

## Glory days

Alexander Karpeyev's approach to the piano harks back to what he regards as the golden age of Russian culture, when noble ideals lay at the heart of music-making. *Robert Turnbull* meets a pianist who combines intellectual rigour with Russian soulfulness from a bygone era

**P**UBLICITY PHOTOS OF YOUNG PIANISTS THESE DAYS set out to seduce. The winning smiles; the curvaceous, perfectly lit bodies; wistful gazes across Bösendorfers... all ploys intended to pull at our heart strings. But the austere, chiaroscuro shot favoured by Alexander Karpeyev as his calling card is cool and autocratic. The Russian is seated ceremoniously on an ornate sofa behind which an embroidered curtain hangs ominously. His erect posture and look of aristocratic disdain are tempered only by the fact that he isn't completely dressed: the bow tie of his perfect evening suit hangs open and untied.

It's an 'old world' image contrived to reflect not how nice or presentable Karpeyev is, but rather to convey who he is – or what he has lost. Karpeyev seems to be identifying with his native Russia; not the reactionary world of Vladimir Putin but, as he sees it, the splendour and romance of the Romanovs. 'I always felt that something beautiful and irreplaceable died in 1917, as Tsarism fell and Bolshevism arrived,' says the soft-spoken 35-year-old, who of course has no experience of either. 'The elevated mood and nobility of the spirit expressed in the music will never again be part of Russian culture.'

Karpeyev took up the piano aged seven in the elegant city of Saratov on the Volga. In 2000 he entered the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory to study with, among others, Vera Gornostayeva, whose protégés include Ivo Pogorelich and Sergei Babayan. There he studied the music of Liszt, Rachmaninov, Scriabin and Tchaikovsky before honing in on music written between 1911 and 1917, the period when so many leading classical musicians left Russia for good. Karpeyev wasn't to know then that he too would follow.

Graduating from the Conservatory with honours in 2005, he won a scholarship to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London to

study with Joan Havill. There he discovered, he says, 'a wealth of piano sonorities that were really inaccessible to me in Russia,' but also the composer that has dominated his early career and who became the subject of his doctoral thesis: Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951).

Medtner's music is an acquired taste. Intellectually and technically demanding, it struggles on first hearing to match Rachmaninov's melodic power or Prokofiev's sparkling wit. Karpeyev insists that appreciating this composer's output takes time, not unlike the late works of Beethoven, 'It's truly enigmatic: a perfect fusion of the Russian soul and German intellect, by an innovator who was also a preserver of the great Late Romantic musical traditions.'

Indeed Medtner, who was of German extraction, actually considered himself a true heir of Beethoven in his attempt to enrich

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JULIAN DRYSON



and expand sonata form. 'The beauty of melodic line was never his top priority,' says Karpeyev. 'For him melodies were really themes to be exploited, so the result is a beautiful kaleidoscope of musical ideas, some more like lyrical than others, brilliantly contrasted and juxtaposed.'

At the Moscow Conservatory Medtner attended the same class as Scriabin and Rachmaninov and was considered equally talented; but under the Soviets, he became a persona non grata. He managed to leave Russia when Rachmaninov organised a concert tour for him, but was ill suited to the kind of American itineraries that brought his friend fame and wealth, choosing instead to settle in Europe, first in Paris, a hub of Russian émigrés at the time, then in the the wilds of Warwickshire in the English Midlands and finally to Golders Green in North London.

Life in Britain began with invitations to play and broadcast for the BBC and considerable accolades as a pianist, but at the onset of the Second World War the momentum was lost. Medtner concentrated on recording, his reputation only kept alive by a swathe of admirers, among them the Maharaja of Mysore, Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar, who sponsored the recording of a substantial chunk of the composer's oeuvre. Medtner died in 1951 and was buried in Hendon Cemetery.

It was only in 1954 when Emil Gilels played Medtner's Sonata in G minor and his widow Anna returned to the Soviet Union that

Medtner enjoyed some rehabilitation, while the international effort gathered pace with the efforts of Geoffrey Tozer, Dmitry Alexeev and Nikolay Demidenko. Feeling obliged to accelerate the process, Karpeyev created his Medtnerfest in London after discussion with fellow enthusiast Alexeev, as well as Iain Burnside and Alexei Volodin. Now in its second year, he's grateful to City University and the Royal College of Music for providing free venues, not to mention Pushkin House, a vibrant centre for Russian culture in Bloomsbury. All of Medtner's vast output will feature, but also works by a handful of his contemporaries that have little, if any profile in the UK, such as Alexander Gretchaninov, Georgy Catoire and Nikolay Golovanov.

As a soloist and chamber musician, Karpeyev has been prolific, performing in most of London's best-known recital venues and at Manchester's Bridgewater Hall, as well as extensive tours all over the world. His most recent London recital, at Kings Place, elicited rave reviews. Writing in the *Catholic Herald*, Michael White said: 'It was in epic scores by Medtner (the *Sonata-Ballade*) and Stravinsky (movements from *Petrushka*) that Karpeyev really triumphed, playing them with virtuosity and more: the deep, internalised musicianship of a master.' 🎹

[www.medtnerfest.co.uk](http://www.medtnerfest.co.uk)

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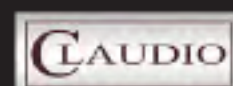


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