

## FRIENDSHIP OF WELL-KNOWN AND UNDESERVEDLY FORGOTTEN MASTERS IN LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RUSSIAN PIANO MUSIC. THE LIFE AND WORK OF MEDTNER, RACHMANINOFF, AND Scriabin

ESZTER SZABÓ<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY.** In this study, I explore the life and work of three outstanding pianists and composers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century: Medtner, Rachmaninoff, and Scriabin, who were not only contemporaries and colleagues but also supportive friends to each other. All three were largely influenced by their years at the Moscow Conservatory, where they became prominent pianists and first showed promise as composers. They received similar impulses and could learn from the same teachers. As a defining common element in their lives, they explored and strived to combine Russian musical traditions and Western classical music. At the same time, their different personalities are apparent from their music, so despite their common roots, their individual musical language is unmistakable. Even at the beginning of their careers, it was clear that despite the commonalities, their lives and careers took a different direction. All three tried their luck abroad, but only Scriabin returned home for the rest of his short life. In addition to their distinct life paths and musical language, their recognition is quite different. Scriabin's name sounds familiar to many, but he does not belong to the most popular composers of our time. Rachmaninoff's widespread popularity can be observed among professional musicians as well as the public. In contrast, it is not impossible to meet a professional for whom Medtner's music is unknown. This is not necessarily explained by disparities in talent and abilities but rather by differences in circumstances, opportunities, and personalities. In this study, I attempt to shed light on the reasons for the three composers' contrasting popularity from the perspective of their life and work.

**Keywords:** Russian composers, Russian music, Late 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Medtner

---

<sup>1</sup> MA student, Franz Liszt Academy of Music, Budapest. Contact: esztisz1997@hotmail.hu

## **Developments in Russian art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Russian art quickly came to the forefront of global culture. During this period, social and intellectual development in Russia accelerated significantly, which was traceable in all areas of culture. Individual artists and different artistic groups set the goal of not only understanding but also contributing to the questions raised and answers provided by Western schools of art. Almost everyone rebelled against what was considered as old-fashioned, but this never meant a complete denial of the values of the past. In addition to societal transformations, Russian art at the time was also largely affected by developments in science. Due to social tensions, Russian culture developed in several seemingly opposite directions.

Deepening political tensions eventually led to great social advancements, as the Russian defeat in the Crimean War made the Russian underdevelopment apparent. The revolutionary ideas of the ensuing period were also reflected in literature, painting, and music. Russian art flourished in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Leading figures in culture fought for the simplicity and accessibility of art. In the fine arts, the depiction of the lives of simple, disadvantaged people became the main theme, thus bringing about the dominance of realism. Representatives of the new approach as well as the idea itself conflicted with the supporters of the Academy of Arts, but, starting from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the works were evaluated independently of the subject. Thus, Russian realism successfully gained ground, while Russian symbolism and other “isms” were also born.

### **The flourishing of Russian music**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russian music, along with other branches of art, began to flourish. At the same time, the period was characterized by the tension between the so-called New Russian School (including Glinka and Rimsky-Korsakov) and the Russian Musical Society (Anton and Nikolai Rubinstein). Composers of the former school wanted to strengthen Russian identity by incorporating folk elements in their music, while those in the latter represented conservative views. Anton Grigoryevich Rubinstein, a great Russian pianist, contributed to the organization of the Russian Music Society with great determination. At the concerts organized by the Society, various Russian artists had the opportunity to perform, so the classical music of the era became available to the public. High-quality music education was ensured by the establishment of new institutions: the first Russian conservatory opened in St. Petersburg in 1862 under the administration of Anton Grigoryevich Rubinstein, and in 1866 the world-famous Moscow Conservatory launched

under the leadership of Anton Grigoryevich's brother, Nikolai Grigoryevich Rubinstein. In 1862, the Free School of Music opened on the initiative of Mily Alekseyevich Balakirev as an educational institution accessible to a wider audience. The aim of the music school was to provide ordinary music enthusiasts with basic theoretical knowledge and experience in choral singing as well as with orchestral instruments.<sup>2</sup>

This was the era in which the three influential Russian pianists and composers, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, and a decade later their younger contemporary, Medtner, were born.

### **Sergei Rachmaninoff**

Rachmaninoff was born in 1873 in Semyonovo, Russia. He became popular not just as a composer but also as a pianist and conductor. Although he was accepted as a composer somewhat later, at an early age he already gained recognition for his piano performance, legendary technical skills, and sense of rhythm, which allowed him to become the greatest pianist of his generation. Rachmaninoff began his piano studies at the age of five, when he was already considered an exceptional talent, and at the age of nine he was admitted to the Saint Petersburg Conservatory on a scholarship. He fascinated his teachers so much with his technique that they ignored his poor academic grades, neglecting his music theory education, so much so that he was later threatened with the termination of his scholarship because of his academic performance. Alexander Siloti, who was an excellent pianist and Rachmaninoff's cousin, became aware of this, and it was on his advice that Rachmaninoff enrolled at the Moscow Conservatory under the supervision of Nikolai Zverev. At first, Rachmaninoff feared his teacher, who was famous for his rigor but also went out of his way to help his students. Zverev introduced his students to the most famous Russian composers of their time, including Tchaikovsky, Anton Rubinstein, and Glazunov. As a teacher, he encouraged Rachmaninoff to become a performer, but in contrast, Tchaikovsky advised the fourteen-year-old boy, whose transcript of the Manfred Symphony he had heard and found promising, to keep on composing. At the age of nineteen, Rachmaninoff composed his first opera, *Aleko*, with flawless orchestration. The work, written in just eighteen days, earned him the Great Gold Medal of the Academy. In the same year, he composed the pieces titled "Morceaux de fantaisie" (Op. 3), among them the Prelude in C-sharp minor, which is very popular to this day. That composition is said to have been inspired by one

---

<sup>2</sup> Maslova, Alexandra (n.d.): *A század második felének orosz művészete [Russian art in the second half of the century]*.

of Rachmaninoff's nightmares. Indeed, one may trace throughout the work hints about burial alive and suffering. His first creative period includes the "Trio élégiaque" (Op. 9), his first symphony, and was concluded by the piano pieces titled "Six moments musicaux" (Op. 16). After his first symphony failed at the premiere, Rachmaninoff fell into a deep depression and did not compose anything for three years. This period was broken by an invitation to London in 1899, where he was asked to write a piano concerto. Although it was difficult at first to start composing, Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 has remained deservedly popular to this day. His second creative era was interwoven with love: in 1902 he married his cousin, with whom they had two children. At that time, he conducted at the Tsarist Opera in Moscow and spent three winters in Dresden, where he gave solo performances and concerts. From a creative point of view, the following ten years were the richest. His second symphony, third piano concerto, and two religious works (All-Night Vigil, Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom) were composed in this period. He also drew inspiration from the fine arts and literature. Arnold Böcklin's painting inspired the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*, and one of Edgar Allan Poe's poems sparked his choral fantasy *The Bells*. This creative period also marked the composition of many of his outstanding piano pieces, including two piano sonatas (Op. 28, Op. 36) as well as two volumes of etudes (Op. 33, Op. 39) and preludes (Op. 23, Op. 32) each. The happiest years of his life came to an end with the outbreak of the revolution in Russia. In 1917, Rachmaninoff embarked on a Swedish concert tour with his family, from which they never returned home. They first lived in Stockholm, then in Copenhagen, and finally settled in the United States, where Rachmaninoff continued to perform and created records, and in the meantime founded a label in France. He generously helped his friend Medtner, both financially and professionally. Medtner thus became a returning guest on concert stages in the United States. Rachmaninoff also played Scriabin's compositions in his concerts, although at that time he was criticized for his performing style, which was allegedly too "down to earth".

Rachmaninoff's third and last creative era is considered to have started with his move overseas. It was then that he composed Piano Concerto No. 3, Symphony No. 4, and *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Rachmaninoff died in 1943. The significance of his work can be felt to this day, having a considerable impact on both his contemporaries and today's pianists and composers. His piano recordings, among which, in addition to his own compositions, we find the works of Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, and Scriabin, are still considered to be unique and outstanding.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Martyn, Barrie. *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor*. Routledge, London, 1990.

## Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin

The Russian composer and pianist, who was one of the most outstanding talents of Russian music after Mussorgsky, was born in 1872 in Moscow. His father's brother, who was a great, albeit amateur, pianist, taught him to play the piano. Scriabin's strong personality was already evident as a little boy: he was described as a shy, troubled, even selfish child. He attended the military academy for nine years and studied music from Zverev. Zverev taught various talented youngsters, which is how Scriabin and his junior by one year, Rachmaninoff, got to know each other. Later, a close friendship developed between them, which stood firm even as the press tried to incite conflict between them. Scriabin enrolled at the Moscow Conservatory at the age of sixteen, where he was taught by Sergei Tanayev, Anton Arensky, and Vasily Safonov. His piano skills developed rapidly, his peers quickly accepted him, and he soon became a renowned pianist. Due to the small size of his hand and rigorous practising, his right hand was severely injured, but he miraculously recovered. It was during this period that he composed his first piano sonata, as a sort of plea for recovery. He graduated from the Conservatory in 1892 with distinction in piano performance but could not receive a degree in composition because Arensky, due to their frequent conflicts, refused to grant his signature. Scriabin gave his first official piano concert in St. Petersburg with a selection of his own piano works. Encouraged by the positive reception, he embarked on a concert tour in Russia and Europe, culminating in a concert in Paris, where he was accompanied by his wife. That year proved to be even more fruitful: he was asked to be a teacher at the Moscow Conservatory, and, having signed a contract with the music publisher Mitrofan Petrovich Belyayev, an increasing number of his pieces were published. This period was also productive from a creative perspective: in addition to composing his first two symphonies, he enriched the piano literature with several masterpieces. It was then that he composed his first series of etudes (Op. 8), his piano concerto, his first three sonatas (Op. 6, Op. 19, Op. 23), and several volumes of preludes. The first creative period is inspired by Romantic music, with a rather traditional harmonic language. Chopin's influence can still be traced in his earlier works, especially regarding the forms he used: in addition to etudes and preludes, Scriabin composed various mazurkas, waltzes, and nocturnes.<sup>4</sup> In 1904 he moved to Switzerland and wrote his third symphony. He left his four children and his wife to begin a relationship with a student of his, with whom he later had

---

<sup>4</sup> Pándi, Marianne. *Hangversenykalauz- Zongoraművek (Concert Guide – Piano Pieces)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1972.

other children. With help from a wealthy supporter, he began traveling, visiting Switzerland, Italy, France, Belgium, and the United States, and in 1907 he finally settled with his new family in Paris. During this time, he composed orchestral works as well as piano pieces. His Sonata No. 4 (Op. 30) and Sonata No. 5 (Op. 53) belong to his second creative period. He also began composing poems, which became a dominant part of his oeuvre, such as “Deux Poèmes” (Op. 32), “Poème tragique” (Op. 34), and “Poème Satanique” (Op. 36). By this time, Scriabin was already experimenting with chromaticism and dissonance, but his music was still dominated by traditional functions. In 1909, he finally returned to his homeland, where he composed increasingly atonal and grandiose works. *“The pursuit of mysticism left its mark on his whole composition style, which became complicated and difficult to follow without accomplishing his vague philosophical-aesthetic ideas.”*<sup>5</sup> It is believed that Scriabin’s late works were also influenced by his synaesthesia. To Rachmaninoff’s great surprise, Scriabin had several discussions with Rimsky-Korsakov about the relationship between sounds and colours. In his last creative period, Scriabin composed his last five piano sonatas as well as his final orchestral piece, Prometheus (The Poem of Fire). The unique and mystical chord of Prometheus, made up of C–F–sharp–B–flat–E–A–D notes, is often discussed and provides evidence that he favoured the use of a series of fourths in constructing his chords. As a climax to his oeuvre, he planned to compose a mystery play, from which only musical fragments and lyrics survived. In 1915, he performed in St. Petersburg for the last time, where he had overwhelming success. According to critics, his eyes lit up and his face radiated joy while performing his works. Not long thereafter, at the age of 43, he died at the peak of his career. Scriabin made recordings of ninety of his works, including two sonatas (Op. 19, Op. 23). His compositions are still popular with pianists to this day. The complexity of his music requires from the performer a high degree of skill and preparation, both musically and technically.<sup>6</sup>

### **Nikolai Karlovich Medtner**

Born in Moscow in 1880, Medtner became renowned as a composer and outstanding pianist. He learned to play the piano from his mother and her brother from the age of six, and at the age of ten he was admitted to the Moscow Conservatory, where his teachers included Pavel Pabst, Vasily

---

<sup>5</sup> Pándi, Marianne. Hangversenykalauz- Zenekari művek (Concert Guide – Orchestral Pieces), Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1972, p. 274.

<sup>6</sup> UK Scriabin Association (2021) <http://www.scriabin-association.com/articles/> (last accessed: 20 June 2021).

Safonov and Sergei Taneyev. He graduated from the Conservatory at the age of twenty, where he was awarded the Anton Rubinstein Prize. Despite his conservative musical taste, Medtner's piano performance and compositions were also noticed and recognised by his contemporaries. As a performer, he used his occasional concerts to present his own works with a solo piano performance. The instrument was also indispensable in his other pieces. To the astonishment of his family, with support from his teacher, Taneyev, he rejected his career as a performer early on and turned to composing. He was extremely motivated by Beethoven's work, especially his string quartets and late sonatas. Medtner's career as a composer officially began in 1903, when his first composition was published in print. By that time, his works had already been presented to the public. His piano sonata in F-minor (Op. 5) drew the attention of the Polish pianist Josef Hofmann, through whom Medtner was also noticed by Rachmaninoff. They subsequently became close friends. Medtner did not impress the critics in Germany, but his career was followed by many in Russia, especially in Moscow. There, in 1909, he received the Glinka Prize because of his growing recognition, and in 1916 he was again awarded the prize for his two piano sonatas (Op. 25 No. 2, Op. 2). It was during this period that he met his later wife, a renowned violinist. Unlike Rachmaninoff, Medtner left Russia long after the 1917 revolution. They first settled in Berlin, but there was little interest in his conservative, traditional music, so he received few assignments. Rachmaninoff was generously trying to support Medtner's position and career, so he organised a concert tour for him in the United States and Canada. The concerts, as before, were arranged as a "Medtner evening", consisting of sonatas, songs, and other relatively short works. He then moved to Paris, where he again found himself in a situation like his years in Berlin, with a rather unpleasant artistic atmosphere. He returned to Russia in 1927 for a three-month tour. In the following year, he visited Great Britain twice, where he became an honorary member of the Royal Academy of Music and performed his Piano Concerto No. 2. He then travelled again to the United States for urgent financial reasons, where only Rachmaninoff's generosity could save him from bankruptcy. In the early 1930s, his resentment towards the musical trends of recent decades grew stronger. He believed that music had eternal laws and condemned modernism and the musical fashion of the time. These feelings eventually prompted him to write a book titled "The Muse and the Fashion", in which he argued in favour of his own conservative aesthetics. The book was published in 1935 with support from Rachmaninoff. After a few further visits to England, he moved to London in 1936 with his wife, where he gave piano performances, composed, and taught for a few hours according to a strictly defined schedule. His humble success was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II, so his performances, the demand for his piano tutoring, and his income from his

German publisher all ceased. Medtner faced great hardships, and his livelihood could only be maintained through the generosity of his friends. As a result of such a generous offer, Medtner received refuge in Warwickshire, where he suffered a heart attack while writing his third and final piano concerto. He recovered slowly, but two years later, in 1944, he was able to present the composition. Despite his declining health in previous years, fortune smiled on him, and in 1946, the Maharajah of Mysore donated a significant sum to establish the Medtner Society. Medtner thus had the opportunity to make open gramophone recordings. Over the next four years, he recorded some of his most important works, including his three piano concertos, Piano Quintet, Violin Sonata No. 1, several songs, and solo piano pieces. After making invaluable recordings, he died in London in 1951.

Although he was sometimes referred to as the “Russian Brahms” in his life, after his death his art was almost completely forgotten. However, this seems to be changing today as he is now often considered to be one of the most significant Russian composers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of piano literature. As a younger contemporary to Rachmaninoff and Scriabin, his contributions, however significant, received undeservedly little spotlight. The piano plays a central role in his works, in a similar way to Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. He composed fourteen piano sonatas, three violin sonatas, three piano concertos, one piano quintet, two pieces for two pianos, many smaller piano pieces, some short works for the violin and piano, and 108 songs. The significance of piano sonatas in his oeuvre is greater than for any other composer since Beethoven, which also shows Medtner’s respect for the Viennese classical composer and his commitment to tradition. He wrote thirty-eight so-called “tales” for the piano, whereby he found his most unique voice as a composer. Today, one of his most frequently performed works is his tenth piano sonata, “Sonata Reminiscenza” (Op. 38 No. 1), which is the first piece in the “Forgotten Melodies” series. The composition, together with the eleventh sonata, was completed in 1920, one year before the composer’s emigration. The one-movement composition is one of Medtner’s most poetic pieces, as the title also suggests, with a nostalgic, longing character. The special feature of the series is that the other seven pieces contain the melodies of the sonata and are built on its themes and variations. The complexity and expressiveness of his works require a high level of sophistication from the performer, but his art is never virtuoso for its own sake. In most respects, his musical style is different from that of his compatriots, as very few tried to translate the spirit of Russian music into a musical mindset rooted in Western classical traditions, including but not limited to Beethoven’s art. His influence by Western classical music can be observed in the use of forms (sonata form) and in the counterpoint composition style, which he



mastered. Even in his first published works, his musical language was already almost mature, which hardly changed during his career, so his entire oeuvre is of a consistent quality. It is more harmonically advanced, but still slightly constrained by the limits set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Progress is traceable in his rhythms, especially in the use of complex cross-beats.<sup>7</sup> According to his own account, he was a follower of Beethoven. Indeed, a similar thematic construction characterises their music, often consisting of massive forms and dramatic contrasts from even the smallest, simple material. Medtner's music includes intense drama, lyrical tone, fantasy, childlike innocence, and exotic Russian harmonies typical of Scriabin and Rachmaninoff. Even though Medtner was considered old-fashioned in his day, he found his own path among the many different trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and we owe him many unique solutions and innovations in terms of form, harmony, and rhythm. Medtner's music tells us something new in an old language in the most honest and intimate way.

In an interview, the legendary Russian pianist Vladimir Horowitz asked the famous question, "Why nobody plays Medtner?" In addition to Sviatoslav Richter, Emil Gilels, and Sergei Rachmaninoff, Horowitz was one of the extremely small groups who also played Medtner in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Medtner's unpopularity may also have come as a surprise because Rachmaninoff spoke of him as the greatest living composer of his time. Nowadays, however, musicians are beginning to learn about his music, and the undeniable value that his works carry is increasingly recognised. Today, his works are often performed on the largest concert stages by such famous pianists as Martha Argerich, Marc-André Hamelin, and Boris Berezovsky.<sup>8</sup>

## REFERENCES

- Maslova, Alexandra (é.n.): *A század második felének orosz művészete (Russian art in the second half of the century)*.  
 Martyn, Barrie. *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor*. Routledge, London, 1990.  
 Martyn, Barrie. *Medtner: His Life and Music*. Scolar Press, Aldershot, England, 1995.

---

<sup>7</sup> Martyn, Barrie. *Medtner: His Life and Music*. Scolar Press, Aldershot, England, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Cahill (2013): Why Medtner Matters.  
<https://www.esm.rochester.edu/blog/2013/10/why-medtner-matters/> (last accessed: 15 June 2021)

UK Scriabin Association (2021) <http://www.scriabin-association.com/articles/> utolsó letöltés: 2021. 06. 20.

Pándi, Marianne. *Hangversenykalauz - Zongoraművek (Concert Guide – Piano Pieces)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1972.

Pándi, Marianne. *Hangversenykalauz - Zenekari művek (Concert Guide – Orchestral Pieces)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1972.

Smith, Cahill. *Why Medtner Matters*. (2013).

<https://www.esm.rochester.edu/blog/2013/10/why-medtner-matters/>  
(last accessed: 15 June 2021)

***Supported by the ÚNKP-20-1 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Innovation and Technology from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund.***