

NAXOS

MEDTNER

Violin Sonatas Nos. 1 and 2 2 Canzonas with Dances

Laurence Kayaleh, Violin • Paul Stewart, Piano



Nikolay Medtner (1880–1951) Complete Works for Violin and Piano, Vol. 2

The piano works of Nikolay Medtner are finally achieving the recognition they merit, but not so his compositions for violin and piano. A great pity, for they encompass music of rare beauty and power, gratifying for both performer and audience. Medtner's scores are unique: distinctly Russian, unabashedly Romantic and full-bodied, yet intellectually devised and highly disciplined, every note and detail given a purpose or, in the composer's words, "a destiny". Close acquaintance and repeated listenings reveal his extraordinary craft. Medtner's five violin and piano works occupy a special place in his oeuvre and fill an important gap in the limited Russian repertoire for this combination.

Although trained as a pianist, and chiefly a composer for the piano, the violin featured prominently in Medtner's life. He had played it as a child, and both his wife and an elder brother, Alexander, were professional violinists. *Sonata No. 1 in B minor, Op. 21*, dates from 1910–11 and is one of his best-known works.

Medtner's rigorous upbringing emphasised the Greek and Latin classics as well as nineteenth-century Russian and German literature. A fascination for the myth of Dionysus or Bacchus, god of wine and intoxication (in both the physical and spiritual sense) was behind the inspiration for this sonata. In ancient times Dionysus was worshipped through ecstatic song and dance; appropriately, the sonata's three movements are *Canzona* (Song), *Danza*, and *Ditirambo* (a choric hymn and dance to Dionysus; Medtner had previously used the term for his *Three Dithyrambs, Op. 10*, for piano). The *Canzona*, marked *con fluidezza*, is a lilting siciliano, sensuous and melancholic. *Danza* begins as a coy, canonic conversation interrupted by a raucous and syncopated *Presto* – the effect is somewhat of a genteel tea party where the hostess suddenly lifts her skirts and dances on the table. The ceremonious *Ditirambo* follows attacca, tolling bells in B major heralding an approaching procession. This rondo includes a tortured episode in B flat minor marked *dolente*; surprisingly its rhythm is that of a tango. Just as

the movement reaches its powerful peak, a gradual winding down ushers the procession off-stage, thematic fragments from the previous movements making their exit as well.

Dedicated to his sister-in-law Anna (whom he later married), only the *Canzona* and *Danza* were ready in time for a scheduled première by the Medtner brothers. The completed work was first heard in Moscow in February 1911, performed by the composer and Alexander Mogilevsky. We are fortunate to have Medtner's own recording with the British violinist Cecilia Hansen. This invaluable document from 1947 is the primary source for the present performance, with the composer's occasional changes in text, phrasing, dynamics and other details incorporated.

In the decade before the Russian Revolution, Medtner lived a prosperous life, well-established in the world of music. The events of October 1917 changed all that. Dispossessed and suffering extreme hardships, Medtner and his wife were granted visas to leave Russia only in late 1921. They never returned, except for a brief concert tour in 1927 during which his next two works for violin and piano were introduced.

Composed in Europe and polished during his 1924 tour of America, *Two Canzonas with Dances, Op. 43* return to the Bacchic connotations of *Op. 21*. These engaging miniatures are Medtner's only examples of what might be termed "light" music, although his distinctive craft is in evidence throughout. The first *Canzona*, in Medtner's "pure" tonality of C major, has the tentative air of a child taking his first steps, the unusual time-signature of 11/8 adding to the hesitancy. Touches of humour abound, a comic rush of scales leading headlong to the capricious, waltz-like *Dance*. The second *Canzona* is a different matter: a cry for a lost Russia, nostalgic and bittersweet. Its complement is a rough-and-ready *Dance* whose gentler trio is oddly reminiscent of a theme in Schumann's *Piano Concerto*, a work Medtner had often played in his youth.

Medtner's "Spring Sonata", his *Sonata No. 2 in G major, Op. 44*, also dates from those peripatetic years. As with the second *Canzona*, its inspiration was triggered by homesickness, particularly for the memories of springtime in Russia. Symbolic of rebirth and the affirmation of God in nature, spring was especially significant to Medtner. A quotation from Fyodor Tyutchev's poem *Vesennyye vody* (Spring Waters), also the text of a famous song by Rachmaninov, adumbrates the Finale's main theme in the printed score.

The *Second Sonata* is conceived as a gigantic structure lasting over forty minutes. An imposing *Introduzione* immediately announces a "motto" motif, in a characteristic dotted rhythm, which will unify the entire sonata. The first movement fairly bursts with impassioned melody, exhaustively developed and crowned with a magnificent *Coda*, its many themes deconstructed over the course of a long diminuendo. A brief *Cadenza*, featuring the "motto" in the piano and some virtuoso writing for the violin, serves as a prelude to six variations whose plaintive theme is redolent of Russian Orthodox liturgical music. Cast in the Aeolian mode common to a *dumka* or lament, each variation becomes increasingly more folkloric, both instruments imitating the strumming of a balalaika in the final measures. Another short *Cadenza* (this time spotlighting the piano) launches the folkloric *Finale*. In rondo form, the rhythm of its main theme corresponds exactly to Tyutchev's words, "*Viesna idyot!*" ("Spring comes!"). Subsidiary material consists of a voluptuous episode in B major, and a quasi-polonaise in C major/minor (a small, deliberate plagiarism from Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz* underlines the demonic side of this section). The former episode, returning quietly and most effectively in the pianist's left hand, gathers intensity until an overwhelming climax is reached. The *Coda* gleefully

exploits every Medtnerian trick in the book, juxtaposing themes from all three movements with triumphant final statements of the "motto". Spring has indeed come!

Medtner reserved the premiere of *Op. 43* and *Op. 44* for his 1927 visit to Soviet Russia. Both were enthusiastically received by the Moscow public, the composer partnering violinist Dmitry Tsyganov. In the audience was Sergey Prokofiev, no great admirer of Medtner's "nineteenth-century" aesthetics; how ironic to discover a harmonic progression in the final pages of Prokofiev's *Eighth Piano Sonata, Op. 84*, completed seventeen years later, lifted directly from Medtner's second *Canzona!*

Following this tour, and after unsuccessful attempts to establish a career in continental Europe, Medtner settled in England. Despite an initial flurry of activity, the Second World War curtailed much of his concert work. A serious heart condition limited post-war public appearances, Medtner resigning himself to a quiet life of composition and teaching. At this sad time, a *deus ex machina* entered Medtner's life. An unusually cultivated man and a fine pianist (as was his sister), the Maharaja of the southern Indian state of Mysore was dismayed to learn of the composer's circumstances. Under his auspices, a Medtner Society was founded to promote and record the composer playing his own works. Between 1947 and 1950 this extraordinary endeavour yielded a legacy which preserves for ever Medtner's magisterial playing and definitive interpretations; among the recordings is the aforementioned performance of *Op. 21*. In gratitude, the composer dedicated his crowning achievement, *Piano Concerto No. 3, Op. 60*, to the Maharaja. Medtner spent his last months confident that posterity would never forget him. Now, in the 21st century, his star has risen again.

Paul Stewart, 2007



Laurence Kayaleh

An exceptional artist, Laurence Kayaleh has performed as soloist in such prestigious centres as Paris, Brussels, Zurich, Tokyo, Washington, Cleveland, Saint Louis, Sofia, Montréal, Bern, Caracas, Moscow, Modena and Geneva. She has appeared with many distinguished orchestras: the Zurich Tonhalle, the Russian National Orchestra, the National Orchestra (Washington), Orchestre Lamoureux (Paris), Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, and the major orchestras of Cleveland, Saint Louis, Caracas (Simon Bolivar), Basel and Mexico City, led by conductors of the calibre of Slatkin, Pletnev, Dutoit, Kogan, Venzago, Novak and Wakasugi. The world-renowned critic of *Le Figaro*, Pierre Petit, used the phrase “L’Archet Royal” to describe her golden tone. She was awarded the Grand Prize at the Stresa International Competition, and has been a guest at major festivals (Lucerne, Blossom, Cervantino, Divonne, Ottawa, and the Abbey Bach Festival in Oregon). In 2001 she was made a member of the American Who’s Who Historical Society. Laurence Kayaleh plays a 1742 Guarnerius which belonged to the famous violinist and pedagogue, Carl Flesch.

Photo: Michael Slobodian

Paul Stewart

Since his orchestral début with the Toronto Symphony in 1981, Paul Stewart has become one of Canada’s best-known musicians, appearing frequently as guest soloist with major orchestras, in solo recital, and in collaboration with such artists as Maureen Forrester, Jessye Norman, Ben Heppner, James Campbell and Rivka Golani. He is also one of the handful of pianists worldwide who champions the music of Nikolay Medtner, which he has performed on four continents. In 1996 he made two important débuts: in London’s Wigmore Hall with a programme of Medtner and Rachmaninov, and at the Moscow Conservatory, playing Rachmaninov’s *Fourth Piano Concerto* with the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra, a performance subsequently released on CD. Recent solo appearances in the United States, Europe and Asia have won him the highest critical acclaim. Recordings include music by Beethoven, Schubert, Liszt, Ravel and Britten, and he is currently recording Medtner’s *Complete Piano Sonatas* for Naxos. Paul Stewart is a professor of piano at the Université de Montréal, Canada.



Photo: Jamusz Sliwka

Distinctly Russian, unabashedly Romantic and full-bodied, yet intellectually devised and highly disciplined, Medtner's compositions for violin and piano encompass music of rare beauty and power, gratifying for both performer and audience. *Violin Sonata No. 1*, one of his best-known works, was inspired by the myth of Dionysus (or Bacchus), god of wine and intoxication. Known as the "*Spring Sonata*", Medtner's epically-proportioned *Violin Sonata No. 2* is a work of exile with distinct memories of springtime in Russia in its late romantic textures. The first volume of this series is released on 8.570298.

Nikolay
MEDTNER
(1880–1951)

Complete Works for Violin and Piano • 2

Violin Sonata No. 1 in B minor, Op. 21	20:34	Violin Sonata No. 2 in G major, Op. 44	41:30
1 I. Canzona: Canterellando; con fluidezza	7:53	8 I. Introduzione: Maestoso (poco quasi cadenza)	2:07
2 II. Danza: Allegro scherzando	5:50	9 Allegro appassionato	14:32
3 III. Ditirambo: Festivamente	6:50	10 Cadenza I: Tranquillo cantabile	1:09
2 Canzonas with Dances, Op. 43	16:56	11 II. Tema con variazioni – Tema: Andante con moto	1:41
4 Canzona No. 1 in C major: Andantino con moto	4:59	12 Variation 1: Tranquillo cantabile, ma con moto	1:53
5 Danza No. 1 in C major: Allegro non troppo e capriccioso	1:54	13 Variation 2: L'istesso tempo ma poco più tranquillo	2:09
6 Canzona No. 2 in B minor: Andantino cantabile	6:36	14 Variation 3: Allegretto tranquillo, grazioso	1:24
7 Danza No. 2 in B minor: Allegro	3:26	15 Variation 4: Allegro molto ritmico	1:04
		16 Variation 5: Allegro molto	0:43
		17 Variation 6: Allegro risoluto	1:33
		18 Cadenza II: Tranquillo cantabile	0:58
		19 III. Finale (Rondo): Allegro risoluto	12:17



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Cover photo: Rotunda on the pond, Ekaterinburg, Russia (Sergey Anatolievich Pristyazhnyuk / Dreamstime.com)

