

## NIKOLAI MEDTNER

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Nikolai Medtner was born in Moscow on 5 January 1880, although according to the Julian calendar his birth was on Christmas Eve 1879. He was one of five children.

At first, he had piano lessons with his mother and then entered the Moscow Conservatory studying with Pablo Pabst (who wrote a very fine piano concerto), Sapolinikoff, Safanov and Sergei Tanayev who was a good friend to him and a loyal support.

Medtner fell in love with Anna, a fine violinist, who had married his brother, Emil. Emil was interned in Germany during the First World War and his future was uncertain. He gave permission for Nikolai to marry Anna which event took place in 1918.

Rachmaninov secured a concert tour for Medtner in the USA and Canada in 1924 and it appears that in all his concerts Medtner only played his own music sometimes with interludes of some of his songs being performed or one of his three violin sonatas. It is interesting to note that all his works included a piano part. Most of his works were published in Germany.



It has been said that he only performed his own works because they were the only ones he knew and because no one else was playing them.

He certainly had a following in the UK and settled in London in 1936 where he engaged in some teaching but was not very good at it, played in a few concerts and had a strict routine about composing. He took years over some compositions such as the Sonata in G minor Op 2 which took nine years which may explain why the style changes throughout the work making the piece disjointed or a hybrid. His Piano Concerto no 2 took seven years. His Violin Sonata no. 1 took six years. Three years were expended on the Sonata-Ballade Op 27 (1912 to 1914) and his two sonatas Op 53 took four years. His Sonata in F minor Op 5 took eight years.

He seems to have come to some fame by his pieces called Fairy Tales. Why the adjective fairy is used one cannot say since the pieces are tales, stories or narratives. Like Scriabin, he had an agenda to make some of his music autobiographical.

In 1943, a Medtner Society was founded in London by His Highness Jayachamaraja Wodeyar Bahadur, the Maharajan of Mysore. Now he was a musician and wanted all of Medtner's works to be recorded and approached Benno Moiseiwitsch who was not interested and did not like the music.

By now, Medtner was suffering from poor health. His pupil, Edna Iles helped to look after him at her home in Warwickshire where he completed his third and final piano concerto dedicating it to the Maharajah.

Nikolai Medtner died at his home, 69 Wentworth Road, Golders Green, London on 13 November 1951. He is buried in Hendon cemetery.

His works include

- Piano Concerto no. 1 in C minor Op 33 (1914-1918)
- Piano Concerto no. 2 in C minor Op 50 (1920-1927)
- Piano Concerto no 3 in E minor (Ballade) op 60 (1940 - 1943)
- Violin Sonata no. 1 in B minor Op 2 (1904-1910)
- Violin Sonata no, 2 in G Op 44 (1922-1925)
- Violin Sonata no. 3 in E minor Op 57 (Epica) (1935 - 1938)
- Piano Quintet Op. post
- Piano Sonatas
  - B minor (1897) (unpublished)
  - G Minor (1898)
  - F minor Op 5 (1895- 1903)
  - Sonata Tirade Op 11 (1904-1907)
    - A flat
    - D minor (Elegy)
    - C
  - G minor Op 2 revised (1901-1910)
- Two Sonatas Op 25
  - Sonata-Fairy Tale in C minor
  - Sonata-Night Wind E minor
- Sonata -Ballade in F sharp op 27 (1912-1914)
- A minor Op 30 (1914)
- Sonata reminiscena A minor Op 38
- Sonata tragica in C minor
- Two Sonatas Op 53 (1929- 1930)
  - romantica B flat minor
  - miniaciosa F minor
- Sonata -Idyll Op 59 (1940-1941)
- Songs all with piano

The great pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin has said the Medtner's music is not so generous in melody as that of Rachmaninov. Many have likened it weaknesses to the examples of Chopin and Scriabin which may be unfair as some of his music is vastly superior to those composers.

Murray McLachlan, another pianist for whom I have respect, has highlighted the Piano Concerto no 1 and the Sonata romantica as just two examples of works of great beauty.

Most musicians have said that Medtner's music is thin and anaemic and that he is not a romantic composer but an impressionist as was Scriabin. He does not have themes that are easily recognisable or memorable but his supporters advocate that we give him a chance for his music may grow on us.

Clearly Medtner's music sadly lacks the brilliance and beauty of Rachmaninov with his gorgeous themes, coherent musical structure, durability and soul satisfaction. Medtner's music is nothing like this and has been called the poor man's Rachmaninov which may, or may not, be fair.

Some have said that Medtner's music appeals to performers rather than anyone else. It is not so good to listen to. Again this may, or may not, be fair.

My friend, the late Richard Noble, knew Medtner and spoke of him lacking knowledge of the piano and music world and that he admitted to being a lazy composer like Chopin.

However, it is for us to judge Medtner's music and determine whether it has worth and of what quality.

(Most of this article was given as a talk in 1990 in a series of talks about Russian composers given by the author. It has been briefly updated in 2011)

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