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Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F-sharp minor, Op. 23

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Piano Sonata No. 4 in F-sharp major, Op. 30

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Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951)

Sonata-Skazka [Märchen-Sonate] in C minor, Op. 25 No. 1

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Mpointproduction • producer: Katja Avdeeva • executive producer: Aliénor Mahy

**Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin** (7 January, 1872 – 14 April, 1915) was a Russian composer and pianist who dedicated his life to creating musical works which would, as he believed, open the portals of the spiritual world. Scriabin took piano lessons as a child, joining, in 1884, Nikolay Zverev's class, where Rachmaninoff was a fellow student. From 1888 to 1892, Scriabin studied at the Moscow Conservatory, where his teachers included Arensky, Taneyev, and Safonov. Although Scriabin's hand could not easily stretch beyond an octave, he developed into a prodigious pianist, launching an international concert career in 1894.

Scriabin started composing during his Conservatory years. Mostly inspired by Chopin, his early works include nocturnes, mazurkas, preludes, and etudes for piano. Between 1904 and 1910, Scriabin lived and concertized in Western Europe and in the United States. At the same time, he was a remarkable pianist and successfully performed his original compositions before international audiences.

Scriabin's writing style changed enormously as he progressed. The early pieces are romantic, fresh, and easily accessible, while his later compositions explore harmony's further reaches. Scriabin's thought processes were immensely complicated, even tinged with solipsism. He experimented with sounds and colors, and made some fascinating and very tangible innovations, such as chords based on fourths and unexpected chromatic effects. Scriabin's gradual move into realms beyond traditional tonality can be clearly heard, for example, in his ten piano sonatas. Today, it is thought by scholars that had Scriabin lived beyond his brief forty-three years, he would have preceded the Austrian school of dodecaphony.

The Piano Sonata No. 3 in F-sharp minor, Op. 23, was composed between 1897 and 1898. Scriabin is said to have called the finished work “Gothic”, evoking the impression of a ruined castle. Some years later however, he devised a different program for this sonata entitled “States of the Soul”:

I. Drammatico: The soul, free and wild, thrown into the whirlpool of suffering and strife.

II. Allegretto: Apparent momentary and illusory respite; tired from suffering, the soul wants to forget, wants to sing and flourish, in spite of everything. But the light rhythm, the fragrant harmonies are just a cover through which gleams the restless and languishing soul.

III. Andante: A sea of feelings, tender and sorrowful: love, sorrow, vague desires, inexplicable thoughts, illusions of a delicate dream.

IV. Finale, Presto con fuoco: From the depth of being rises the fearsome voice of creative man whose victorious song resounds triumphantly. But, too weak yet to reach the acme, he plunges, temporarily defeated, into the abyss of non-being.

The Piano Sonata No. 4 in F-sharp major, Op. 30, was written in 1903. It consists of two movements, Andante and Prestissimo volando, and it is the shortest of Scriabin’s sonatas. The composer himself described this work: “Flight to the star, symbol of happiness”.

**Nikolai Karlovich Medtner** (5 January 1880 – 13 November 1951) was a Russian composer and pianist, who studied piano at the Moscow Conservatory. He took private composition lessons with Sergei Taneyev. After graduating from the Moscow Conservatory with distinction in 1900, he was awarded First Honorable Mention at Vienna's Third International Anton Rubinstein Competition. Medtner later appeared in Moscow under the baton of the legendary Arthur Nikisch, playing the Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto. In Germany, he performed solo works of Beethoven and Schumann. In Berlin and Leipzig, he introduced his own piano compositions and songs. He gradually devoted more time to composition, but still performed, and in 1908 he was invited to join the Conservatory faculty as a piano professor. With the production of several piano sonatas, some shorter piano pieces, and a number of songs — he would eventually write more than one hundred — Medtner's image as a composer clarified itself and he resigned that first teaching post after a year to devote himself full time to his music, participate actively in Moscow's various professional societies, perform composer's concerts, and serve on the advisory panel of Sergei Koussevitsky's newly founded Editions Russes de la Musique.

Medtner resumed his professorship from 1915 to 1921, remaining there throughout World War I, the 1917 Revolution and its aftermath. But composition and performance of his music so filled Medtner's life that he left Russia to acquaint the West with his newest works. Fatefully, both fear of hardships caused by economic collapse in Russia and incomprehension of the magnitude of the historic events happening in his homeland had their unintended effect: what was to have been a limited tour for

Medtner became a virtual emigration. Except for a brief return in 1927, the composer remained abroad until his death in London, on November 13, 1951. After a tour of the United States in 1925, he settled in Paris, which had the most important Russian émigré colony in Europe.

Medtner's music was harmonically adventurous, but had a Romantic aesthetic that was out of fashion in trendy Paris. Other locales welcomed his music more readily: he was acclaimed in the United States and Canada, and especially in England, where he moved in 1935, shortly after his book *The Muse and the Fashion* was published by Rachmaninoff in Paris. In the book, he expressed his disillusionment with modern music.

6 Faced with three decades of shifting style, compositional vogues and musical fads, Medtner remained faithful to the standard of clarity of purpose he learned from a lifetime of classical performance. Above all, he considered himself Beethoven's student. Reflecting his approach "in defense of the fundamentals of musical art," the composer later wrote (in *The Muse and the Fashion*) of the essence of theme, melody, form and rhythm, and of the "principal meanings" and "unwritten laws that are the foundation of musical language." In later years, Alexander Glazunov called Nikolai Medtner "an artist guarding the eternal laws of art."

Fourteen piano sonatas comprise a major part of Medtner's body of compositions. Medtner also willingly uses the small one-movement sonata, similar to the *poème* genre. From as early as his second opus, Medtner developed something interesting, something that became typical for him in the development of a sonata—the creation

of thematic sonatas. None of the composers preceding him had worked in this genre to such an extent.

*Sonata-Skazka* (usually translated as *Fairy Tale Sonata*) is a short work written in 1910-11. Curiously the theme of the second movement bears a similarity to a famous melody by Rachmaninoff. This is coincidental, as the latter was not written until some thirty years later. This was the only Medtner sonata that Rachmaninoff performed.

*Sonata-Reminiscenza* is one of the most famous of Medtner's compositions. It is a one-movement sonata, part of the *Forgotten Melodies* cycle, Op. 38.

## KATJA AVDEEVA

Russian music is a constant feature in the work of this pianist who started to play piano at the age of four. At eight, Ms. Avdeeva already made her first public appearance on stage for a piano competition in St. Petersburg, where she later studied at the State Conservatory with Marina Wolf and Pavel Egorov in the best traditions of the Russian piano school. After graduating with distinction in Russia she went on to study in Switzerland, with Marc Pantillon in Neuchâtel and Thomas Larcher at the Basel Music Academy. After she received her soloist's diploma from the Conservatory, the recording of her final recital of Rachmaninoff's *Études-tableaux* was bought and released by Sony. She is a laureate of national and international piano competitions in Switzerland, France, and Spain.

Her fascination for contemporary music has led her to work with such composers as Pierre Boulez, Harrison Birtwistle, Heinz Holliger, Otto Zikan, Kasper de Roo (Windkraft Tirol), and Igor Drukh. Her performances have been broadcast by ORF, Radio Suisse Romande, and Radio Hermitage. Currently, Ms. Avdeeva is busy with an intensive concert activity, performing as soloist and chamber music artist in Russia, China and Europe, in halls such as the St. Petersburg Philharmonia, Teatru Manoel, Teatro Sá de Miranda, and others. She has appeared in numerous festivals, such as Klangspuren, Lucerne Festival, Les Jardins Musicaux, and VFMIF.





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