

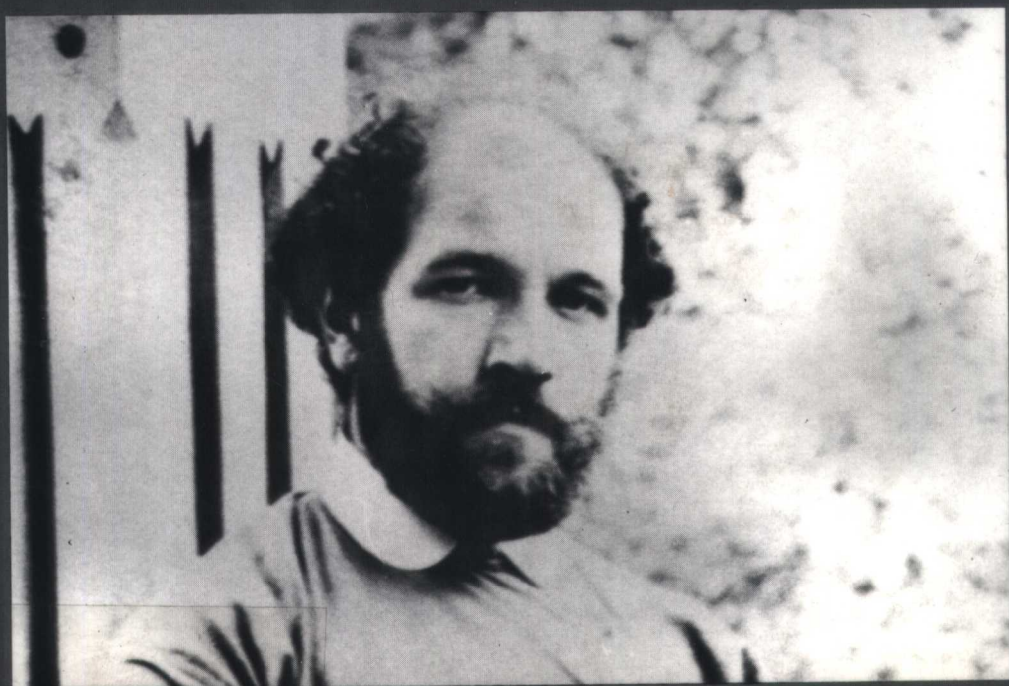
中央音乐学院图书馆藏书

号 Z2.1.5

登号 BK303794

# Nicolas Medtner

## His Life and Music



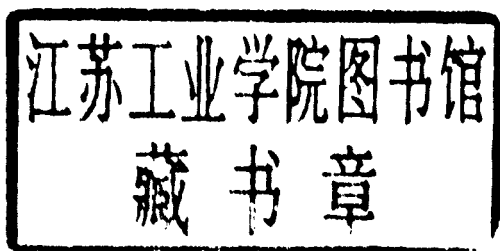
Music  
(N.)

## Barrie Martyn

NICOLAS MEDTNER

His Life and Music

BARRIE MARTYN



SCOLAR  
PRESS

© Barrie Martyn, 1995

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published by  
SCOLAR PRESS  
Gower House  
Croft Road  
Aldershot  
Hants GU11 3HR  
England

Ashgate Publishing Company  
Old Post Road  
Brookfield  
Vermont 05036  
USA

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Martyn, Barrie

Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music

I. Title

780.92

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Martyn, Barrie.

Nicolas Medtner : his life and music / Barrie Martyn.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and indexes.

ISBN 0-85967-959-4 (hc)

1. Medtner, Nikolay Karlovich, 1880-1951. 2. Composers—Russia (Federation)—Biography. I. Title.

ML410.M46M37 1995

780'.92—dc20 95-11401

[B]

CIP

MN

ISBN 0 85967 959 4

Phototypeset in Sabon by Intype, London and printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

# Introduction

In the history of Russian music, Nicolas Medtner is a forlorn figure. A younger contemporary of Scriabin and Rachmaninoff, he was, like them, a great pianist and a composer whose work focused mainly on his own instrument. If his career had taken off like theirs, he might have come to be regarded as completing a Moscow musical triumvirate; instead, lacking the mystique of the former and the popular appeal of the latter, he was from the first overshadowed, his work highly prized by a small band of faithful admirers but, even to this day, never becoming familiar to a wide audience.

Medtner's life and work have attracted little serious study. Many biographical details have remained obscure, and over the years ill-informed critics have persistently made wildly misleading pronouncements about the nature of his art, at first pigeon-holing him as 'the Russian Brahms' (a sobriquet he particularly disliked) or more generally as a German composer Russian only through accident of birth. Later, and no less perversely, he was dismissed as merely a pale copy of Rachmaninoff, a view still current in some quarters. The present study attempts to clarify the facts of his career and, through an examination of the works, dispel at least some misapprehensions about his music.

What are the qualities in Medtner which his admirers find so appealing and on which they would base their claim that, far from deserving neglect, he should in fact be ranked among the great composers of the 20th century? Firstly, this self-declared 'pupil of Beethoven' was unquestionably a wonderful craftsman, a master contrapuntist and one of music's great architects. Taneyev described him as being 'born with sonata form', and certainly he had a grasp of large-scale structure such as few Russians have possessed. This is most clearly demonstrated in the Concertos and Sonatas, in which a characteristic ploy, exemplified at its finest in the Sonata in E minor, Op. 25, No. 2, is to show at the end of a work that all its themes, though apparently widely diverse, emanate from a single source. Such writing is intensely satisfying, musically and intellectually.

Then there is the rich vein of lyricism in the music, affecting but never sentimental. In some of his works, most notably in the Concertos and the songs to German texts, Medtner, like his compatriot Taneyev, exhibits no

specific national identity, but when he sets Russian poetry or, as in some of the so-called 'Fairy Tales', treats Russian themes, his nationality strongly asserts itself. If his melodies lack the overwhelming emotional impact of Rachmaninoff, occasionally a certain stylistic kinship can be felt between the two composers; however, as Rachmaninoff himself remarked, 'Medtner is too much an individual to bear resemblance to anyone except the Russian composer Medtner.'

This individuality is perhaps most evident in his use of rhythm, where unusual metres and syncopation are often distinctive features of the fabric of the music, while an extensive use of cross rhythms reveals a surprisingly progressive aspect of an otherwise conservative musical personality. In terms of harmony, though using it distinctively for his own ends, the composer worked within the boundaries set by the masters of the 18th and 19th centuries. In general his style may be said to have developed hardly at all throughout his career; he emerged fully-fledged with his earliest published works, his entire *oeuvre* being remarkably consistent in quality.

For Medtner his muse and his God were indivisible, his art a profession of faith. Informed by a lofty purpose, his music often expresses the most noble human feelings and his song texts are invariably chosen from poetry of the highest quality. Indeed, it is perhaps among the best of the songs, which demonstrate his strengths in their most concentrated form, that the composer's finest work is to be found.

Although he devoted his creative energy mainly to the piano and included it in every work he wrote, as had Chopin and Alkan before him, Medtner's range of expression is as wide as that of composers who have written for every kind of medium. His understanding of the potentialities of the instrument was so complete that he was able to realize his ideas through it fully and without compromise. His only use of the orchestra is in the Concertos; he really had no need of it elsewhere. He despised orchestral colouristic effects as adding nothing to the essential nature of a musical statement, just as in his piano writing he eschewed sonority and sensuousness for their own sakes.

Medtner cheerfully admitted that he was something of an anachronism. His natural musical sympathies lying with the western classical masters on the one hand and with Tchaikovsky on the other, he began his career at the very point when music was about to be led in new directions, in Europe by Strauss and Schönberg, and in his own country by Stravinsky and Prokofiev, for all of whom he developed an almost pathological distaste. He reacted with horror at what he saw as the overthrowing of the immutable laws of art and all his life raged against modernist heresy, but in the end could only look on impotently and with mounting despair

as musical evolution took its course. The conservatism of his own musical style helped to ensure that his work was ignored by the arbiters of fashion.

A number of other factors have conspired over the years to deny Medtner's music a fair hearing. The natural tendency of many professional pianists to shun the unfamiliar in their programmes has severely limited its exposure in recital, while its technical difficulty puts it beyond the scope of all but the most proficient of amateurs. Its intellectual subtlety yields no instant gratification; it is the kind of music that demands, and abundantly repays, repeated hearing. Though perhaps never likely to enjoy widespread popularity, for those able to respond to its particular qualities, Medtner's art can be a revelation.

The author's main source of biographical material has been the Medtner correspondence, of which an enormous archive is held by both the Glinka Museum in Moscow and the Library of Congress in Washington. A Soviet anthology of 390 letters, edited by the late Zarui Apetyan, contains much valuable information in its annotations, as does the same scholar's collection of reminiscences of the composer, supplementing the pioneering English *festschrift* edited by Richard Holt. Details have been culled from the biographical sketches of Swan and Pinsonneault, and the author has had the benefit of the personal recollections of William Brown, Hugh and Yvonne Dinwiddy, Colin Horsley, Edna Iles, Sidney Miller, Phyllis Palmer and Irina Prehn. Thanks are also due to others who have helped in different ways: to Irina Medvedeva of the Glinka Museum and Kate Rivers of the Library of Congress; to Robert Bartlett, Pamela Birley, Michael Brough, John Clapperton, Lawson Cook, Peter Cooper, Beresford King-Smith, Tanya Moiseiwitsch, Frederick Moyer, and above all to Michael Jones, for his generous practical assistance and advice.

In the text I have retained the generally accepted Europeanized forms of the names of familiar Russian personalities, but have transliterated others more strictly. Outside Russia the composer himself used the Teutonic form of his name, 'Medtner', rather than the literal version, 'Metner', and so here. Russian dating I have left unchanged. The Julian calendar, operating in Russia until February 1918, was 12 days behind our own in the 19th and 13 in the 20th century. To avoid confusion Russians writing from abroad normally gave their letters a double dating, in the 'old [Julian] style' and 'new [Gregorian] style'. The dating of all events abroad is in the 'new style'.

# Contents

List of plates	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	xi
1 1880–1900 Childhood and conservatoire	1
2 1900–1903 Start of a career	13
3 1903–1906 Personal turmoil	27
4 1906–1909 German sojourn	45
5 1909–1911 Conservatoire professor	66
6 1911–1914 Friends and critics	91
7 1914–1917 War	108
8 1917–1921 Revolution	128
9 1921–1925 A life abroad	147
10 1925–1927 Return to Russia	173
11 1927–1930 Britain and America	189
12 1930–1935 <i>The Muse and the Fashion</i>	205
13 1935–1939 Move to England	221
14 1939–1945 Second World War	231
15 1945–1951 Indian fairy tale	245
Notes	261
Index of Medtner's works	263
Index of persons and of works referred to in the text	268

# 1 1880–1900 Childhood and conservatoire

In 1721, towards the end of the reign of Peter the Great, the Baltic provinces were incorporated into the Russian Empire. Since the Middle Ages the area had been under the rule of a German landowning aristocracy, and henceforth the Baltic became Russia's cultural and economic link with the West, its citizens in the course of time becoming bicultural and bilingual. Among the businessmen from northern Europe attracted there by the expansion of trade was the founding father of the Russian Medtner family.

According to tradition,<sup>1</sup> the Medtners had originated in Denmark but later settled in Schleswig-Holstein, from where they emigrated to Livonia (present-day Estonia) at the end of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th century, acquiring citizenship and establishing themselves at Pärnu, a seaport on the Baltic coast. Two generations later the composer's grandfather moved to Moscow, where he married the daughter of a German Lutheran immigrant of Spanish descent. Their son, Nicolas's father, despite his Moscow residency and membership of the Moscow guild of merchants, for official purposes remained a citizen of Pärnu and continued to pay taxes to the town authorities.

Musical talent, a love of literature and the cultivation of intellectual pursuits were the common inheritance of the composer's mother's side of the family. Medtner's maternal great-grandfather, Friedrich Gebhard, was a particularly remarkable character. Born in Thuringia in 1769, he studied theology and music as a young man but then suddenly dropped everything to join a troupe of wandering actors. Making his way to Riga, he ran off with the daughter of a Baltic baron and then fled to St Petersburg, where he and his wife appeared as both actors and singers at the two court theatres. He wrote plays and poetry – two volumes of his works were published in Leipzig in 1826 – and, prophetically for the Medtner story, he worshipped Goethe, whom he may have met and with whom he almost certainly corresponded.

The Gebhard children seem to have inherited their parents' artistic talent. Minna was a gifted miniature portrait painter and Fyodor a com-



poser of German *lieder*, including settings of Goethe that were among the music collection in the Medtner household. Polina Gebhard, a coloratura soprano reputed to have performed Mozart especially well, became a well-known singing teacher in Moscow. A friend of the cellist and later Director of the St Petersburg Conservatoire, Karl Davydov, of Balakirev's piano teacher, Alexandre Dubuque, and of the Old Lion himself, Anton Rubinstein, Polina became the wife of Karl Andreyevich Goedicke and subsequently Nicolas's grandmother.

The Goedicke, emigrants from Pomerania in northern Germany but originally probably from Sweden, were yet another Lutheran immigrant family who followed the Baltic route to Russia at about the same time as the Medtners and Gebhards. They were scholars, teachers, musicians – particularly organists. Karl Andreyevich himself, a friend of the expatriate Irish inventor of Nocturnes, John Field, and well-known in Moscow as a teacher and conductor, was an occasional composer.<sup>2</sup> Despite his Protestantism he was organist at the French Catholic church in Moscow, as was his son Fyodor, who taught piano at the Conservatoire. Fyodor's own son, Alexander, became the most famous of the musical Goedicke. Starting his career as an outstanding concert pianist, he followed the family tradition in becoming Russia's most distinguished organist. Above all else, however, he was a composer, whose substantial *oeuvre*, written in a conservative and academic style, made no distinctive or lasting impression on the turbulent history of 20th-century Russian music, and which, apart from some delightful piano pieces for children, still awaits discovery.

The Medtner and Goedicke families were united through the marriage of Karl Petrovich Medtner and Alexandra Karlovna Goedicke. The cultural interests of the pair were complementary, on one side literary and intellectual, on the other musical. Karl was a widely-read man, since his youth devoted to poetry and philosophy. He loved German and Russian literature in equal measure, though, like his wife's grandfather, harboured a particular passion for Goethe.<sup>3</sup> The theatre was another of his enthusiasms; in the evenings after work he would read and translate plays and poetry. Alexandra, on the other hand, had inherited the Goedicke musical talent; she played the piano and in her youth had appeared as a singer.<sup>4</sup>

Karl Medtner's success in business – he was the managing director of a Moscow lace factory – enabled him to bring up his family in comfortable bourgeois circumstances, in which his own and his wife's enthusiasm for culture was passed on to their children. The consciously intellectual atmosphere in the home undoubtedly developed minds and tastes but, remote as it was from the stark realities of everyday life outside, it no doubt encouraged in the children a certain unworldliness. It was into this highly cultured environment that Nicolas Medtner was born on 24

December 1879 'old style' or, according to the western calendar, 5 January 1880.

The Medtners had six children in all, five sons and a daughter. Nicolas was the fifth child, but because his younger brother, Vladimir, died in early childhood, during the impressionable years of adolescence he was the youngest in the family. Playmate of his sister, Sofiya, just two years his senior, he was indulged by his parents and influenced by his elder brothers, all of whom had exceptional minds and strong personalities. Karl, who was singled out to carry on his father's business, had a passion for the theatre and was also active in Moscow literary and philosophic circles; Alexander loved music, which led to a professional musical career as a violin and viola player and as a teacher and conductor; and Emil, who possessed perhaps the most remarkable intellect of all the brothers, interested himself in every aspect of art and thought. He was particularly devoted to German culture, Goethe above all, to philosophy in which he was greatly influenced by Nietzsche, and later to psychology; he became both leader of the cult of Wagner in Russia and guiding spirit of the Moscow symbolist poets. As eldest brother, he exercised a profound influence on the formation of Nicolas's tastes and attitudes.

Nicolas showed an early aptitude for music and his mother began piano lessons with him at the age of six.<sup>5</sup> Such was his fascination with the instrument that at meal times he had physically to be torn away from it. His brother Alexander was at this time learning to play the violin and in due course, simply by observing him practise, Nicolas too picked up the rudiments of the instrument. Eventually he became sufficiently competent not only to make music at home in an ensemble with his brother, his cousin Alexander Goedicke and other childhood friends, but to take his place with them in a 60-piece children's orchestra, founded in 1888 by a Moscow music teacher, Anatoly Erarsky, which played arrangements of Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Grieg, Liadov, Arensky and Schumann, and whose performances were impressive enough to be attended at different times by Tchaikovsky, Taneyev and Rimsky-Korsakov.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile his musical horizons were further widened by attending orchestral concerts of the Russian Musical Society, to which his mother subscribed and to which she invariably took her children.

Nicolas had already begun to improvise and compose. According to the composer's wife, reporting the family tradition more than 60 years later, 'the boy covered with music every bit of paper he could lay hold of. It was, however, to the piano that he turned to express the music that was in him.'<sup>7</sup> His progress at the keyboard was rapid, and when he was nine or ten<sup>8</sup> his mother asked her brother, Fyodor Goedicke, to take charge of this aspect of his education. With a precocious but characteristic assertion of individuality, Nicolas would have nothing to do with

'children's music' but demanded instead Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Scarlatti,' a profound love of whose work remained with him throughout his life.

At the same time he began his general education as a pupil at a *gymnasium*, but his attendance there lasted no more than two years. One day in 1892 he returned home from school, threw down his books and, declaring that from that time on he intended to devote himself exclusively to music, demanded to be enrolled at the Moscow Conservatoire. His parents reacted angrily, never dreaming that their son might wish to become a professional musician, but at the ensuing family conference his brother Emil, then preparing to go up to Moscow University to read law, took Nicolas's side, urging forcefully that the proper development of his obvious musical gifts required special training. His case was doubtless helped by the fact that Alexander Goedicke, two years Nicolas's senior, was making a similar move from *gymnasium* to conservatoire that same year. Emil won the argument and the Medtners gave in. Expertly prepared by his uncle, himself on the staff of the Conservatoire for more than a decade, the boy passed the entry test and so began his studies in the very year in which two other composer-pianists whose careers were to overshadow his own left the Conservatoire as graduates – Rachmaninoff and Scriabin.

By the time the 12-year-old Medtner entered this new stage in his musical development, he already had grandiose plans for composition. The archives of the Glinka Museum contain three different autograph lists of projects dating to 1892. The first, with 17 works, of which only a few tentative bars and some hints of instrumentation remain, reveals the extent of the embryonic composer's extravagant ambitions:

- Op. 1 Impromptu mignon
- Op. 2 Pensé musical [*sic*] (for 4 hands)
- Op. 3 1st Song Without Words (*Duetto*)
- Op. 4 2nd Song Without Words (*Gondelied*)
- Op. 5 Berceuse (for violin and piano)
- Op. 6 First Concerto
- Op. 7 Second Concerto
- Op. 8 Third Concerto
- Op. 9 3rd Song Without Words
- Op. 10 4th Song Without Words
- Op. 11 Sonata (for violin and piano)
- Op. 12 First Symphony (for 2 hands)
- Op. 13 Second Symphony (for 4 hands)
- Op. 14 First Concerto for violin
- Op. 15 Berceuse (for piano)

- Op. 16 First Sonata (for piano)
- Op. 17 Second Sonata (for piano)

The listing of three concertos and of violin and piano sonatas was to prove prophetic.

The second catalogue of works is more modest:

- Op. 1 Menuetto  
Scherzo
- Op. 2 Two Themes with Variations
  - No. 1 in G minor
  - No. 2 in C sharp minor
- Op. 3 Fantasia for orchestra in F major
- Op. 4 Sonata No. 1
- Op. 5 Sonata No. 2
- Op. 6 Fantasia à la Sonata in F minor (for piano)

The indications of key may suggest that Medtner had definite ideas for at least some of these pieces, though nothing of them survives.

On the third list, in a musical notebook containing thematic material from the years 1892–95, ten works are put down for 1892: four Sonatas, two Fantasias (one orchestral), a Fugue, a Scherzo, Op. 1, and two pieces, *Im Walde*, Op. 2. To 1892–93 is assigned a composition bearing a title reminiscent of Alkan's *Funeral March on the Death of A Parrot – Funeral of a Piece of Rotten Beef* – an early example of Medtner's exuberantly fanciful and slightly grotesque sense of humour, and to 1895 an *Etude à la Polonaise* and a Symphony.

In its academic organization the Moscow Conservatoire was divided into a junior and a senior department, the courses in each normally lasting five years. Medtner was admitted at the level appropriate to his age, the fourth of the five preliminary years, where his tuition included not only practical and theoretical aspects of music, but also a general education. His tutor in musical theory was Tchaikovsky's friend Nikolay Kashkin, who had worked at the Conservatoire since its opening in 1866 and was also active as a music critic; the course in harmony was run by the composer Anton Arensky, who had a reputation for irascibility and sloth. It was Kashkin who encouraged the boy's creative work, as did a friend of the Medtner family, the now forgotten composer and pianist Arseny Koreshchenko, who also acquainted him with the latest works of the Russian nationalist school.<sup>10</sup>

Evidently coping easily with his academic courses, Medtner had plenty of time left to concentrate on the piano,<sup>11</sup> for which he was supervised by Anatoly Galli, a pupil of Nikolay Zverev (teacher of Rachmaninoff and

Scriabin) and of the illustrious Karl Klindworth. Galli's modest career as a junior professor had perhaps not fulfilled the promise of his early years, and though no one knows Medtner's true opinion of him as a teacher, an incidental remark in one of his letters implies that he thought him not sufficiently demanding.<sup>12</sup>

In the spring of 1894, at the end of the junior course, Medtner passed the examination for entry into the Conservatoire's senior department, where he chose the piano as his principal study. Whereas potential composers ordinarily combined a study of their chosen instrument with courses in counterpoint, fugue and a final two years of 'free composition', Medtner opted for Arensky's alternative general course, *Encyclopaedia*, whose syllabus embraced such subjects as musical analysis and form, polyphony, aesthetics, instrumentation and musical history. Although for the academic year 1897-98 he joined Taneyev's counterpoint class, he abandoned it half way through. Once, having difficulty in resolving a musical impasse in a composition, he was told by his teacher that the solution was simply to move some element or other to a different place, 'like rearranging furniture in a room'.<sup>13</sup> Medtner, for whom organic musical growth was so important, could not go along with such a method; indeed, he did not even understand it. His head was always full of unresolved problems of counterpoint and emerging musical ideas, their solution sometimes coming to him unexpectedly, even at night when half-asleep.<sup>14</sup> In the end he left the class, with Taneyev's connivance - 'Work the way you want to, but bring your compositions to show me whenever you wish.'<sup>15</sup> As if admitting that Medtner's talent transcended the need for formal class instruction, some time later, when the young composer had played him some of his works, the master commented, 'Until now I thought that it was impossible to become a real composer without having thoroughly learned counterpoint, but now I see from your example that I was mistaken in this.'<sup>16</sup>

In eschewing a composer's traditional conservatoire training, Medtner was following the precedent of his cousin Alexander Goedicke, two years ahead of him, whose composing talent, far from being stunted by a lack of formal tuition, had flourished without it. In Goedicke's case, too, Taneyev kept a friendly extramural eye on his progress.

The efficacy of the Conservatoire's pianistic training, however, could not be questioned, with Medtner's tutor for the senior course, Paul Pabst, being particularly successful. A German-born pupil of Liszt, he proved to be the last in the long line of virtuosos from western Europe who made a career teaching in Russia. He concertized extensively and also found time for making arrangements and transcriptions and for composing some salon pieces of his own. Pabst seems to have excelled most in exhibitionist virtuoso works, such as Liszt's *Don Juan Fantasy*, though he was also noted for his interpretations of Schumann and was a friend of Tchaikovsky

(his *Onegin* Paraphrase is still occasionally performed). He had overseen the training of a number of distinguished pianists already making their names in Russia: Igumnov, Goldenweiser, Maximov, the composer Liapunov and, most recently, Goedicke. He was popular as a teacher, though one suspects that his method – playing a piece through and writing notes concerning interpretation on the score but speaking little about technical problems or ways of correcting faults – would have worked effectively with only his most gifted pupils. Medtner, however, seems to have valued what Pabst had to offer and doubtless appreciated the encouragement he is said to have given him in his creative work.<sup>17</sup>

Some idea of the repertoire Medtner studied with Pabst can be deduced from the surviving programmes of student concerts in which he appeared. Beethoven seems to have figured prominently; appropriately it was with the opening movement of the C minor Concerto that he made his debut, on 7 December 1894. Incidentally, his first performance of the *Appassionata* Sonata, a work with which he later came to be especially associated, also dates from the Pabst years. His teacher's enthusiasm for Schumann, which he came wholeheartedly to share, was reflected in performances of the *Toccata* – another work included in his subsequent public repertoire – and the Concerto, which he played with Pabst in its two-piano version at a concert on 22 January 1897. Naturally Medtner also studied Liszt at this time, performing the *Rigoletto* Paraphrase and other works.

Work with Pabst came to an abrupt halt with his sudden death in May 1897, which stunned Medtner 'to the depths of the heart'.<sup>18</sup> He asked the Conservatoire's Director, Vasily Safonov, to supervise his piano studies the following year but Safonov was already fully committed, not only by his official responsibilities but by a programme of conducting engagements in Moscow and St Petersburg. In the event the breach was filled by the Russian virtuoso Vasily Sapelnikov, who had studied in St Petersburg with Sophie Menter and Louis Brassin before gaining fame in Russia and western Europe. A cornerstone of his repertoire was Tchaikovsky's First Concerto, with which he had achieved overnight fame in his first appearance abroad, in Hamburg in 1888, with the composer conducting. During his year under Sapelnikov, Medtner too learned the work. However, this time together proved no more than a stop-gap, for with the prospect at last of working with Safonov, he decided to spend a further two years at the Conservatoire, instead of the expected one, before graduating.

Safonov, Medtner's last and most influential teacher, had led a distinguished career both as a practising musician and as a pedagogue.<sup>19</sup> After lessons with Alexandre Villoing, the teacher of Anton and Nikolay Rubinstein, and with Leschetizky, he graduated in 1880 with the gold medal from Brassin's class in the Conservatoire at St Petersburg, where he was immediately appointed to a professorship. Five years later he transferred

to the Moscow Conservatoire, becoming Director after Taneyev's resignation in 1889 and proving himself an excellent if autocratic administrator. In his public career he henceforth concentrated on conducting. He took over the Russian Musical Society concerts in Moscow and later, after leaving the Conservatoire, was principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra for three seasons, acquiring a special reputation for his Beethoven and Tchaikovsky interpretations.

As a pianist Safonov preferred performing chamber music to solo recital work since, by all accounts, he did not possess a big technique. Perhaps it was this limitation that led him to seek greater musical fulfilment elsewhere; at any rate it was for his outstanding qualities as a teacher that he left his mark in the pianistic sphere, Lhevinne and Scriabin being the most well-known of a host of his distinguished students. In Russia only Leschetizky was more influential as a teacher. It was not simply that Safonov had a natural gift for imparting knowledge and adopted the best features of different piano methods, but that his teaching was practical and systematic. Alexander Goedicke, who, like Medtner, transferred to him from Pabst, remarked on Safonov's exceptional ability to pick out and correct a student's weaknesses so that, whoever he was, the physiognomy of his playing would change totally within three or four months.<sup>20</sup>

Safonov published a pamphlet containing a range of exercise material based on his teaching method, which he called his 'New Formula'.<sup>21</sup> One small legacy of his teaching detectable in Medtner's piano playing and in the printed fingering of his music may be the composer's preference to maintain the natural hand position and pass the thumb under the fifth finger in certain ascending scale passages, of which the earliest example occurs towards the end of the first of the *Three Fantastic Improvisations*, Op. 2, written during the time Medtner was studying with Safonov. At any rate, it may be more than coincidence that practising this fingering is one of the very first of the 'New Formula' exercises.

Under Safonov, Medtner became a mature artist. To judge again by the evidence of student concert programmes, he seems over these two years to have concentrated on large-scale romantic works, such as Chopin's E minor Concerto and Schumann's Sonata in F sharp minor, Op. 11, but also to have extended the range of his Russian repertoire. Particularly memorable in this connection must have been a concert towards the end of the course, on 6 February 1900, to which the great Polish pianist Josef Hofmann had been invited. Medtner brought the programme to a spectacular end with a dazzling performance of Balakirev's *Islamey*. Hofmann was reported to have been greatly impressed, not only by the young man's playing, but by his powers of endurance and self-control.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, a major artist was about to enter the concert world – or so everyone expected.

Despite the piano being his main study over the last six years, Medtner had continued to work assiduously, if only semi-officially, as a composer, completing a considerable number of works. Among the unpublished manuscripts dating from this period in the archives of the Glinka Museum are the following:

- Adagio funebre (cacofoniale) in E minor (1894–95)
- Moment musical in C minor (March 1896)
- Humoresque in F sharp minor (April 1896)
- Pastorale in C major (dedicated to Pabst) (summer 1896)
- Six Preludes (1896–97)
- March in C major for Two Pianos (dedicated ‘to my dear parents’)  
(25 February 1897)
- Piece for piano (1897)
- Sonata in F sharp minor (unfinished) (1897)
- Impromptu à la Mazurka (28 December 1897)
- Sonatina in G minor (1898)
- Impromptu (1898)
- Album Leaf (11 January 1900)
- Variations in F sharp minor (unfinished)
- Sonata in B minor
- March
- Postludes in C minor and B minor
- Façon de parler
- Moderato. Con molto tenerezza, A minor.

The list foreshadows the composer’s mature output in its total preoccupation with the piano, the only surviving works for other media being a song – a setting of Lermontov’s *Prayer*, written in the summer of 1896 – and some early pieces for string orchestra. The future is also anticipated in one small detail: attached to the earliest of these compositions, the *Adagio funebre*, is the epithet ‘*cacofoniale*’, a hint of the penchant for unusual Italian terms that came to be an intriguing feature of Medtner’s titles and expression markings. Several of these early pieces were salvaged for re-use in later published works, particularly at the beginning of the composer’s career.

In May 1900, Medtner at last left the Moscow Conservatoire, honoured as the year’s most distinguished piano graduate. Safonov presented him with the institution’s highest award, the ‘Small Gold Medal’,<sup>23</sup> and his name was added to the marble tablet of distinguished alumni in the entrance hall. Predicting a great career for his pupil, Safonov is said to have declared that, with so prodigious a talent, Medtner should have been given a diamond medal, had such a thing existed. A final obligation was



to take part in a graduation concert on 29 May, at which he performed the first movement of Rubinstein's Fifth Concerto, under Safonov's direction.

In the hope of consolidating his success at home and laying the foundations for an international career, Medtner applied for entry to the Rubinstein Competition for pianists and composers, due to be held in Vienna in August. This quinquennial event had been established by Anton Rubinstein himself in 1890 with a competition in St Petersburg, where the most significant outcome in retrospect was the award of the composition prize to Busoni. In the second competition, held in Berlin, Safonov's pupil Josef Lhevinne had won the piano prize. Worldly-wise as to the best ways of promoting a career, Safonov may himself have urged Medtner to enter the third competition, confident of another success.

At first Medtner's intention was to take part in the competition as both pianist and composer, but as the works he was required to submit – a concert piece for piano and orchestra and a sonata – were far from ready, Safonov advised him to save his strength, leave composition on one side and concentrate on his playing. Karl Petrovich Medtner blamed Safonov for being slow to pay attention to his son's creative talent<sup>24</sup> and must have been piqued that his nephew, Alexander Goedicke, was entering the competition in both capacities. Still more so later when, apparently against only weak opposition,<sup>25</sup> Goedicke won the composition prize. However, he accompanied them both to Vienna, where they joined a third Moscow aspirant, Alexander Goldenweiser, among the 16 competitors.

Medtner's repertoire for the event comprised the Prelude in D major from Bach's *Little Preludes* and the 12th fugue from *The Art of the Fugue*; Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata; Chopin's F minor *Ballade*, his Nocturne in E major, Op. 62, No. 2, and Mazurka in F minor, Op. 63, No. 2; Liszt's *Feux follets*, and two of Schumann's *Fantasiestücke*. For his statutory Rubinstein Concerto he naturally chose No. 5 in E flat, of which at least the first movement was already in his fingers.

The circumstances of the competition were inauspicious almost from the start. There were no rehearsals, the order of performances was changed without warning, so upsetting practice plans and confidence, and there seems to have been intrigue behind the scenes. Even Safonov, who had come to conduct the concerto performances, is said to have remarked confidentially that it was not worth the trouble to play and that it would be 'a scandal rather than a competition'.<sup>26</sup> Although Medtner was satisfied with his performance of the Concerto, by the time he came to play his solo programme, he had been unsettled by a succession of delays and failed to do himself justice.

The next day I was no longer in any state to wrestle with my nerves. Every piece I had to play seemed to me only an instrument of torture: passages, trills,