian composers demanded from their art an answer to the complicated and painful questions of existence. They wanted to understand themselves and their times. Art as an expression of the human spirit was an illusion, nor was art a direct spiritual acceptance of life.” — Andrey Olkhovsky.

Nineteenth-century Russia, in general, was divided by a desire to move Russian culture deeper into its own national identity (these people were labelled Slavophiles) or closer to that of the West (Westernisers). In music, the division is reflected more by the purpose of the music. The Slavophiles, who were mainly based in St. Petersburg, argued that music should essentially serve a social function and are generally represented by concrete depictions (Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Cui). On the other hand, composers (centred mainly in Moscow) such as Tchaikovsky, then later Scriabin and Rachmaninoff, share an ideology of “philosophical speculation”: “man’s struggles against the forces which restrain his aspiration towards happiness” (Olkhovsky).

Somewhere between these two groups lies composers such as Liadoff — a composer heavily rooted in the Western tradition (particularly Chopin). His music is introspective, but not as focused on personal struggle as Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninoff.

Liadoff was a student of Rimsky-Korsakov and later went on to teach harmony and composition at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. His students include Myaskovsky, Bortkiewicz, and Prokofiev. Liadoff had a reputation for laziness — as a student he was expelled from the conservatory for failing to attend lectures, and later he failed to complete Diaghilev’s commission for the *Firebird* ballet (which was then completed by Stravinsky).

Another ‘middle-ground’ composer, though of a slightly later period, was Konstantin Stepanovich Sorokin. Educated at the Moscow conservatory, Sorokin’s work as an editor for the Music State Publishing House (Moscow) resulted in an eclectic style highly influenced by the Western tradition. Particularly evident is the influence of French music on his harmony. Sorokin’s style, in the works in this program, appears not to have been influenced by the anti-formalist (i.e., against art for art’s sake) tendencies of the Soviet regime, which would have criticised the use of stylised dances, influence of the West, and lack of any Russian content. Sorokin’s other published compositions include a piano concerto, album of classical waltzes, and works for the young (including a set of twenty-four preludes and fugues for the young and a youth concerto). The *Three Dances* are from the ballet *The Ugly Duckling*. They were published in two piano form in 1963, and in their present form in 1966.

The music of Scriabin and Rachmaninoff (both educated at the same time at the Moscow conservatory) both share the philosophical sense of Tchaikovsky. The main difference between the music of Scriabin and Tchaikovsky (besides the fact that he hated Tchaikovsky’s music), was that Scriabin’s philosophy possessed a desire for resolution of the personal torment: a kind of spiritual ecstasy. Scriabin saw alcoholic intoxication as a physical imitation of a more sublime spiritual ecstasy. In 1900, he started planning an

opera. The libretto contained a hero (which was himself):

I am the magician of a powerful heavenly harmony, lavishing
caressing dreams on mankind. With the power of love I will make
life's springtime. I will find long-desired peace by the strength of
my wisdom.

The second of the opus 32 *Poèmes* is an idea from the opera — though the opera was not written down in a musical form.

One critic wrote that some of Scriabin's *Preludes* were "shorter than a sparrow's beak, briefer than a bear's tail". The *Scherzo* (op. 46) and the *Rêverie* (op. 49) fit into this category. They represent Scriabin's desire to create "the maximum expression with the minimum means". Faubion Bowers writes: "if a poem can be a quatrain and a sonnet can speak universal, total truth, why not a fourteen-measure piece or a prelude of four lines".

The *Moments Musicaux* of Rachmaninoff are expressed on a slightly larger scale. Rachmaninoff's lyrical self expression shares a closer link to the music of Tchaikovsky than Scriabin. He believed that "a composer's music should express the country of his birth, his love affairs, his religion ... it should be the sum of his total experience". The *Moments Musicaux* work particularly well as a cycle in representing a psychological mindset: from the outward distress of no. 2, to the frustration of no. 4, immediately followed by the introspective Db major (No. 5), this is all resolved in the C major finale. They possess what Sabaneyeff describes as the essential feature of the music of Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky: "drunken mysticism, ecstatic sensations against a background of profound pessimism permeating existence. It was not form or harmoniousness, or Apollonic vision that was demanded of music, but passion, feeling, languor, heartache."

In stark contrast to this are the *Preludes* of St. Petersburg educated Shostakovich. In contrast to the other piano-orientated composers of the program, Shostakovich tended to focus more on other genres. Matthew Rye writes that the *Preludes* "seem to have been written as a kind of relief after a series of large-scale dramatic works — film scores, theatrical music, and, most significantly, the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*". Experimenting in neoclassicism, the *Preludes*, written in 1932-3, possess "linear clarity, the play of melodic lines and harmonic complexes, of timbres and rhythms, an admirable facility in the invention of expressive ideas, all combined with vital emotionally picturesque content" (Olkovsky).

Though contrasting from the musical style of his predecessors, Shostakovich's music links with the St. Petersburg philosophy of music possessing a social role. It is interesting to note Olkovsky's observation that, despite the differences between the Moscow lyricists and the St. Petersburg nationalists and neoclassicists, they all possess an emphasis on 'understandable melody'. This melodic sense helped provide what Shostakovich was later to describe as music's "indivisible ties with the people and people's striving and interests" as composers' creativity was repressed in the later part of the Stalin regime.

RECITAL NO. 2
THE RUSSIAN ETUDE

MONDAY 25TH MARCH 2002, 7:30 P.M.

Serge Bortkiewicz 12 Etudes Nouvelles (illustees), op.29
 - No. 5: *Le Poete*
 - No. 6: *Le Heros*

Serge Rachmaninoff *Etudes-Tableaux*, op.33
 - No. 3: Grave
 - No. 4: Moderato
 - No. 7: Moderato
 Etudes-Tableaux, op.39
 - No. 2: Lento assai

Alexander Scriabin *Etude*, op.2, no.1
 Eight Etudes, op.42

Sergei Prokofiev *Etude*, op.2, no.2
 Etude, op.2, no.1

* * *

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians applies the term etude to “fairly short pieces whose principle aim is the development and exploitation of a particular aspect of performing technique”. The concept of works composed purely for the development of technique was strongly inbuilt into Russian musical education in the nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. Rachmaninoff described the course at the music schools supervised by the Imperial Music Society (this includes the Moscow and St. Petersburg Conservatories, where all four composers were educated as pianists):

Technic [*sic.*] is at first a matter of paramount importance. All students must become technically proficient. None are excused ... This course is nine years in duration. During the first five years the student gets most of his technical instruction from a books of studies by Hanon, which is used very extensively in the conservatories.

At the end of the fifth year an examination takes place ... If the pupil fails to pass the technical examination he is not permitted to go ahead...

Personally, I believe this matter of insisting upon a thorough technical knowledge is a very vital one ... The student's technical grasp should be all-embracing.

Later, the student is given advanced technical exercises, like those of Tausig. Czerny is also very deservedly popular.

However, technical gain is only one facet of the etudes of Bortkiewicz, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, and Prokofiev. Their personalities and careers give further insight into their individual concept of ‘etude’.

The works of **Serge Bortkiewicz** (1877-1952) have been largely neglected in the latter part of the twentieth century, partly because many of his published works were destroyed during World War II. Born in Kharkov, educated at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, then Leipzig, Bortkiewicz was an accomplished composer, pianist, teacher, and conductor. Later in his life, he became an Austrian citizen, worked at the Vienna Conservatory, and was of high enough repute to have a Bortkiewicz Society established in his honour in 1947.

Pianistic technique was of great importance to him. In his “Recollections”, he complains that his teacher in Leipzig, Reisenauer, “did not give any instruction or hints as to how a good and reliable technique could be acquired. With all the advantages of his teaching methods there was unfortunately a certain regrettable disregard of technical problems.” It is also no surprise that he includes a left-handed *Etude* in the set (*Le Poete*), seeing the previous opus number in his catalogue is his second Piano Concerto, for the left hand.

Hans Ankiewicz-Kleehoven (the founder of the Bortkiewicz Society) described Bortkiewicz:

a proud upright attitude and his always evident dignified earnestness, which he at times softened with a friendly smile, but hardly ever with a merry laugh. As with so many other Slavs, a gentle melancholy also formed a basic feature of his character, which also echoes in his music and gave it a special charm. The minor keys were closer to him than the major ones. But since he also possessed an intellect and an almost French esprit, as it were, he was also successful in full, especially living melodies...

Bortkiewicz’s somewhat retrospective style (this set of Etudes was written in the 1920s) is representative of his view that art in general had decayed since the “golden age” of Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky. His philosophy was that “One should not see as much as possible but observe, take time, consider, digest the impression”. He rejected cinema and believed that

what one produces oneself, for example, on the piano, while trying to analyse and study a piece of music, even if it sounds terrible, is worth more than the hundreds of hours that one spends at the radio, until music, deprived of any meaning ... becomes nauseating ... The wonderful goddess of music has become a worn out prostitute!

Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) shared Bortkiewicz’s disregard for “false art”. Rachmaninoff stated that “My constant desire to compose music is actually the urge within me to give tonal expression to my feelings, just as I speak to give utterance to my thoughts.” This intense expression is clearly conveyed in the *Etudes Tableaux*. In the months before writing the second set of *Etudes Tableaux*, Rachmaninoff had become increasingly anxious about death. He told a friend in 1915:

I have never wanted immortality personally. A man wears out, grows old; under old age he grows fed up with himself. I have grown fed up with myself even before old age. But if there is something beyond, then that is terrifying.

It is perhaps for this reason that the Op.29 No.2 etude is based around the *Dies Irae* figure that appears in so many of Rachmaninoff’s works.

Despite the fact that the etudes are labelled *Etudes Tableaux* (“Study Pictures”), Rachmaninoff preferred not to reveal the extra-musical sources. He believed that listeners “should paint for themselves what [the music] most suggests”. According to Riesemann, Rachmaninoff revealed that Op.33 No.8 was inspired by a Böcklin painting on depicting “Morning”. When Respighi orchestrated some of the etudes, Rachmaninoff revealed that Mme. Rachmaninoff had suggested the op.39 no.2 etude was representative of “Sea and Seagulls”.

Contrary to the definition of the etude provided by the Grove Dictionary, Rachmaninoff’s etudes do not so much focus on one technique, but a quest for Rachmaninoff’s goal: musical perfection. Rachmaninoff made a strong distinction between composer-pianists and pianists, believing that composer-pianists had a greater ability for detecting the overall shape of the work and a greater sensitiveness for musical colouring. Barrie Martyn describes Rachmaninoff as a performer:

Though Rachmaninoff was a perfectionist and worked hard to achieve an unerring technique, he used the piano primarily as a vehicle by which to achieve a realisation (sic.) of a particular view of a piece as he had seen it in his composer’s mind. Thus, all his performances were a composition within themselves.

Remarkably, the characteristics of Rachmaninoff’s playing, as described by Abraham Chasins, seem to coincide with what the *Etudes-Tableaux* aim to achieve: “melodic eloquence and dramatic virtuosity” and “his way of orchestrating chords with a special beauty through individual distribution of balances and blendings”.

Scriabin’s (1871-1915) playing possessed a similar regard for colour. Yet his approach to performance was considerably more flexible. Whereas Rachmaninoff was concerned with a carefully planned, “overall picture” for the composition, Scriabin was far more spontaneous. He believed “a composition is many faceted ... alive and breathes on its own. It is one thing today, another tomorrow, like the sea. How awful it would be if the sea were the same every day”. Grigori Prokofiev commented that “he captivates his audience, too, by giving the impression of improvising. He breaks the rhythmic flow and something new comes out each time”.

The style of the Op.2 No.1 *Etude* (which Scriabin wrote when he was fourteen) is considerably more Chopinesque than his later works. However, certain characteristics are still present, such as the interlocking of thumbs and reliance on phrase repetition as a means of continuity. By his middle period works, such as the Opus 42 *Etudes* (1903), Scriabin’s overall focus had shifted dramatically to encompass his philosophy of creating a new world order. He wrote “I am the magician of a powerful heavenly harmony, lavishing caressing dreams on mankind ... I am the apotheosis of world creation, the aim of aims, the end of ends”. He then started referring to that “godly” side of himself as “HE”: “HE is great, though I am at times poor, little, weak, and weary. But you forgive me all this because HE lives within me. I am not yet HE, but soon I will become HE.” So Scriabin’s compositional purpose became to grow closer to becoming “HE”. Scriabin said “I don’t know anything I can’t express at the piano, and from these different expressions I can build an entire system as an inner entirety or whole”. Certain

characteristics of Scriabin's style are evident in the op.42 etudes. Bowers describes:

Looking at Scriabin's compositions, we see at every turn how he worked for non-piano effects, to make the piano a kind of celestial orchestra of unearthly sounds. His first task was, invariably, how to defy the piano's laws - how to keep its evanescent tone from dissipating into the air ... Scriabin constantly dense extended figurations to prevent this ... He strove to remove the human coefficient from music, so that all that was left would be the purest, blinding, most radiant light.

So in effect, Scriabin's *Etudes*, while each are focused on technical difficulties, are not so much etudes to achieve a better technique, but more importantly, etudes in preparation for becoming "HE".

The *Etudes* of Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) were not written with the purpose of creating a "new world order". Written in 1909, the set of four etudes was dedicated to his ex-piano teacher Winkler "to commemorate the time I had spent in his class". Prokofiev had a disregard for "conventional" composers in the repertoire. He commented that "they say one cannot give a piano recital without playing Chopin, and I am going to prove that one can". In reference to Mozart's music he said "What primitive monotonous harmony". Victor Seroff describes his piano playing at the time:

Unwilling to dispense with his own sweeping and bold, but far from accurate style of playing, he also often disregarded the composer's text in pieces he was studying, omitting what he considered 'superfluous', or writing into the score accents, *accelerandos*, and *staccatos*, as well as introducing extra notes into the chords, thus altering them harmonically.

Perhaps, then, for the young Prokofiev, the concept of composing etudes is not so much a desire for attaining pianistic perfection, as with Rachmaninoff and Bortkiewicz, or individual perfection, as with Scriabin, but more of an attempt to "rewrite" the previously esteemed values of eighteenth and nineteenth-century pianism and replace it with his own, rhythmic, harmonically bolder, "scherzando" style.

RECITAL NO. 3
PROGRAMMATIC MUSIC AND THE RUSSIAN ELEGY

5 AUGUST 2002, 7 P.M.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

The Seasons (opus 37 bis)

No. 1 - *January: At the fireside*

"A little corner of peaceful bliss, the night dressed in twilight; the little fire is dying, and the candle has burned out" (Pushkin)

No. 2 - *February: Carnival*

"At the lively Mardi Gras soon a large feast will overflow" (Vyasamsky)

No. 4 - *April: Snowdrops*

"The blue, pure snowdrop-flower, and near it the last snow drops. The last tears over past grief's and first dreams of another happiness" (Maykov)

No. 9 - *September: Hunting*

"It is time! The horns are sounding! The hunters in their hunting dress are mounted on their horses; in early dawn the borzois are jumping" (Pushkin)

No. 10 - *October: Autumn Song*

"The fall, falling down on our poor orchard, the yellow leaves are flying in the wind" (Tolstoy)

No. 12 - *December: Christmas*

"Once upon a Christmas night the girls were telling fortunes: taking their slippers off their feet and throwing them out the gate" (Shurovsky)

Anton Stepanovich Arensky (1861-1906)

Elegy in G minor (no. 16 from 24 *Characteristic Pieces*, op.36)

Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Elegy, opus 3 no.1

Nikolay Karlovich Medtner (1880 [*Western Calendar*] - 1951)

Tales

Opus 34 no.2

"When we have called a thing ours, It departs from us forever" — Tyutchev

Opus 42 no.1 ("Russian folktale")

Opus 20 no.1

Opus 34 no.4

"There lived in the world a poor knight" — Pushkin

It may seem, at first glance, a little strange to group programmatic works with two elegies, but on closer inspection, all the composers in this program have one predominant similarity: their regard of music as a very personal, very highly regarded form of expression.

It is too easy to dismiss Tchaikovsky's *Seasons* as simple nineteenth-century miniatures aiming only to please the amateur market. It is true that this is the market they were originally designed for: in 1875 Nikolay Bernard, the editor of *Nouvelliste*, commissioned a series of twelve piano pieces to be published each month of the year. Bernard also chose the epigraphs to provide the reader with some stimuli. It is also too easy to look at the comparatively simple pianistic style to dismiss them as salon music. Yet David Brown, after criticising the works, reluctantly admits, many of these works must have prompted "many a dewy-eyed response in many a drawing room". It is this power of Tchaikovsky's music to move virtually any listener that distinguishes Tchaikovsky's music from his lesser contemporaries: this is where the "extra dimension" to program music comes into play.

The most basic level of experience, both from the listener's and the performer's perspective, is the the written program. All the texts chosen try to create images of Russian culture. The Five (such as Mussorgsky, Borodin, Cui, Balakirev, and Rimsky Korsakov) embarked on similar attempts to "capture" Russian culture in music. Yet their depiction of the programs were more realist (i.e., the purpose of the music being purely to create the atmosphere of the program). Tchaikovsky, on the other hand, adds an additional human element to the music. His works possess all the charm and warmth of his personality. Konstantin di Lazari, a close friend, described that

it was impossible not to love him. From his youthful appearance and wonderful eyes with their profound expression, everything about him created insuperable attraction, most of all his touching kindness and humility ... No one was more capable of treating everyone sincerely and sweetly; no one's view of people had such a childlike purity and radiance. Conversation with him made everyone feel a certain warmth...

January, April, and December in particular show this side of Tchaikovsky's personality.

On listening to *October*, the listener can't help but get the impression that there is more to the work than mere imagery of leaves falling in an orchard as suggested by the text. Here a darker side of Tchaikovsky's sensitive personality becomes evident. In a letter to his brother Modest, Tchaikovsky wrote (in 1876, the year *The Seasons* were written): "It is also true that my damned homosexuality creates an unbridgeable chasm between me and most people. It imparts my character an estrangement, a fear of people, immoderate timidity, mistrustfulness, in short, a thousand qualities whereby I am growing more and more unsociable". While Tchaikovsky was not on the whole unhappy about his sexual preferences, the intolerance of the surrounding society — forcing Tchaikovsky to suppress his desires — at times had effects on Tchaikovsky's nerves. This expression found an outlet in his music — most obviously in his large scale works (particularly the Fourth and Sixth Symphonies), but the intensity is still contained in *October*.

Even though the works in *The Seasons* may be simply structured in ternary form and possess a relatively simple musical style, they are more than mere programmatic works. The literary program actually becomes secondary to Tchaikovsky's honest, direct emotion. In fact, as suggested by Bolstein, the simple musical approach enhances the emotional effect, as the economy of thematic material enables the listener (importantly, including the amateur) to easily "tap into" these emotions. Similarly, Tchaikovsky also gives extra dimension to the style of Russian music: unlike the previous attempts by the Five, which merely try to reproduce the Russian style, Tchaikovsky (almost subconsciously, it seems) uses both his Western training and Russian Culture as tools to express his passionate emotion — this is particularly seen in "October".

This need to express passionate emotion is the link to the Russian elegy. Arensky wrote the g minor *Elegy* (op.36) in 1894, at which time he was a professor in harmony, orchestration, and composition at the Moscow Conservatory. His students included Rachmaninoff, Medtner, Scriabin, Goldenweizer, and Grechaninov. While little is known of the circumstances of the *Elegy*, descriptions of his personality suggest a similar "refuge" in music as a means of coping with the outer world. Tchaikovsky described Arensky as "strange, unstable, and he is nervous unto sickness", while a student, Mikhail Bukinik, described the composer as "nervous, with a wry smile on his clever, half Tartar face, always joking or snarling. All feared his laughter and adored his talent."

Rachmaninoff dedicated his *Five Morceaux*, opus 3, to his teacher Arensky. This set opens with the *Elegy*, and also includes the famous C# minor *Prelude*. At the time, Rachmaninoff had recently graduated from the Conservatory and was trying to find success as a freelance composer. He was having financial difficulties and was complaining of illness. A letter to Natalia Skalon provides insight into his state of mind at the time:

...my soul bears a large burden of grief ... Actually, all my relatives seem agreed on killing me and laying me in my coffin — not intentionally, of course, but simply through circumstances. My closest relatives console me in this way: my father lives a most senseless life; my mother is gravely ill; my older brother accumulates debts that God alone knows how he is to repay (in the present circumstances little hope can be placed on me); my younger brother is terribly lazy and is sure to be stuck for another year in his grade; my grandmother is at the point of death...

... People often tell me ... throw off this melancholy — at your age and with your talent, it's a shame. But everyone forgets that besides being (perhaps) a talented musician, I am also a man, like everyone else, demanding from life the same things that others do.

So for Rachmaninoff, the elegy serves as a direct expression of his disenchantment with his personal life.

A close friend of Rachmaninoff was Nikolay Medtner. However, their relationship was not merely one of friendship — they also shared a similar philosophy on music. Both of them were "retrospective" in their style and shared a high value for

the worth of art. While in Berlin in 1921, Medtner described to Rachmaninoff “a true defence in my heart of that intimate core from which alone, in my view, can arise any artistic activity and which sinks into the earth beneath me with every bruising encounter with this alien atmosphere, or worse still, with the so-called marketplace or fashion, depriving me of any ground under me at all.” To this, Rachmaninoff replied: “As for the estrangement you feel, I must say that I feel it here [America] too... I see very few real and sincere musicians around! It seems you may be the only one left”.

Medtner had such a high regard for the value of art that he stated that

It is bad when an artist loses faith in art, that is, the kind of faith I, for example, only understand a man having in God when he feels him absolutely distinctly in his heart and does not recognise Him as some images beyond the clouds. That is how an artist must believe in art...

Medtner actually believed that to compose was the “justification of his whole life”. It is therefore not surprising that Medtner, despite living in financially difficult situations at times, was more concerned with his artistic ideals.

Success itself ... gives me no satisfaction at all, despite its undoubted practical results [*i.e., money*] ... precisely because it is practical and not to do with ideals ... This may sound very pretentious but, as I see it, however insignificant an artist may be, provided that he really is an artist, for him his ideals are the most precious thing he has.

Medtner’s *Tales* encompass his ideals. While the common title given to Medtner’s *Tales* in the Western world is *Fairy Tales*, they are actually not associated with children’s fairy tales at all. Rather, as Boris Asafyev describes, they “are tales about personal experiences, about the conflicts of man’s inner life.” This explains the lack of any written “program” in the opus 20 no.1 *Tale*. Medtner once described that this *Tale* must “begin at once, impetuously, with a rush, as though appealing to someone with a fervent entreaty”.

The *Russian Folktale* was first conceived in Russia, but notated in 1924 when Medtner was in France after escaping the harsh realities of communist Russia. Yet, having left Russia, Medtner felt alienated, and needed Russia for creative stimulus. He later wrote that “If I don’t surround myself with Kremlin walls against every outside circumstance, I shall really do nothing more ... If a bird in a cage breaks its wings against the roof and sides, even if set free, it will still not fly...”.

The opus 34 no. 4 tale has the epigraph “there lived in the world a poor knight”. This is the opening line of a poem by Pushkin describing a “paladin who, having devoted his life to serving the Mother of Christ, is finally rewarded by being admitted into Heaven” (Barry Martyn, *Medtner*). Interestingly, of the latter half of the program, this *Tale* is the only work that actually resolves the sentiment of the work in a positive light. This proves even further that the works in the program were not designed merely with the intent of being pleasant salon music — surely they play too much on the listener’s emotions for this to be the case. The emotions created are not founded in a desire to win over the audience with dramatic gestures — the very unfounded, commercial dramatic gestures that Medtner renounced. Rather, the works reflect the sensitive personalities of the composers reacting to the often unsettled surroundings of the time.

RECITAL NO. 4
THE RUSSIAN PIANO SONATA

10th DECEMBER 2002

ALEXANDER BALTIN (born 1931): *Sonatine*

DMITRY KABALEVSKY (1904-1987): *Sonata No. 3* (opus 46)

ALEXANDER SCRIABIN (1871-1915): *Sonata No. 9: “Black Mass”* (opus 68)

NIKOLAY MEDTNER (1880 [new calendar]-1951): *Sonata in G minor* (opus 22)

* * *

THE SONATA CONCEPT IN RUSSIA

When studying the development of the sonata in Russia, it is important to remember that before Glinka, Russia’s musical life was largely reliant on visiting foreigners. One of these was Johann Hässler (1747-1822), who moved to Russia in 1792. He wrote a substantial number of sonatas and sonatinas. Not surprisingly, these were similar to those being written in the West at the time.

Even after musical life in Russia had become more established in the second half of the nineteenth-century, composers were generally not particularly interested in the sonata as a genre. For example, Mussorgsky wrote a sonata as a student, but it was never published in his lifetime. He and the rest of the Five were, in general, more interested in tapping into the Russian musical heritage. It was the more “cosmopolitan” oriented composers — such as Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky, and Glazunov — that continued to explore the sonata genre. The following generation, at the height of the Russian Silver Age, really began to significantly mould the sonata to reflect their personal language — less strongly tied to the sonatas of the West. Arguably, the Russian Romantic sonata reached its peak with these composers — including Rachmaninoff and Medtner. More forward looking composers, such as Scriabin, Prokofiev, and Kabalevsky also moulded the sonata to suit their musical language.

What the sonatas (and sonatinas) do reflect in today’s program is not only each composer’s different conception of the genre, but an insight into the primary driving force behind the composer’s musical language, whether that be political or philosophical.

SONATINAS AND SONATAS IN SOVIET RUSSIA: BALTIM AND KABALEVSKY

“Soviet composers have no right to be non-political, hiding themselves away from the present in their personal little worlds. We do not need composer supermen separated from the common cause which constitutes the life of the whole Soviet people.”

— Lenin

The sonata, as a genre, goes against the very principle of Soviet music: that art not be written for arts sake. Unless a program is attached, it is incapable of containing “socialist realism” and thereby is completely formalist. As a result of this policy, there was a major decline in the amount of music written for piano in the decade following the 1917 Revolution. After the dissolution of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) in 1931, there was a renewed interest in writing for the piano. Even then, limitations were placed upon them. Soviet policy rejected art which was saturated “with gloom, pessimism, and disillusionment with life” (Resolution of 1946). As a result, as the musicologist Olkhovsky points out, composers tended to “employ a simplified classical texture, and to lay particular stress on an objective “lyricism” and tone of forced cheerfulness ... [this music] bore no relation to the emotionalism and dramatic fervour which had previously been the characteristic of Russian piano music.” This style can be seen in Baltin’s Sonatine (1955) and Kabalevsky’s Sonata No. 3 (1946).

Baltin’s style resembles earlier Soviet composers: particularly Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Kabalevsky. This can partly be attributed to his education and Soviet policy. Baltin wrote the Sonatine while a student at the Moscow Conservatory. This institution (among others) had been criticised several years before (1948) for their “formalistic tendencies”. “Students are not inculcated with the respect for best traditions of Russian and Western classical music ... The creative output of many students of our conservatories consists of blind imitation of the music of Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and others” (Resolution of 1948). However, too much blame should not be put on either the teachers or the students, as in 1947 Asafiev wrote “There are composers who fight rigidly and sternly for sharp individualist principles and tastes, for a personal “sediment” in invention so as not to be repetitious, not to resemble anyone, and to speak only in a personal idiom. Such composers ought to think hard about their future creative development.” In a time of such confused expression, it is no wonder that students preferred the safe, tried and tested, alternative.

Kabalevsky’s music was received quite well both in Soviet Russia and the West. The state awarded him a Medal of Honour in 1941 to recognise his musical achievements (the year after he joined the communist party). Kabalevsky accepted the principles of socialist realism, and promoted these in his compositions and articles in journals. He believed that “tragedy is not the sphere of art adapted to the main features that are characteristic of our country’s life and the spirit of our composition.” Rather, the spirit of Russian music should be “the strength of ideological conviction, of intellect, feeling, and will ... the firm belief in the future and revolutionary aspiration ... born of the Soviet outlook.” For Kabalevsky, traditionally formalist music — such as the sonata — could

still be composed and moulded to fit the communist ideology. Kabalevsky stated that “no limits are set to Socialist realist art”. He believed that works should be “connected with the image of the contemporary man, his rich inner life, and clear optimistic outlook of the the future”. His Third Sonata does reflect this optimism — with its pleasant lyricism, occasionally interrupted with episodes of aggression, which could be seen more positively as expressions of the strength characteristic of the ideal Soviet society. Kabalevsky was one of the few composers of the era who successfully managed to merge Soviet ideology with clever composition. He is, as Olkovichovsky describes, one of Soviet music’s “evil geniuses”.

MUSIC AND MYSTICISM — SRIABIN

“The soul must exploit its creative ability (opposition), that is, must intoxicate itself with creativity before it can return to a state of peace.”

— Scriabin

Scriabin once stated that “holy men today are ignorant magicians, having forgotten their magic.” He saw music as a way of rekindling those powers. When performing the ninth sonata, Scriabin said that he was “practising sorcery” while playing it. This is representative of Scriabin’s search for ecstasy in music: to “life [the mind] outside or above merely physical sensations into the region of purely abstract ecstasy and purely intellectual speculation.”

Scriabin’s friend Alexi Podgaetsky gave the Sonata its title “Black Mass”. Black Masses were practised in pre-Revolutionary, Rasputin Russia. Sadism and cannibalism were practised. Nikolai Sperling, a friend of Scriabin, drank human blood of the wounded and ate the human flesh of soldiers at the front during the war in an effort to derive mystical experience.

Scriabin’s means of exploring mysticism was through harmonic and pianistic colour, rather than through such extreme measures. Despite the new harmonic language and rhythmic and textural complexities, the Sonata No. 9 is surprisingly tied to the traditional sonata model: it’s in sonata form, and still uses the traditional four-bar periodicity.

A SEARCH FOR SPIRITUALITY

Musicologist Alfred Swann wrote of Medtner’s music: “those who approach a work of art in an exterior and modish frame of mind, looking merely for exciting novelty, nerve-racking stimulants, and a dose of flattery to prevailing fashions, will be completely disappointed. But to those who are ready to shake off all accretion and look straight for the infallible principles of great art, Medtner will be a revelation.”

Medtner's musical language is an intense one. It is detailed in its harmonic, contrapuntal, and thematic constructions. His compositional process was a slow one, but consistent. Medtner once wrote: “Perhaps you find me guilty of being obsessed with myself and my compositions ... But ... however meagre my livelihood may be, it is

my only livelihood, for apart from my music, apart from what I do in it, I am absolutely nothing.” He also wrote that “consistency in work is just as important as in love, as in prayer.” Robert Rimm adds that “by communing daily with his craft and stretching his abilities in the service of an internal moral guidance, he fostered the means for inspired creativity.”

His Sonata in g minor (completed 1909/10?; first performed March 1910) is a fine example of this careful compositional process. The sketches for the first subject actually date back to 1901 and was planned as a three-movement violin sonata. It then developed into a “Concerto-Sonata” for solo piano. This was later abandoned as Medtner decided to include the f minor Prelude (a work from his student days) as an interlude in the development. It took Medtner three more versions for the composition to reach its final stage. The introduction was not added until after the rest of the sonata was completed.

The inclusion of an “interlude” in the development of a one movement sonata goes against the very principle of development in traditional sonata form. Traditionally, the development serves to create tension through thematic development, leading to an “expected” recapitulation. In many respects, the interlude gives more meaning to the surrounding drama. The intensive build up becomes more psychological, followed by silence, followed by a baron interlude which Barrie Martyn describes as “a profound spiritual questioning”. Other clues that Medtner is conscious of the emotional shape of the work are found in his expressive markings. Indications such as “awakening”, “full of pain, crushed”, and his description of the second subject as “timid” all indicate Medtner’s attention to detail.