

MEDTNER Violin Sonata No. 3 in e, op. 57 "Epica". 1 Sonata-Idylle in G, op. 56. Eight Songs, op. 61 • Alexander Karpeyev (pn); 1 Natalia Lomeiko (vn); 2 Theodore Platt (bar) • SOMM 0674 (74:18)

Medtner in England presents three works by the Russian-born composer and pianist. After leaving Russia in 1921, Nikolai Medtner and his wife Anna lived in Germany and France, before permanently relocating to England in 1935. The "Epica" Violin Sonata (1935–38) and Sonata-Idylle (1935–37) for piano date from the Medtners' first years in England. The Eight Songs, op. 61, published after Medtner's death, are a collection of works composed over several years. The major piece on Medtner in England is the Third Violin Sonata, aptly named "Epica." The piece, dedicated to the memory of his brother Emil, lasts three quarters of an hour. When questioned about the propriety of such a time span for a violin sonata, Medtner replied: "Whoever heard of a short epic?" In his superb liner notes for Medtner in England, Francis Pott observes that the "Epica" explores music based "on intensive use of 'cell-like' ideas and a certain consistency in how a solo string line relates to its keyboard counterparts. Such music demands effort from its listeners, of a kind incompletely rewarded by a single hearing. It also denies itself the opulence of, say, a 'big tune' by Rachmaninoff, in favour of a more oblique, more exacting and less immediately fulfilling discourse. In posterity this may have done Medtner a disservice; yet his intricate music possesses an unusual capacity to 'get under the skin' of the receptive, persistent listener, as reaction to its gradual re-emergence in recent decades has amply shown." Jim Svejda, in a Fanfare review (42:3, Jan/Feb 2019) of a Hänssler recording (17087) of the three Medtner Violin Sonatas, is more skeptical: "While a composer of undeniable skill and resource, Medtner's chronic inability to invent memorable themes put him on the fringes of musical history and will undoubtedly keep him there permanently. Here's another little test. Name a single incontestably great composer who was not a master of unforgettable melody. (Don't waste any time on that one, as there aren't any.)" I'd nominate Bruckner in response to Svejda's rhetorical question (if I remember Bruckner melodies, it's due less to their inspiration than the composer's trademark repetition). But both Pott and Sveda correctly observe that if the "Epica" succeeds with audiences, that's less do to the memorability of Medtner's foundational thematic material, than what the composer does with it.

I find the "Epica" a fascinating piece. Two large-scale movements in sonata form bookend a scherzo and slow-tempo movement. To be sure, Medtner's Russian heritage may often be heard, in evocations of folk melodies, and the chant "Christ is Risen." But Medtner's peripatetic life experiences may also be gleaned from music that calls upon German, French, and English influences, often juxtaposed side by side. Through all this, Medtner is constantly manipulating his thematic material, both rhythmically and via instrumental guises. As both Francis Pott and Jim Sveda remind us, the "Epica" does not make for easily accessible listening. And this, despite Medtner's rather conservative approach to tonality. But it is a work teeming with energy, and rich, challenging writing for the violin and piano. A successful performance of the "Epica" demands artists who not only can surmount all its technical hurdles, but also embrace Medtner's complex and rigorous mode of expression. Violinist Natalia Lomeiko and pianist Alexander Karpeyev are such artists. Their rendition of the "Epica" is razor-sharp in execution, flexibly phrased with a variety of dynamics and colors, and brimming with commitment. Karpeyev is also impressive in the far briefer Sonata-Idylle, a two-movement piece that weds Medtner's motivic exploration with a more lyrical voice.

The Eight Songs, op. 61, include settings of texts in German and Russian by Eichendorff, Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tyutchev. Here, the writing is highly melodic, expressive, and quite demanding for the vocalist, who on occasion must achieve an operatic power and range. The piano writing is rich and colorful as well. Karpeyev is the superb accompanist, and lyric baritone Theodore Platt sings with impressive color, beauty, and keen expression. The recorded sound is excellent for all three performances. The booklet includes full sung texts and translations. This is a fine achievement, highly recommended. Ken Meltzer