

MEDTNER Violin Sonata No. 3, "Epica". 1 Sonata-Idylle in G. 8 Songs, op. 612 • Alexander Karpeyev (pn); 1Natalia Lomeiko (vn); 2Theodore Platt (bar) • SOMM 0674 (74:18 )

Nikolai Medtner (1879–1951) was almost an exact contemporary of Rachmaninoff (1873–1943), with whom he was great friends. What keeps Medtner from his counterpart's level of popularity is that he lacked Rachmaninoff's melodic genius. (You cannot imagine Medtner's tunes being turned into popular songs like "Full Moon and Empty Arms.") Medtner's idiom is also somewhat more dense harmonically and less Romantically ripe. Nevertheless, there is much pleasure to be gotten from his music, and it is good to see its popularity grow.

Even though Medtner owes a great deal of his reputation to solo piano pieces, the major work on this disc is the Third Violin Sonata, subtitled "Epica." At 43:57, it is the third-longest violin sonata in my fairly large record collection (only the two by Furtwängler are longer). When it was suggested to Medtner that the piece might be a bit too long, he responded, "Whoever heard of a short epic?" It is a complicated work, begun in 1935 but put aside until 1938. During that period the composer's brother Emil, with whom he had a very close and complicated relationship, died. Afterwards, Nikolai wrote, "He was like a father to me." (Their relationship is well described in Francis Pott's admirable program notes.)

A tragic feeling underlies the first movement, which opens with a series of tolling chords that recall Russian church bells before continuing in a restrained, at times melancholy vein. The mood shifts to an energetic Allegro, but the movement never quite forgoes its dark undertones, thanks in part to Medtner's use of modal harmonies. The more upbeat second movement Scherzo, marked Allegro molto vivace e leggiero, begins without pause. Its rhythms are reminiscent of a tango. The succeeding Andante con moto returns to the modal harmonies of Russian liturgical music and is particularly beautiful. In the finale, marked Allegro molto, Medtner quotes a Russian chant, "Christ is Risen," interweaving it with a variety of thematic material and rhythms.

The "Epica" Sonata is at once accessible and ambitious. The more I listened, the more gratifying I found it. I cannot compare the performance by violinist Natalia Lomeiko and pianist Alexander Karpeyev with other recordings, which I have not heard, as this was my introduction to this piece. I do find them very persuasive and intense.

As a soloist, Karpeyev does not find the rich variety of color in the two-movement Sonata-Idylle that Marc-André Hamelin does in his Hyperion recording, part of a terrific four-CD set of Medtner's piano music. But taken on its own terms, this is attractive and communicative playing. Karpeyev has the technique for Medtner's demanding writing (particularly in the second movement). He is able to clarify Medtner's tricky rhythms, which are described in Potts's notes as a "tendency to think in repeating rhythms that are gently at odds with the bar length." Through carefully thought-out accenting and precise dynamic shadings, Karpeyev keeps the music moving forward. He also displays a good ear for color.

Medtner composed about 100 songs, divided roughly equally between Russian and German. The eight songs that comprise op. 61 were assembled after his death and not conceived of as a cycle. The first two are in German, setting poems by Eichendorff; the last six in Russian set Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tyutchev. Two of the most beautiful songs are "Prayer" and "Noon," which baritone Theodore Platt sings with warmth and deep feeling. Platt is British-Russian, born in London, so his comfort with Medtner's songs is no surprise. At the conclusion of the seventh song, "Oh my foreboding soul," a Tyutchev setting, Platt executes a perfectly judged diminuendo over 11 seconds, during which his voice retains its fullness. Karpeyev is a knowing, sensitive accompanist.

The recorded sound for the instrumental works is fine, but I wish there was more focus on Platt's voice in the songs—it is almost lost at his entrance in the first song, and throughout, the piano has more presence than the singer. One does acclimate, at least enough to recognize Platt's excellent singing and the quality of Medtner's writing. Somm provides texts and translations. I wish record companies would provide transliterations of Russian texts, however. For those who can't read the Cyrillic alphabet it is difficult to follow the singer with any precision.

This is a welcome sampling of Medtner's wide-ranging output and can be recommended to his enthusiasts as well as to curious listeners who want to explore him. Henry Fogel