

International Piano MASTERCLASS

Steeped in Russian folklore, Medtner's *Fairy Tales* provide the ideal introduction to the composer's mature style. Pianist **Frank Huang** hails their purity and elegance



No one tells such Tales as Koyak! exclaimed an excited Rachmaninov after Nikolai Medtner played his 6 *Skazki* Op 51.

The English term 'Fairy Tale' seems most appropriate for these highly evocative works as they are dedicated to the Russian folk characters Zolushka (Cinderella) and Young Ivan the Fool, the latter symbolising a poor, naive man who always puts his heart before his mind. In Op 51/3, Medtner takes us to an otherworldly dimension with his spellbinding and entrancing melodies. The work is a wonderful introduction to his creative output and interestingly, it was the only Medtner piece that the great Vladimir Horowitz ever recorded.

Who was Nikolai Medtner?

Medtner (1880-1951) was a lesser-known Russian Romantic and contemporary of Rachmaninov. He was a prolific composer for the piano who produced a comparable output to Scriabin, Prokofiev and his other Russian compatriots. Even though Rachmaninov

called him 'the greatest composer of our time', Medtner lived most of his life in poverty and isolation – moving around between Germany, the US and France before settling down in London, where he died.

There are several reasons that explain why Medtner was neglected during his lifetime. He was often dismissed as merely a copy of Rachmaninov, who acknowledged the unfair criticism thrown at his good friend by remarking, 'Medtner is too much an individual to bear resemblance to anyone except the Russian composer Medtner'. Indeed, his compositions exhibit rich lyricism and a unique harmonic language, but many of his works lack instant appeal – requiring repeated listening before one can truly appreciate his art.

His greatest contributions to the piano literature were his *Skazki*, or *Fairy Tales*. These miniature pieces held an important place to Medtner as he constantly composed them throughout his life, akin to Chopin and his *Mazurkas*. In the *Skazki*, we hear Medtner's

cultural heritage as he infused Russian folklore into these compositions.

Fairy Tale Op 51/3

While Medtner was not explicit as to which character, Cinderella or Ivan, was represented in Op 51/3, one cannot help but be immediately captivated by the simplicity and charm of the opening melody. The composer achieves this effect by constructing the theme with little melodic variance while primarily using diatonic tones of the work's home key, A major. These elements evoke a sense of purity and elegance which seem to suggest the portrayal of Cinderella.

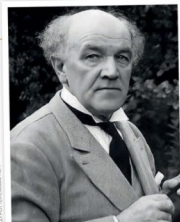
As the music progresses throughout this section, take note of the various passing key areas: F-sharp minor (bar 38), C-sharp minor (bar 42), C major (bar 65). With constant shifts outside of A major and a significant departure

is especially the case in passages saturated with contrapuntal textures such as bars 18-22 (Medtner indicates a flutter pedal marking here). It is also important to note that the composer valued clarity in the performance of his works. According to Edna Iles, Medtner's last student, this was constantly emphasised in her lessons with the composer. So be careful not to overuse the sustain pedal – it should generally be used to enhance the tone without ever compromising clarity.

In the opening theme in bars 1-11, I suggest practising the left hand separately. The key to convey the charming, dream-like mood is the shaping of the left-hand figures. Try floating your wrist upwards gently after each attack with a greater motion on each successive chord – almost as if one is picking up fruit. Feeling one large pulse for every two bars will also help with this (bars 1-2 should feel like a pickup to the downbeat of bar 3; bars 3-4 should feel like a pickup to the downbeat of bar 5, etc.). The left-hand quavers should feel supple, but never rushed or hurried. As the music begins to unfold in bars 18-25, make sure to employ a flutter pedal as previously mentioned. I suggest using quarter pedal, but do experiment with it a bit. Also, keep in mind that the indicated tempo changes in this passage should be seamless and hardly detectable.

At bar 26, we begin a new section resembling that of a folk dance. Even though the mood here is more energetic with perhaps a greater sense of urgency, pay attention to controlling the dynamics and balance of the inner voices synopocated chords (ie bars 26-29, 38-41 etc). I suggest playing them with a legato touch as well as not allowing the fingers to completely leave the keys, a technique commonly referred as playing above the escapement action. Try using this method when you want to play repeated notes or figures smoothly at a softer dynamic level (think of the opening right-hand chords of Ravel's 'Ondine' from *Gaspard de la nuit*, for example).

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Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951)

in the left-hand writing style, the music seems to be more in transit, compared with the stately and graceful theme from the beginning. I believe these changes provide the performer with greater flexibilities in rubato, dynamics and expression. This is especially the case in bars 54-64, where the expressive left-hand line should be played as if it were a secondary melody.

By the time we reach bar 78, we are at one of the lowest points in the music. To bring out this *tenebreoso* (dark) timbre, I suggest voicing the tritone intervals of each hand while employing as much finger legato as possible in the right-hand swirling semiquavers. This will give a more muted and submerged tone, allowing for a greater crescendo and impact as we climb to the piece's apex at bar 90.

With the opening melody's reprise occurring at bar 98, one has more liberties in tempo this time because of the alteration of the left-hand material, which is now in the form of semiquavers with *portato* markings (indicated with staccatos with a slur). Practise these figures separately. Work on shaping them expressively and note the constant shifts in contour and direction. In some ways, I hear the left hand almost like a duet partner. Other than this change, much of the return remains the same. Upon the arrival of bar 120, however, we get a slight detour with a nostalgic and melancholic reminder of the folk-dance theme from bar 30. This time, Medtner wants the music to be more contemplative and less energetic with his indication of tenuto markings in the soprano line and the tempo change: *poco rit.*, *poco meno mosso*. I suggest

approaching these notes with a loose, tension-free arm to produce a weightier tone.

As we approach the end, special consideration must be given to the voicing of chords and balance of textures in bars 128-139. First I would practise the melodic lines in both hands. One should strive for a cushioned and sustained tone. Again, using some arm weight will ensure a nice projection of the melodic line without being overbearing. I would also work on producing a legato touch as much as possible, so one is not relying solely on the pedal. After these voices are carefully worked out, examine the notes on the offbeats so they are discreetly supporting the melodic lines.

For the right hand, work on voicing the top note of each chord so that the tone is not heavy. This is critical as it will help achieve the *senpre accelerando e crescendo* effect. Furthermore, make sure that you approach each right-hand chord with a light, quick, and quasi-staccato touch. The wrist should be supple here. As for the left-hand supporting line (the repeated 'X's), I would use a similar touch as previously discussed in bars 26-29 by playing your left-hand thumb above the escapement action. Think of these repeated tones as a reverberation – they are merely an atmospheric background effect and must not be so clearly heard.

The final measures of the *Fairy Tale* are absolutely fitting. Medtner returns with the opening theme in its original setting one last time, almost as an afterthought. Keep the pacing simple here with little to no rubato except in bars 141-142, where the composer indicates *ritenuto* and a tempo. The arpeggiated gesture into the final chord should not have any pedal. The sound should just dissipate as Cinderella recedes peacefully into the distance. **FP**



Frank Huang's Solo Piano Works of Nikolai Medtner – Vol 1 is now available from Centaur Records (CRC3852) frankhuangpiano.com

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