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NEW LIGHT ON NIKOLAY MEDTNER

AS PIANIST AND TEACHER

The Edna Iles Medtner Collection (EIMC) at the British Library

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Dissertation prepared in partial fulfilment of the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation introduces the ‘Edna Iles’s Medtner Collection’ (EIMC), held by the British Library in London, and provides a detailed analysis of her ‘Notes on the Interpretation of Medtner’s Works’. Nikolay Medtner (1880–1951) was one of Russia’s leading, early-20th-century composers, who spent the latter part of his life in the UK. He wrote mainly for the piano, composing 14 piano sonatas, three piano concertos, 108 songs, three violin sonatas, a piano quintet and more than 90 pieces for solo piano. Although he performed and recorded, and was considered a prominent composer while he was resident in the UK, his wider renown in the West was limited.

Edna Iles (1905–2003) was an English pianist and Medtner’s last pupil. She took numerous notes during and immediately following her lessons and, in 1997, donated all of her Medtner-related materials to the British Library. I am the fourth person to consult it. The scope of the EIMC is impressive: Medtner manuscripts, newspaper cuttings, photographs and letters, all of which she carefully organized before donating. Importantly, her ‘Notes on the Interpretation of Medtner’s Works’ contain unique information about how he taught and thought his music should be interpreted. She was, in fact, the only Medtner student to leave systematic written evidence of his pedagogy; the recordings she made of his music further demonstrate her mastery of his principles. She became, in effect, his disciple. This dissertation assesses the new light her ‘Notes’ shed on our knowledge of his methods and pianism.

The Introduction provides details of Medtner reception history and introduces all available sources on Medtner performance practice. Chapter 1 summarizes the lives of Medtner and Iles, and elucidates the nature of their relationship. Chapters 2 through to 4 discuss the disciplines of Medtner’s approach to playing – basic piano technique, articulation, practicing, pedaling and memorization – corroborated elsewhere. Chapters 5 and 6 unravel the more intellectual concepts of *fil rouge*, tempo, phrasing, voicing and his distinction between energetic and rounded music that form the core of Iles’s ‘Notes’ and represent the EIMC’s most original contribution to Medtner performance practice. Chapter 7 provides the opportunity to observe and apply Medtner’s interpretive philosophy to a single work (*Sonate-Idylle*, Op. 56) by blending the advice conveyed in his printed scores with the methodology and insights he communicated to Iles. The Conclusions affirm the importance of the EIMC as a uniquely detailed primary source on Medtnerian performance practice.

An inventory of the Edna Iles Medtner Collection and transcript of her ‘Notes on Interpretation of Medtner’s Works’ can be found in Appendices One and Two. Appendix Three offers a facsimile of exercises Medtner gave to Iles, preserved in her own handwriting. Appendices Four and Five provide a discography of Medtner piano works and pertinent contextual photographic evidence.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CUP	Cambridge University Press
Dent	J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.
Dover	Dover Publications Ltd.
EIMC	The Edna Iles Medtner Collection
GSMD	Guildhall School of Music & Drama
<i>M&L</i>	<i>Music & Letters</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Music and Musicians</i>
<i>MO</i>	<i>Musical Opinion</i>
<i>MQ</i>	<i>The Musical Quarterly</i>
<i>MR</i>	<i>Music Review</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>The Musical Times</i>
mvt	movement
OUP	Oxford University Press

The *New Grove* system of transliteration was used for all Russian titles and names excepting those commonly used in English (Gilels, Kabalevsky, Rachmaninov).

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INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of Medtner and his performance practice

Nikolay Medtner was a fine pianist and deeply knowledgeable teacher as well as a prolific Russian composer and respected contemporary of Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915) and Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943).¹ Born in tsarist Russia in 1880,² Medtner later lived in Germany and France before ending his days in England.

While pursuing a successful performing career in Russia, Medtner taught first in private schools in Moscow and then for three years at his *alma mater*, the Moscow Conservatory, where he chose to work with a select group of students (seven during his last year there). Although his Moscow recitals had always been rapturously received,³ his early appearances in Germany in 1904-07 elicited a mixed reception: the critics gave due credit to him as a pianist, but damningly cast doubt on the artistic qualities of his music.⁴ Thereafter he sought in vain to win the acknowledgement he felt he deserved as a major European composer.

Medtner left the Soviet Union in 1921 and was able to return only once in 1927 for what was a remarkably successful concert tour bearing in mind that his official reputation and the prestige he had enjoyed, like those of Stravinsky and Rachmaninov, had diminished after emigrating. Indeed, when he applied for a visa in the 1930s to return for a further tour of the USSR, it was refused. The move to England in 1935 proved initially to be a wise decision: in the years up to the War, he managed to secure

¹ Zarui Apetyan, ed., *N. K. Metner: Pis'ma* [Letters] (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1973), p.3; Heinrich Neuhaus, 'A contemporary of Scriabin and Rachmaninov', Zarui Apetyan, ed., *N.K. Metner: Vospominaniya, stat'i, material'i* [Reminiscences, Articles, Materials] (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1981), p.31; Nikolay Myaskovskiy, 'N. Medtner – Impressions on his Creative Personality', *Russians on Russian Music, 1880-1917: An Anthology*, trans. & ed. Stuart Campbell (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp.185-93.

² 1879 according to the Russian calendar at the time.

³ A. Belī, 'Snezhniye arabeski. Muzika Metnera' [Snow Arabesques: Music of Medtner], *Sovetskaya muzika*, 3 (March 1990), pp.118-22.

⁴ Apetyan, *Letters*, pp.68-69 and 114-116.

regular concert and broadcast bookings. To his delight, the British critics admired him both as a pianist and as a composer. One described his music as ‘of rare beauty, rich imagination and nobility of feeling’; another remarked that ‘a musician more thoroughly skilled in the mere craft of composition could not be imagined’; and a third noted that, ‘the spirit of his music is that of the great romanticists of the past, strengthened by experience of the modern world’ and described Medtner as ‘by far the most interesting and striking personality in modern Russian music’. Medtner’s playing was described as ‘in the grand style and [reminiscent] of Rachmaninov’s’.⁵

In the 1930s and 40s, Medtner’s music was censored in the Soviet Union for political reasons, and it was not until after Stalin’s death that it began to be performed by a new generation of Russian pianists. His widow Anna brought his manuscripts and notebooks back to Moscow when she was allowed to return in 1958; they now form the core of a large collection called the ‘Fond Metnera’ [Medtner Resource] stored at the Glinka Museum of Musical Culture.⁶ The ‘Fond Metnera’ is the largest collection of Medtner-related materials: nearly three hundred of Medtner’s manuscripts, literary works (including the diaries that later formed the *Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer*), 3356 letters, various documents (including records of his time at the Moscow Conservatory), books, concert programmes, photographs and printed music. Anna’s generous gift immediately attracted the interest of the Soviet musicologists Yelena Dolinskaya and Isaak Zetel’ in particular, and eventually led to the publication of Medtner’s *Complete Edition* (1959–1963).⁷

At much the same time (1963) Medtner’s notes on piano playing and practising

⁵ Richard Holt, ‘Nicolas Medtner’, *The Gramophone* (December 1951), p.151 and (February 1946), p.136; E. Newman, ‘Medtner’, *MT*, 863, 56 (Jan. 1915) p.9; Montagu Montagu-Nathan, ‘Medtner’, *Contemporary Russian Composers* (London: C. Palmer & Hayward, 1917), p.236; Kaikhosru Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1932), p.132.

⁶ The full content of the ‘Medtner Resource’ is available (in Russian) on page 106 of <<http://www.glinka.museum/upload/iblock/7df/02.pdf>> (date last accessed: 17 July 2014).

⁷ Nikolay Medtner. *Complete Edition*. 12 vols. (Moscow: State Music Publishers, 1959-1963). Medtner’s songs on Nietzsche texts, Op. 19 and Op. 19a were not included in the *Complete Edition* on ideological grounds.

were published in the form of a book – *Povsednevnyaya rabota pianista i kompozitora* [The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer]⁸ – prepared by two of his students, Maria Gurvich and Leopold Lukomskiy. They divided Medtner’s notes into four categories: (1) general instructions for pianists, (2) work on different aspects of musical performance, (3) practising, and (4) notes on the composer’s works. Originally set down for his personal use, Medtner’s notes spanned his experience of more than two decades and, as the *Daily Work*, have – until now – formed the core of our knowledge of Medtner’s performance practice; it should, however, be used with care because he never sanctioned its publication. Although it was recently translated into English,⁹ it has yet to become widely known; accordingly, I have incorporated a detailed analysis of it as part of this dissertation as a source of comparison in my study of the EIMC.

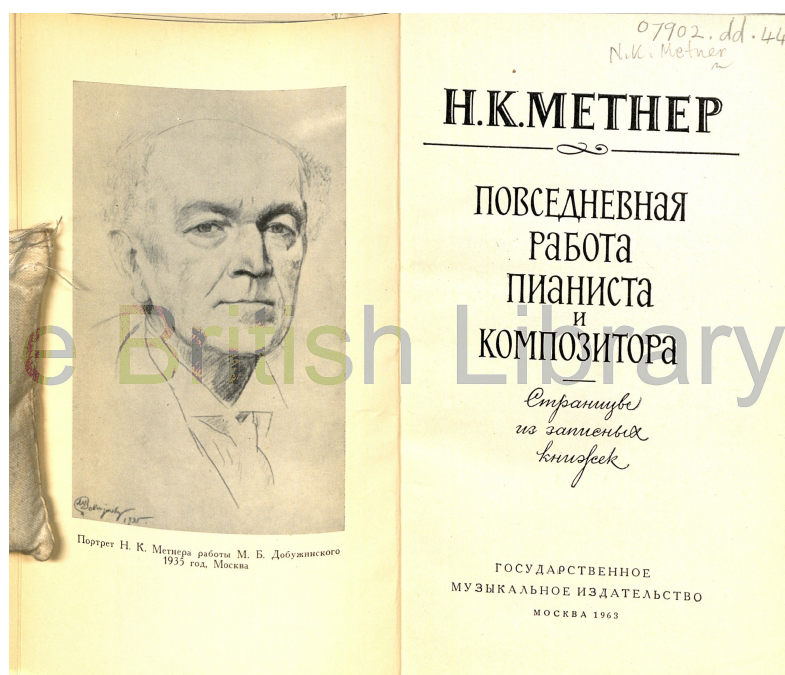


Plate 1. Title page of *The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer* (1963)
(© The British Library Board)

⁸ Nikolay Medtner, *Povsednevnyaya rabota pianista i kompozitora* [The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer] (Moscow: State Music Publishers, 1963).

⁹ Luidmila Bondar included a translation of the *Daily Work* into English in her thesis, *Nicolas Medtner: Composer, Pianist, and Teacher (Translation of Medtner's Notes Compiled into a Book, 'The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer' by Gurvich and L. Lukomsky, With an Introduction by his Student, P. Vasiliev)*, Michigan State University, MMus thesis, 2003.

A selection of Medtner's letters from the Glinka Museum's archive appeared (in Russian) in 1973 with an introduction by Zarui Apetyan.¹⁰ It contains transcriptions of nearly four hundred of Medtner's letters to colleagues as well as Rachmaninov's to him. The letters reveal much about his personality, but contain little that was pertinent to my research. With the exception of a small selection of letters, published in German and in Russian in Flamm's book, the 1973 publication remains the only printed source of Medtner's letters. Apetyan also edited a compilation of personal reminiscences by Medtner's colleagues, students and friends – her *Vospominaniya, Stat'i, Materiali* [Reminiscences, Articles, Materials] (1981)¹¹ contains articles by Issay Dobroveyn, Nikolay Myaskovskiy, Heinrich Neuhaus, Aleksandr Gol'denveyzer, Alfred Swan, Eric Prehn and others who knew Medtner well. I frequently refer to this compilation in my dissertation.

Though less substantial than the Glinka Museum Medtner holdings, it is important to mention the other significant Medtner collections:

1. The British Library accepted the donation of the 'Edna Iles Medtner Collection' in 1997. It is the second largest Medtner archive and important for its primary sources relating to piano pedagogy and the interpretation of his music. The full contents are listed in Appendix I of this dissertation; Chapter 1 incorporates a section describing both the EIMC and the 'Notes on the Interpretation of Medtner's Works' contained within.¹²

2. The Library of Congress in Washington DC, holds another major archive of Medtner-related materials.¹³ Anna Medtner is listed among the donors to the 'Medtner Papers', which include five boxes of correspondence between Anna,

¹⁰ Zarui Apetyan, ed. *N. K. Medtner: Pis'ma* [Letters] (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1973).

¹¹ Zarui Apetyan, *Vospominaniya, Stat'i, Materiali* [Reminiscences, Articles, Materials] (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1981).

¹² See p. [The 'Edna Iles Medtner Collection']

¹³ The full content of the 'Nikolay Karlovich Medtner Papers' is listed at <<http://lcn.loc.gov/2011570510>> (date last accessed 4 August 2014).

Nikolay and Emil Medtner and their friends and colleagues as well as programmes, articles and books that once belonged to the composer.

3. The 'Alfred J. Swan Papers' deposited at the library of University of Virginia contain correspondence relating to Medtner, Rachmaninov and Tchesnokov, as well as a few photographs of Medtner.¹⁴

4. The 'Alfred LaLiberté Fonds' at the National Library of Canada contains correspondence between Medtner and LaLiberté, and some of Medtner's musical and literary manuscripts.¹⁵

5. Finally, the Russian Archive at the University of Leeds preserves correspondence between Anna, Nikolay and their English friend, the painter Eric Prehn.¹⁶

Apart from the EIMC detailed study of these collections has not been undertaken yet.

From the 1950s onwards, Medtner's name gradually regained currency among wider circles of Soviet musicians and audiences, not least because of the efforts of the pianists Emil Gilels, Tatiana Nikolayeva, Abram Shatskes, Evgeny Svetlanov and Vladimir Tropp, who performed Medtner's music extensively. During the 1990s the majority of Medtner recordings by Russian artists, such as Dmitry Alexeev, Boris Berezovsky, Nikolay Demidenko, Vadim Repin and Konstantin Scherbakov, were made and released in the West. Nevertheless, the resurgence of interest in Russia has continued to grow: since the turn of the century, Berezovsky organised major international Medtner festivals in Moscow, Ekaterinburg and Vladimir in 2006, 2007 and 2011; international Medtner conferences were held in Moscow in 2002 and 2013;

¹⁴ See finding aid at <<http://search.lib.virginia.edu/catalog/u3571531>> (date last accessed 7 August 2014).

¹⁵ See <<https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/4/7/m15-392-e.html>> (date last accessed 7 August 2014).

¹⁶ For further details see <<http://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/20306>> (date last accessed 7 August 2014).

the Russian edition of the *Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer* reprinted (2011); and Dolinskaya's latest Medtner monograph appeared in 2013.¹⁷

After his death, Medtner's reputation declined in the West. Apart from the efforts of his English student, Edna Iles, who included Medtner's compositions in all of her recitals and promoted his music through broadcasts and interviews, the only other British pianist to perform his music with any frequency was Hamish Milne (b. 1939); since 1977 he has recorded nearly everything Medtner composed. During the 1990s Medtner became a frequent research topic in the West, his music increasingly included in recital and concerto programmes and on digital recordings to such an extent that it is difficult now to say now whether Medtner's music is better known in the West or in Russia. Medtner festivals were organised by Tali Mahanor, President of the International Medtner Foundation, in New York in 2004 and Christoph Flamm in Saarbrücken in 2011. It is nevertheless undeniable that Medtner has yet to win acknowledgement as the musician Rachmaninov once called the 'greatest composer of our time'.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Medtner performance practice remains a grey area. In spite of the abundance of primary sources – Medtner's manuscripts (not all available to me), printed music, recordings, the *Daily Work* and the written evidence of his students (including Iles)¹⁹ – no one before me has attempted to formulate a systematic approach to playing his music.

Of Medtner's Russian students, only Abram Shatskes (1900–1961) taught as well as performed. Like Iles, he performed nearly all Medtner works, including the three concertos but, unlike her, also devoted more than three decades to teaching at the

¹⁷ Yelena Dolinskaya, *Nikolay Medtner* (Moscow: Muzika/Jurgenson, 2013).

¹⁸ Rachmaninov's letter to Medtner (29 October 1921), Apetyan, *Letters*, p.540.

¹⁹ E. Iles, 'Medtner, friend and master', *Recorded Sound*, 70-71 (1978), p.793

Moscow Conservatory. Apetyan's *Reminiscences, Articles, Materials* contains articles in Russian by Shatskes and other Medtner students, including Maria Gurvich, Nikolay Stember, Alexey Yefremenko, Anatoly Aleksandrov and Panteleymon Vasil'yev. Although they successfully evoke the atmosphere of Medtner's studio, their articles contain very little practical information about his pedagogy.

Some of Neuhaus's ideas in *The Art of Piano Playing*,²⁰ replicate those of Medtner, but it seems unlikely that Neuhaus had access to Medtner's own notes or would have relied on them without acknowledging them. What is clear is that Medtner preceded Neuhaus in advocating many of these ideas, and thus some of Neuhaus's fame as the founder of the Soviet piano school properly belongs to Medtner. Another researcher, John Anthony Rego, made a similar claim for Prokofiev, saying that 'a disproportionate amount of attention has hitherto been focused on Aleksandr Gol'denveyzer and Genrikh Neigauz [Neuhaus] as founders of the Soviet Piano School' and that Sergey Prokofiev's 'contributions in bringing forward the technical principles of the Russian Piano School were arguably more significant'.²¹ Had Medtner not felt it necessary to leave the Soviet Union, his legacy of piano pedagogy might have remained a living tradition in Russia. By teaching Iles he was hoping to nurture a tradition in a foreign land.

Medtner taught a small number of students between settling in England in 1935 and the outbreak of war, after which Edna Iles was his only student. Others during that time included Yvonne Dinwiddy (née Catterall) (1924–2010) and Marguerite Dupré, daughter of Medtner's friend, the organist Marcel Dupré. Of them, Iles took down in

²⁰ Heinrich Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, trans. K.A. Leibovitch (London: Kahn & Averill, 1993).

²¹ John Anthony Rego, *Skryabin, Rakhmaninov and Prokofiev As Composer-Pianists: The Russian Piano Tradition, Aesthetics, And Performance Practices* (Princeton University PhD, 2012), pp.29-30.

notebooks almost everything Medtner said to her in lessons and Catterall later published a memoir about him.²²

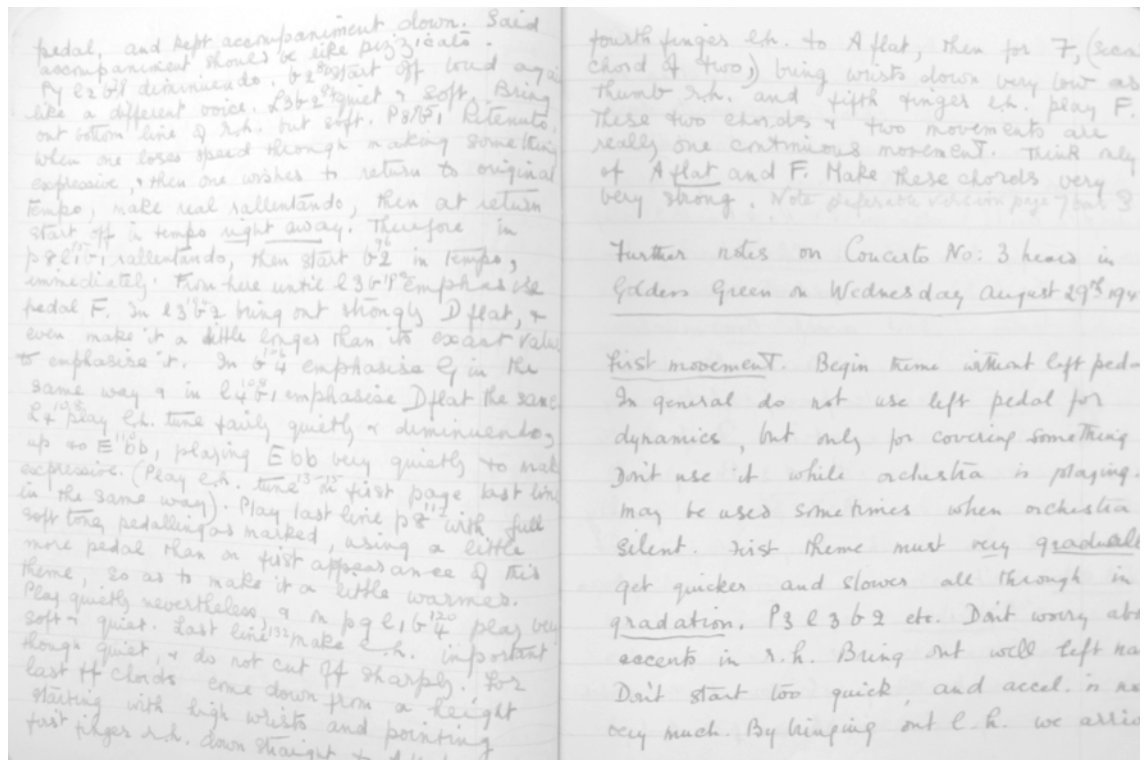


Plate 2. Page of Iles's lesson notes ((© The British Library Board))²³

Iles's 'Notes on the Interpretation of Medtner's Works' are unique in the history of piano playing.²⁴ As yet unpublished, they are not completely unknown,²⁵ although until now no serious evaluation of the performance practice elements had been attempted. Iles did not speak Russian; with the exception of occasional phrases in French, she took down her notes in English. Importantly, she took care later to order them so that they might benefit other pianists. By donating her Archive to the British Library, she ensured that Medtner's teaching and interpretations would be passed on to

²² Y. Catterall, 'Nicolas Medtner, the Man and his Music', *Makerere Journal*, 4 (1960), pp.81-87. One of Catterall's students, Marcus Andrews, became a concert pianist. His biography can be found online at <<http://marcusandrews.instantcore.com/web/home.aspx>> (date last accessed 17 August 2014)

²³ See Appendix 5 for a colour version of the photograph.

²⁴ The only analogy that comes to mind is that of Marguerite Long, who after meeting and studying with Debussy, Fauré and Ravel, published her memoirs. See Appendix 2.

²⁵ See the detailed description of Iles's archive in Chapter 1.

future generations. Detailed consideration and analysis of the ‘Notes’ form the body of this dissertation.

Research aims and methodology

My initial aim was to become more familiar with the music of Nikolay Medtner and, specifically, how to perform it with authority. The EIMC provided the way in. My methodology involved transcribing Iles’s ‘Notes’ and submitting them to analysis and comparison with other primary sources of Medtner's work as a pianist, including his writings, editions and recordings as well as closely associated secondary sources.

As a Russian pianist studying in Britain, interested in performing and popularising lesser known music by my countrymen, I felt that Medtner provided an ideal subject for my dissertation, particularly as the Edna Iles Medtner Collection was easily accessible and ripe for investigation.

I was fortunate to discover the EIMC by chance. A cursory examination convinced me of its value, in particular the specific elements of interpretation covered in her lesson notes relating to Medtner’s piano works. My initial questions, however, were twofold:

1. What survives of a ‘Medtner tradition’ and, indeed, whether there ever was one?
2. To what extent do Iles’s ‘Notes’ shed new light on Medtner’s scores?

Medtner, himself, never took the opportunity to establish an on-going tradition of performing his music, and certainly none of his Russian pupils were able to pursue international careers. Indeed, he taught only briefly in Russia, at what is now the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, and took only a few private students during his time abroad in Germany, France and England, but fortunately he left materials to formulate an authoritative guide to studying and performing his music.

I began by transcribing Iles's 'Early book'²⁶ and translating selected excerpts from the *The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer* (in Russian). I worked first on the chapter devoted pedalling (Chapter 3). Electronic searches allowed me to gain 'global' perspectives on Iles's coverage, which gradually enabled me to formulate my ten Medtnerian principles of pedalling (see Chart 2 on page 61), which I compared and corroborated with the pedalling treatises of Banowetz, Neuhaus, Rubinstein and Carreño. While transcribing the remainder of Iles's 'Notes', I observed that Medtner often repeated certain interpretive advice – paying attention to the perspective, 'harmonious passages', follow-through movement, 'points of rest', 'isolation' – not something one would normally encounter in piano pedagogy. Accordingly, I was able to distill 32 concepts (ranging from a rather philosophic *fil rouge* to a very particular playing of the grace notes quickly) which informed a perspective through which I approached Medtner's recordings and those of Iles. Having carefully followed Medtner's playing with his printed editions to hand, I was able to conclude that Iles's 'Notes' represent a uniquely informed resource, although their originality remained to be confirmed. Applying the same methodology used in the chapter on pedalling, I set about contextualizing Iles's 'Notes' with other aspects of piano playing and pedagogy expressed in (1) treatises by Sándor, Neuhaus, Leschetizky, Breithaupt, Giesecking, Hambourg, Lhevinne, Safonov, (2) Medtner's own views as expressed in the *Daily Work* and (3) documented views on piano playing by Medtner's other students. To my delight I then had to acknowledge the full role of Iles's 'Notes' as a unparalleled source on Medtnerian performance practice.

In 2012 I undertook a pilgrimage to the Midlands, where the Iles' and the Medtner lived during World War II, and interviewed both Mary Mason, Iles's younger

²⁶ See Appendix 2 for the full transcription.

See page 31 in Chapter 1 for the full descriptions of the EIMC.

cousin, and Michael Jones, her only student,²⁷ and in October 2013 I presented a paper, ‘New Light on Nikolay Medtner’, and performed at the international conference in Moscow, ‘The Medtner Family in Russian and World Culture’ dedicated to Emil and Nikolay Medtner. In May 2014 I organised a ‘Medtner Day’ at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama (GSMD), which was well attended and involved both musicologists and established interpreters, including Hamish Milne, as well as young performers from the GSMD. Listening to the GSMD students rehearsing in preparation for the ‘Medtner Day’ reinforced the order of priority I had given to Medtner’s concepts in this dissertation. On a practical level, during my research and writing up, I have performed and taught works by Medtner, including the subject of my case study in Chapter 7, the *Sonate-Idylle*.

Literature review

The principal secondary sources for Medtner comprise the monographs by Yelena Dolinskaya²⁸ in Russian, Barrie Martyn²⁹ in English and Christoph Flamm³⁰ in German. Dolinskaya’s 1966 book, which introduced Medtner to a new generation of musicians in the USSR, relies primarily on the Medtner Archive that Anna Medtner brought back to the USSR and interleaves biographical data with analyses of his music. Although her analyses are often merely descriptive, the significance of her book is clear: she reinstated Medtner among the circle of Russian composers of the first half of twentieth century. Nearly half a century later Dolinskaya published an expanded version of the book that incorporates sources not available to her in 1966, including fuller documentation and quotations from Medtner’s letters, his *Muza i Moda* and Apetyan’s

²⁷ Sadly, Mrs. Mason died early this year.

²⁸ Yelena Dolinskaya, *Nikolay Metner: Monograficheskiy ocherk* (Moscow: Muzika, 1966) and *Nikolay Metner* (Moscow: Muzika/Jurgenson, 2013).

²⁹ Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music* (Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1995).

³⁰ Christoph Flamm, *Der Russische Komponist Nicolaj Medtner. Studien und Materialien*, (Berlin: Ernst Kuhn Verlag, 1995).

compilation of reminiscences. Significantly, Dolinskaya acknowledges the role of Edna Iles as Medtner's supporter during his English period, having spent time at the British Library, looking in particular at the material relating to Medtner's concertos in the EIMC, which she incorporated in her revised text along with photographs that I provided. Importantly, Dolinskaya expresses the need to bring Iles's lesson notes to public attention.³¹ Martyn dedicated his 1995 monograph to Edna Iles; it remains the most comprehensive study of Medtner in English, although it avoids the subject of Medtner's relations with Anna and Emil and should be read in conjunction with Ljunggren's biography of Emil Medtner.³²

1995 also marked the publication of Christoph Flamm's monumental study of Medtner in German. It is based on detailed research in the Glinka and Russian State Library Archives, but fails to devote equal scrutiny to Medtner's final years in England; had he been aware of Iles's archive, he might well have consulted it.³³ In the first section, he discusses the aesthetic influences on Medtner, both in *Muza i Moda* and his music. The second section incorporates unpublished letters (Belī was one of the addressees), programme notes from his *Liederabend* (1909), and reviews (in both Russian and German) dating from 1903-1927 of Medtner's concert appearances and his compositions. Among the appendices is one devoted to the family trees of Medtner's parents.

Two collections of the personal reminiscences of Medtner's friends, colleagues and pupils, were published, one in England, four years after his death,³⁴ the other in the

³¹ Dolinskaya, *Metner* (2013), p.227.

³² Magnus Ljunggren, *Russian Mephisto. A study of the Life and Work of Emilii Medtner* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994).

³³ Private correspondence.

The EIMC was donated to the British Library in 1997, two years after the publication of Flamm's book.

³⁴ Holt, *Medtner: A Tribute* (1955).

USSR in 1981.³⁵ The 1981 compilation of reminiscences includes detailed biography of Medtner by his wife. Another important biographical resource is the memoir published (in German) by Alfred J. Swan in *Musik des Ostens*.³⁶ Edna Iles's own memoir, 'Medtner, Friend and Master', which first appeared in 1978 in the periodical *Recorded Sound*, was included (in Russian) in the 1981 Soviet collection, albeit in a heavily edited version.

In 1981 Russian pianist and musicologist Isaak Zetel' published an important monograph on Medtner.³⁷ Originally an academic thesis, Zetel's work now occupies an important place among a series of published doctoral dissertations on aspects of Medtnerian performance practice. Eight appeared in the United States alone between 1961 and 1982.³⁸ Not all were available to me to consult. Distinguished for their thorough analyses of the Sonatas, the dissertations of Cenieth Catherine Elmore and Bobby Hughes Loftis merit special mention.

The turn of the millennium witnessed a fresh wave of academic interest in Medtner, arguably connected with the search for less well-known music to include in recital programmes and recordings. Between 2003 and 2012 fifteen further dissertations

³⁵ Apetyan, ed. *N.K. Metner: Vospominaniya, stat'i, materiali* [Reminiscences, Articles, Materials] (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1981).

³⁶ A.J. Swan. 'Das Leben Nikolai Medtner's', *Musik des Ostens*, 4 (1967), pp. 65-116.

³⁷ Isaak Zetel', *N. K. Metner – pianist. Tvorchestvo. Ispolnitel'stvo. Pedagogika* ['N. K. Medtner – A Pianist. His Compositions, his Art of Interpretation and his Teaching] (Moscow: Muzika, 1981).

³⁸ Lona Ruth Ginsburg, *The Piano Sonatas of Nikolai Medtner* (University of California, Los-Angeles MA thesis, 1961)

Sarah Louise Kinley, *A Performer's Analysis of Eight Piano Sonatas of Nicholas Medtner* (Butler University, 1970)

Bobby Hughes Loftis, *The Piano Sonatas of Nicolai Medtner* (University of West Virginia PhD, 1970)

Charles William Keller, *The Piano Sonatas of Nicolas Medtner* (Ohio State University, 1971)

Cenieth Catherine. Elmore, *Some Stylistic Considerations in the Piano Sonatas of Nikolai Medtner* (University of North Carolina PhD, 1972)

Ronald Dominic Surace, *The Solo Piano Music of Nicolas Medtner* (University of Cincinnati, 1973)

Ronald Lamar Ackerman, *Orchestral Transcriptions of Selected Piano Compositions of Nicholas Medtner* (Boston University, 1976)

Emily Alice Kelley, *The Fairy Tales of Nikolai Metner* (University of Virginia MA thesis, 1982).

were completed.³⁹ Having come to the attention of scholars, Medtner and his music became the theme of an international conference that took place in Moscow in 2002. The resulting volume of papers, *Nikolay Medtner: Issues of Biography and Creativity*,⁴⁰ appeared in 2009 and contains valuable contributions from Flamm, E. Kondrat'yev, Magnus Ljunggren, Konstantin Zenkin and Rakhlenko. Two, in particular, offer new perspectives: the article by Flamm⁴¹ remarks on Medtner's closeness to the Symbolists; that of Kondrat'yev provides useful insights into Medtner's artistic stance as expressed in *The Muse and The Fashion*.⁴²

³⁹ Luidmila Bondar, *Nicolas Medtner: Composer, Pianist, and Teacher* (translation of Medtner's notes compiled into a book, 'The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer' by Gurvich and L. Lukomsky, with an introduction by his student, P. Vasiliev), (Michigan State University MMus thesis, 2003)

Bo Won Hong, *An Analysis of Medtner's Piano Concerto No. 2 op. 50 in C minor* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign DMA, 2003)

Saida Kafarova, *An Introduction to Nikolai Medtner and Performance Analysis in Dialogue Form of his Works for Two Pianos - Russian Round Dance and Knight Errant* (University of Texas at Austin DMA 2003)

David Skvorak, *Thematic Unity in Nicolas Medtner's Works for Piano: Skazki, Sonatas, and Piano Quintet* (University of Cincinnati DMA 2003)

Gregory Michael Smith, *Performance Practice Issues in Russian Piano Music* (University of Newcastle Masters thesis, 2003)

Hiroaki Takenouchi, *Piano Sonatas by Nikolay Medtner: a Performer's Perspective* (Royal College of Music, London, MMus dissertation 2004)

Olga Grines, *Genres of Piano Ensemble and its Realization in the Art of I. Stravinsky and N. Medtner* (Nizhniy Novgorod, 2005)

Natalya Kalendarev, *Medtner: His Beliefs, Influences, and Work* (University of Washington University DMA 2005)

Sungeun Kim, *Nicholas Medtner's Piano Music with Special Emphasis on his Fairy Tales* (Peabody Conservatory of Music DMA 2006)

Riana Vermaak, *The Muse and the Fashion: A Comparative Study of Goethe Settings by Medtner and Schubert*, (University of Alberta DMA, 2007)

Ekaterina Chernaya-Oh, *The Skazki (Fairy Tales) of Nikolai Medtner: The Evolution and Characteristics of the Genre With Compositional and Performance Aspects of Selected Fairy Tales* (University of North Texas DMA, 2008)

David Westfall, *Three One-Movement Sonatas of the Russian Silver Age: a Comparative Study* (University of Hartford DMA, 2008)

Huey-Jing Yeh, *A Research and Interpretation of Piano Sonata 'Reminiscenza' by Nikolai Medtner* (Soochow University Masters thesis, 2009)

Jonathan Paul Tauscheck, *A Performance Guide to Two Fairy Tales of Nickolai Medtner* (University of Iowa DMA, 2012)

Shu-Hao Hsu, *Nicolai Medtner's Piano Concerto No. 3, op. 60: Musical Style and Performance Strategies* (University of Iowa DMA, 2012).

⁴⁰ *Nikolay Medtner. Voprosi biografii i tvorchestva* [Issues of Biography and Creativity]. Moscow: Biblioteka-fond 'Russkoye zarubezh'e': Russkiy put', 2009.

⁴¹ C. Flamm, 'Sem'ya Medtnerov i kul'tura Serebryannogo veka' [The family of Medtner and the culture of the Silver Age. Notes on the sonatas of Nikolay Medtner], *Nikolay Medtner. Issues of Biography and Creativity*. Moscow: Biblioteka-fond 'Russkoye zarubezh'e': Russkiy put', 2009.

⁴² E. Kondrat'yev. 'Sistema muzikal'nikh smyslov Nikolaya Medtnera' [The system of Nikolay Medtner's musical senses], *Nikolay Medtner. Issues of Biography and Creativity*. Moscow: Biblioteka-fond 'Russkoye zarubezh'e': Russkiy put', 2009.

Although several of Iles's recordings of Medtner were broadcast in 1958 in the USSR after Anna Medtner returned (presumably bearing copies), her role as Medtner's English disciple was not acknowledged until Dolinskaya's student Rakhlenko examined the EIMC (shortly after it was deposited in the British Library) and made it the subject of an article she published in 2004 and more recently in an essay on the artistic rapport between Medtner and Iles,⁴³ in which she describes Iles's lesson notes as 'Medtner's live word, addressed to the performers of his music'.⁴⁴ My research corroborates this view.

⁴³ I. Rakhlenko, 'Novoye o londonskom periode N.K. Medtnera v kolleksii pisem iz arhiva Ėdny Aylz' [New Information about the London Period of N.K. Medtner from the Collection of Letters in Edna Iles's Archive], *Muzikal'naya akademiya*, 4 (2004), pp.113-122; 'Nikolay Medtner i Ėdna Aylz. Artisticheskiye kontakti' [Nikolay Medtner and Edna Iles. Artistic Contact], *Issues of Biography and Creativity*, pp.145-69.

⁴⁴ *Issues of Biography and Creativity*, p.156.

CHAPTER 1

Medtner, Iles and the Edna Iles Medtner Collection

Medtner's biography

Nikolay Medtner's life can be divided into a Russian Period (1880–1921), the 'Years of Roaming' when he lived in Germany and France (1921–1935), and the final English Period (1935–1951).

The Russian Period

Born in 1880, Nikolay Karlovich Medtner¹ was the fifth of six children. Medtner's mother, Aleksandra, came from the Goedicke family that included many generations of musicians, and it was from her that he received his first piano lessons.² Medtner's father, Karl Medtner, came from a Danish family that had immigrated to present-day Estonia around the turn of the 19th century. Karl's mother was the daughter of a German Lutheran immigrant of Spanish descent;³ Pyotr Medtner, the composer's grandfather, married her in Moscow, hence Nikolay belonged to only the second generation of Medtners born in that city.

His older brother Aleksandr became a violinist and violist as well as composer and conductor of a Moscow musical theatre, and took part in premieres and major performances of Nikolay's music in Russia.⁴ By listening to Aleksandr practise the violin Nikolay taught himself to play the instrument,⁵ and later composed three sonatas

¹ 'Metner' in strict Russian transliteration

² Anna Medtner, 'O Nikolaye Karloviche Metnere' [About Nikolay Karlovich Medtner], Zarui Apetyan ed, *Vospominaniya, stat'i, material'i* [Reminiscences, Articles, Materials] (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1981), p.36.

³ Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), p.1.

⁴ Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, p.341.

⁵ Anna Medtner, p.36.

and several small pieces for violin and piano. His younger brother Vladimir died at the age of eight. A third brother, Karl, was killed in the First World War.

A fourth brother, Emil, was the eldest son of the family. He and Nikolay were very close.

In his early puberty he appears to have developed a narcissistic infatuation with Nikolai [and even] regarded it as his mission to ‘conduct’ Nikolai's musical career, controlling his brother's professional development at the same time that he magnanimously abandoned his own artistic ambitions.⁶

It was through Emil that Nikolay became acquainted with Andrey Belī, one of the leading poets of the Symbolism movement in Russia. Emil was the only member of the family to support his brother's decision in 1892 to become a musician and his later refusal to undertake a concert tour in 1900. The two brothers remained close until Emil's death in 1936, but did not always agree: while Emil undoubtedly influenced Nikolay's aesthetic outlook, the critic Marietta Shaginyan later remarked that Nikolay and Anna didn't approve of the racist views propounded in Emil's 1912 book, *Modernism and Music*, nor did they share many of his other philosophical views.⁷

In 1890 Nikolay initially enrolled in the Real'noye uchilishche,⁸ where in pre-revolutionary Russia the main emphasis was on natural sciences and mathematics. His piano teacher at the time was his Uncle Fyodor Goedicke, a professor at the Moscow Conservatory. Medtner's passion for music developed quickly and in 1892 he entered the Junior Department of the Moscow Conservatory in the class of Anatoly Galli. Two years later he switched to Paul Pabst's class, and after Pabst's death in 1897 to Vasily Safonov. Chart 1 provides a musical family tree for Medtner, whose ‘ancestors’ included Muzio Clementi, Johann Hummel, Beethoven, Moscheles and Liszt.

⁶ Magnus Ljunggren, *Russian Mephisto. A study of the Life and Work of Emilii Medtner* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994).

⁷ Emil Medtner, *Modernizm i Muzika* [Modernism and Music] (Moscow: Musaget, 1912).

Marietta Shaginyan, ‘Vospominaniya o S.V. Rakhmaninove’ [Reminiscences about Rachmaninov], *Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove*, II, (Moscow: Muzika, 1974), p.116.

⁸ Analogous to the Realschule in Germany.

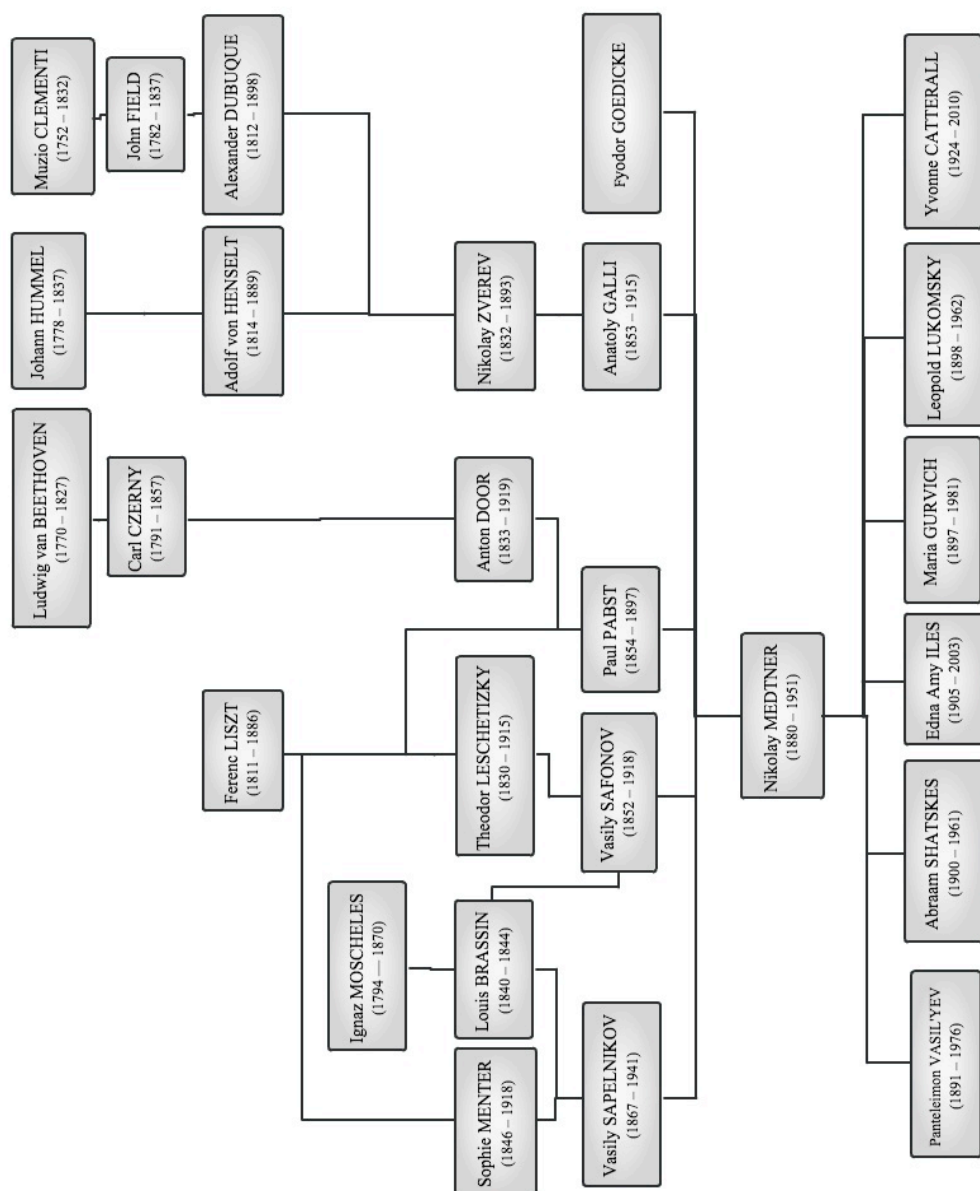


Chart 1. Genealogy of Medtner's teachers and those students cited in the thesis

While at the Junior Department of the Moscow Conservatory, Medtner studied music theory and composition with Sergey Taneyev, but preferred to dedicate himself to intensive piano studies, completing a piano degree in 1900. As one of the most accomplished students of his year, he performed Rubinstein's Fifth Piano Concerto under Safonov at the graduation ceremony in the Great Hall of the Conservatory.

Medtner's only experience of competition followed that year, when he took part in the Third International Anton Rubinstein Competition in Vienna, receiving a First Honorary Mention. Shortly afterwards he committed what some consider to be his

first career mistake by refusing to take part in a major concert tour organized by Safonov. One can only guess how Medtner's performing career might have developed had he seized that opportunity. We do know that for the next few years Safonov ceased contact with his pupil.

In response, Medtner decided to devote himself mainly to composition, performing and teaching as little as he could in order to produce an income. His only major concert appearance during these first years was in Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, under the baton of Arthur Nikisch, on 13 December 1902. His performances between 1902 and 1921 kept Moscow audiences up-to-date with his progress as an emerging composer. Apart from concerto engagements with Serge Koussevitzky in 1910, 1916 and 1919 in which he performed Beethoven's Concerto No. 4, he appeared in solo recitals, *Liederabende*, or a mixture of the two.⁹ All of these took place in Russia apart from a few concerts in Germany in 1904, 1905 and 1907.

Medtner's first teaching posts were at the private music school in Moscow owned by his friend, Leo E. Conus, and the Elizavetinskiy Women's Institute. In 1909 he was invited to teach at the Moscow Conservatory; he remained only a year, but later returned in 1915. Although technically on the faculty until 1921, he ceased giving lessons in 1919. Thus, we can only talk about Medtner as a teacher at a major institution during a brief five-year period, but it was enough to win him the lasting admiration and devotion of his students, some of whom, like Abram Shatskes, remained life-long promoters of his music.

One person particularly important to Medtner at this stage was Anna Bratenshi, whom he had met in 1896. Although Anna first married his brother Emil in 1902, after their divorce she married Nikolay in 1918. She willingly took on additional roles in Medtner's life as his secretary, copyist, agent and, after his death, the guardian of his

⁹ The full list of Medtner's concerts can be found in Christoph Flamm's *Der Russische Komponist Nicolaj Medtner. Studien und Materialien* (Berlin: Ernst Kuhn Verlag, 1995), pp.573-631.

legacy. 'Anna Mikhaylovna has taken everything upon herself and has left to him only his creative work.'¹⁰ Crucially, she kept diaries during Medtner's concert trips between 1924 and 1931, which have been included in Zarui Apetyan's compilation of memoirs and articles on Medtner.¹¹ Anna also wrote a short biography of Medtner for Richard Holt's *Tribute* (1955) that was later translated into Russian.¹²

Together, they fled Soviet Russia in 1921, less for political convictions than personal reasons. Indeed, it was said that 'while an empire collapsed in ruins and a new state was arising from the blood-fertilised soil, Medtner wrote pastorals and fairy tales'.¹³ While deeply affected by the death of Medtner's mother and the confiscation of his father's business by the authorities, like Stravinsky and Rachmaninov, he was unwilling to endure the increasing degradation of life in the Soviet Union.

The 'Years of Roaming'

With expectations of a warm reception from the musical community, the Medtners began a new life in Berlin in 1921, but opportunities to perform were scarce so they stayed only 16 months.

Great was his horror when out of his isolation he got into a noisy European world infected with materialism, almost entirely devoid of that 'holy' attitude towards music which alone had value in Medtner's eyes... The musicians of Germany could not help seeing in Medtner but 'one of many', a composer of the antique style in which nobody takes any interest at present.¹⁴

In the summer of 1924, the Medtners moved on to France, stopping first at Erquy in Brittany. Thanks to Rachmaninov, Medtner undertook his first concert tour in the United States during the 1924/25 season, which proved successful both artistically and

¹⁰ A. and K. Swan, 'Rachmaninoff personal reminiscences – Part I', *MQ*, 30/2 (April 1944), p.180.

¹¹ Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, pp.213-89.

¹² Richard Holt, ed., *Medtner: A Tribute to his Art and Personality* (London: Dobson, 1955); Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, pp.36-45.

¹³ Albert Jarosy, 'Nicolas Medtner', *The Listener* 401/xvi (16 September 1936), p.551.

¹⁴ Leonid Sabaneev, 'Nikolay Metner', *Modern Russian Composers* (London: Martin Lawrence Limited, 1927), p.141.

financially. Returning to France, the Medtners lived briefly in Paris before moving to the suburb of La Fontaine d'Yvette, but to their dismay no concert engagements came Medtner's way until 1927, when he made his triumphal tour of the Soviet Union. Even before his first recital there, the anticipation among the most distinguished figures in Moscow's musical life was palpable:

Words fail us to describe the joyous excitement, the supreme gladness of being once more in the presence of one who – in Pushkin's words – 'makes God's word burn in the heart of man. ... We love and honour the greatness of your spirit, aloof from all noise and bustle.'¹⁵

Apart from the Beethoven Op. 53 Sonata, Medtner exclusively performed his own works, many of them for the first time. Though he did not know it then, this would be the last time he visited his motherland.



Plate 3. Rachmaninov and Medtner in 1938 (online)

The following year Medtner's first English tour proved a happy sequel to the Soviet tour. Anna wrote in her diary: 'It was a big surprise and joy to find out how much Kolya [Medtner] was expected here.'¹⁶ 'Ovations were such that concert organizers, concert hall managers and people who flew into the artistic room said they

¹⁵ Holt, p.233.

¹⁶ Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, p.239.

usually never have such receptions here.’¹⁷ Before returning to France he was made an Honorary Member of the Royal Academy of Music. Indeed the warm reception given by English audiences was one of the reasons the Medtners later moved to London. During his second visit to North America, during the 1929-30 season, he gave 19 concerts, mostly in Canada. In 1931 Medtner again toured in England, where in London at Westminster Central Hall he made the first recordings of his own music – short piano pieces and three songs sung by Tatiana Makushina – on the ‘Columbia’ label.¹⁸

Between 1932 and 1934, Medtner gave only ten concerts, in Paris, Tartu and Riga, and was forced to rely on royalties and private teaching to survive.¹⁹ The dearth of opportunities to play his music sent him into a state of despair. He found it difficult to accept that it was not more in tune with the times, and expressed this along with his disaffection with Modernism in *Muza i Moda* [The Muse and the Fashion]. Written in Russian and published first in Paris in 1935, it was translated into English by Alfred J. Swan and published in 1951, shortly before he died.²⁰

The Medtners moved to London in 1935, hoping for better prospects. Constant financial struggle in France, greater demand for his music in England and the attractive conditions of rent offered by their friend Mikhail Braykevich were among the factors that drew them there; 69 Wentworth Road, Golders Green, North London, became their new home. Having previously been Lutheran, shortly before the move Medtner embraced the Russian Orthodox faith. A new phase of his life was beginning.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ During four sessions (which took place on the 11, 12, 25 and 26 of February) Medtner recorded Tales Op. 8 No. 1, Op. 14 No. 2, Op. 20 No. 1, Op. 26 No. 2 and No. 3, Op. 51 No. 2, No. 3 and No. 5, Novella, Op. 17 No. 1, ‘Danza festiva’, Op. 38 No. 3, ‘Canzona matinata’, Op. 39 No. 4, ‘Danza jubilosa’, Op. 40 No. 4, ‘Hymne in Praise of Toil’, Op. 49 No. 1, as well as ‘Elfenliedchen’, Op. 6 No. 3, ‘The Butterfly’, Op. 28 No. 3 and ‘Life’s Waggon’, Op. 45 No. 2.

¹⁹ It is a sad fact that after leaving Russia Medtner never drew a salary and as a consequence could never afford a comfortable level of existence.

²⁰ Nikolay Medtner, *Muza i Moda* [The Muse and the Fashion] (Paris: TAIR, 1935; reprinted by YMCA-PRESS, 1978); *The Muse and The Fashion. Being a Defence of the Foundations of the Art of Music*, trans. Alfred J. Swan (Haverford, PA: Haverford College Bookstore, 1951).

England 1935–1951

Fortunately, this move brought a degree of stability to the Medtner's lives. Invitations to give concerts, do broadcasts and teach came more frequently and with them much-needed income: 'Clearly they value me more here than in any other foreign country.'²¹ From then onwards, Medtner performed exclusively in Great Britain.



Plate 4. Medtner, his wife Anna and Iles (© The British Library Board)

News of Emil's death in 1936 came as a devastating blow, as did the outbreak of war with Germany three years later. When the bombs began falling in London, it was literally impossible for Medtner to compose, so he was grateful when his student, Edna Iles, offered them refuge in the Midlands. Their wartime sojourn lasted two and a half years, from September 1940 until 20 April 1943.

²¹ Zarui Apetyan ed., *Pis'ma* [Letters] (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1973), p.475.

The Medtners and Iles first lived in Wythall in Worcestershire, before relocating to the village of Wootton Wawen in December 1940.²² Here, the artistic collaboration between Medtner and Iles flourished, taking the form of frequent lessons. Despite war raging throughout Europe and the shortage of food and petrol, they were able to maintain a lifestyle entirely dedicated to art and work. In return for lessons with Medtner, Iles taught him English by reading books aloud, with the help of Anna made translations of the texts of his songs into English, took him round all the Shakespearean sites in and around Stratford as well as to films and plays there, and even engaged him in card games.²³ Their insular lifestyle allowed Medtner to complete his two-piano pieces, the Op. 58 pieces for two pianos,²⁴ 2 *Elegien* [Two Elegies], Op. 59 and most importantly his monumental Third Concerto, Op. 60.

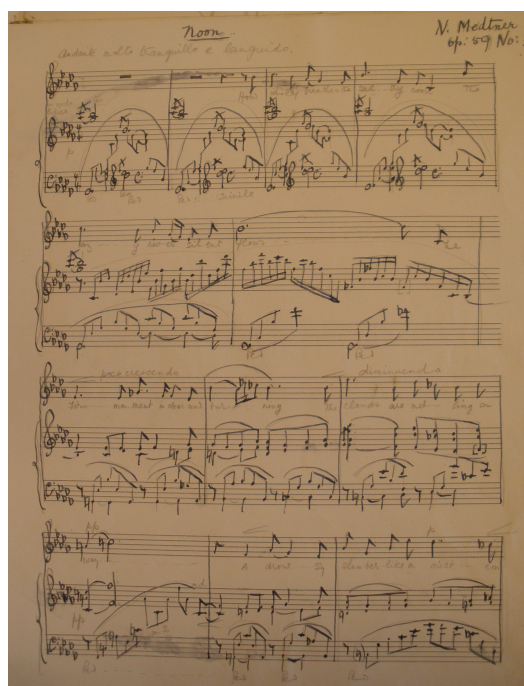


Plate 5. Medtner's manuscript of 'Midday' (EIMC, date unknown)
(© The British Library Board)

²² Martyn, p.237.

²³ Iles's attempts to improve Medtner's command of English prompted him to compose a 'Moral-song' ('About nothing'), in which he parodies Iles's voice by indicating *ffz* remarks at the beginning of words 'mother', 'brother', 'bother' and 'nothing'. The song is preserved in Box 2 of the EIMC.

²⁴ Irina Rakhlenko believes that the circumstances of their time together prompted Medtner to compose them, one of which is dedicated to Iles

Unforeseen good news came in 1946: an admirer, the ‘Maharaja of Mysore’, Jaya Chamaraja Wadiyar, proposed the creation of a ‘Medtner Society’ that would finance the recording of his music. ‘His Highness suggests the three Piano Concertos, all his piano music, the songs (a goodly selection) the Violin and Piano the Sonatas, *Sonate-Vocalise* [Op. 41 No. 1], Improvisations, etc.’²⁵ Anna Medtner remarked that the project gave the composer new life and energy.²⁶ In fact, Medtner was so taken with the desire to record that he cancelled a planned, third North American tour proposed by his friends Alfred Swan and Henry Drinker. Medtner succeeded in recording all three Piano Concertos with the Philharmonia Orchestra in 1947.²⁷ He also recorded two Sonatas (*Sonate-Ballade*, Op. 27 and ‘Sonata tragica’, Op. 39, No. 5), the Piano Quintet and a number of tales and songs.²⁸ One of the very last and best recordings of the Maharaja’s scheme involved the famous soprano Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, whose husband Walter Legge happened to sit on the advisory committee of the Medtner Society.²⁹ Medtner’s recordings, which Barrie Martyn, called ‘a priceless legacy of interpretative guidance’,³⁰ were released in the Soviet Union on ‘Melodiya’ label as LPs in 1961, and again in 1984, but digital recordings of Medtner playing his own music have only been available in Russia since 2013.³¹ The first digital album, on the ‘Melodiya’ label, was released in August 2014.³² The existence of Medtner’s recordings only became known to me when

²⁵ Martyn, p.247.

²⁶ Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, p.38.

²⁷ The Maharaja was the first president of the Philharmonia Orchestra.

George Weldon conducted the orchestra in the First Concerto, *Issay Dobrowen* in the Second and Third.

²⁸ Following Iles’s recommendation as expressed in her article ‘Medtner, friend and master’, I use the word ‘Tale’ instead of commonly accepted ‘Fairy Tale’.

The Piano Quintet was recorded in 1949 with Aeolian Quartet (consisting of Alfred Cave, Leonard Dight, Watson Forbes and John Moore).

²⁹ Martyn, p.247.

³⁰ Barrie Martyn, ‘Nicolas Medtner’, *Grove Online* (date last accessed: 13 July 2014).

³¹ Yelena Dolinskaya’s book *Nikolay Metner* (Moscow: Muzika/Jurgenson, 2013) has a CD attached to it.

³² ‘Medtner plays Medtner’, vol. 1. Melodiya MEL CD 10 02200.

I came to study in London (2005). Today, there are available on the ‘Appian Publications & Recordings Ltd.’ and ‘St-Laurent’ labels and easily accessed online.

Medtner’s failing health meant that the plans to record the rest of his music were put on hold before eventually being abandoned: on 13 November 1951 Medtner died at home in Golders Green and was buried nearby in Hendon. After her husband’s death, Anna was allowed to return to the Soviet Union, thanks to the intercession of Emil Gilels.³³



Plate 6. Medtner in 1942 (courtesy of Mary Mason)

³³ Dmitry Paperno, *Notes of a Moscow Pianist* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1998), p.114.

Edna Iles's biography

Edna Amy Iles was born in Kings Heath, a suburb of Birmingham in the Midlands, on 18 May 1905. Her parents were first cousins: her father, Harry Iles, was a wealthy businessman, her mother Amy Iles came from Frome in Somerset, and was a singer. They lived comfortably in various large houses in South Birmingham, mainly in Kings Heath and Moseley. As an only child, Edna was educated in accordance with their social standing and encouraged in her piano studies.



Plate 7. Iles in 1918 (courtesy of Mary Mason)

In 1915 she made her debut in a concert in aid of the Belgian Relief Fund and, six years later, her first appearance with City of Birmingham Orchestra³⁴ and debut recital at the Wigmore Hall in London. She made an impression (not entirely a favourable one) on the retired music critic George Bernard Shaw, who described her performance at a private party he attended in Birmingham as ‘a perfect piece of

³⁴ Now the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

conducting'.³⁵ Duncan Honeybourne proffered a constructive interpretation of Shaw's words:

Shaw was surely alluding to Iles's consummate underlining of musical architecture [that] throughout her career was achieved via a clear-headed, unsentimental approach to the details distilled through a rigorous intellect.³⁶

In 1923 she became the first British pianist to perform Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto.³⁷ Reviewers at the time noted that, 'she is a remarkable young player, quiet and unassuming, and plays with effortless ease, beautiful, clear tone and artistic intelligence';³⁸ and, perhaps a little patronizingly, that the 'straight forward, unemotional playing of the kind we heard from Miss Iles is the best preparation for a reliable performer'.³⁹

Her first acquaintanceship with Medtner's music came through her teacher, Appleby Matthews (1881–1948), who suggested she learn 'Ein Idyll', Op. 7, No. 1. She eventually met Medtner in 1930, after a performance he gave in London on 20 March. At their first lesson, she played for him his First Piano Concerto, a work she had recently premiered with the City of Birmingham Orchestra under Sir Adrian Boult. According to the notes she made on that occasion, Medtner responded warmly to her playing, commenting: 'she is very brilliant and she can *gather* it!' 'Magnifique!'⁴⁰ It wasn't until 1934, when Medtner next visited England that they met again. This time Iles played both his Second Concerto, Op. 50, and the 6 Tales, Op. 51. Of the Tale Op. 51 No. 6, Medtner commented: 'I don't know how you have understood it; it is so very Russian!' It was after this meeting that Medtner agreed to teach her on a regular basis.

³⁵ D. Honeybourne, 'Russian Piano Music in Deepest Warwickshire', *BMI Insight*, 4 (2001), p.48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ The concert took place on 29 April 1923 at Birmingham Town Hall and was given by the City of Birmingham Orchestra under Appleby Matthews.

³⁸ Unsigned review in *MO*, 46/549 (June 1923), p.843.

³⁹ Unsigned review in *The Daily Telegraph* (7 July 1921).

⁴⁰ Honeybourne, p.49.

Medtner's limited English meant that he initially conducted his lessons with Iles in French. Thereafter, a mixture of languages remained the norm for them.

Later he would write in a letter of recommendation to a conductor confiding that Iles's musicality, 'both given and developed, is extraordinary'.⁴¹

So, from November 1935 when the Medttners moved to London, their lessons became regular. Gradually, a less formal relationship between them developed, and in 1939 the Medttners first stayed with Iles in Birmingham. Shortly after their second visit, they moved first to her house in rural Wythall, then – to avoid the Blitz at the beginning of 1941 – to Wootton Wawen, staying in all more than two and a half years before returning to North London. According to Mary Mason, no exchange of money ever took place between them.

The manner in which the Medttners and Iles spent their time together there was remarkable. The exceptional quality of their artistic contact during the war years undoubtedly played an enormous part in her determination to dedicate the rest of her life to promoting his music.

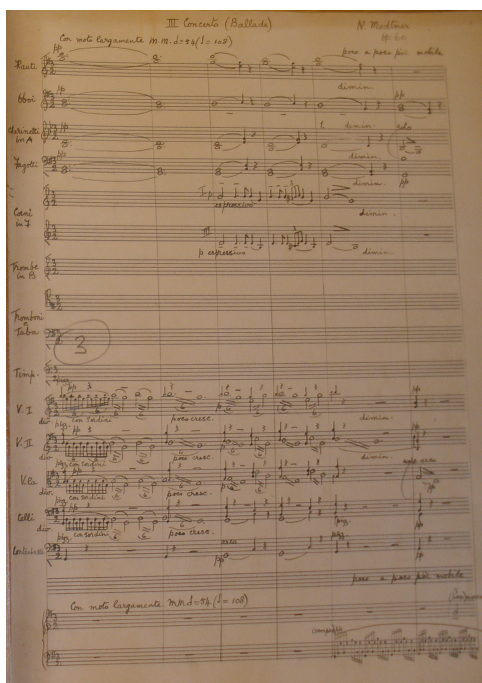


Plate 8. Iles's own manuscript copy of the score of Medtner's Third Concerto⁴²
(© The British Library Board)

⁴¹ Apetyan, *Letters*, pp.512-13.

⁴² See Appendix 5 for a colour version of the photograph.

An unwavering sense of mission ensured that Iles never gave up trying to bring Medtner's music to a wider audience. In 1946 she performed all three piano concertos in London at the Royal Albert Hall and took part in the Wigmore Hall concerts celebrating Medtner's 70th birthday in 1950 and marking his centenary in 1980. As Medtner's principal interpreter, both during his lifetime and immediately thereafter, she made the most of her unique access to him. It is both appropriate and touching, then, that the composer considered her 'the bravest and most able besieger of my musical fortresses'.⁴³

Iles's role in promoting Medtner's music is hard to overestimate. From the 1930s onwards she included his works in all her concerts. As the *Independent* critic Martin Anderson neatly put it: 'that he is now often spoken of in the same breath as his friend Sergei Rachmaninov and features regularly in recitals and recordings is a tribute to her perspicacity and tenacity.'⁴⁴ Some of Iles's broadcasts are accessible at the Sound Archive in the British Library.

Had she not been on her own⁴⁵ and living in the relative isolation of the Midlands, she might have enjoyed greater success as a soloist.⁴⁶ While in her 20s and 30s she had given concerts in Berlin, Vienna (at the Musikverein), Oslo, Stockholm and Budapest, appeared alongside Paderewski and Furtwängler in an international celebrity concert series, and played under conductors who included Sir Adrian Boult, Sir Thomas Beecham and Willem Mengelberg, yet today she is almost forgotten. The release of four Iles albums on the St-Laurent label in 2014 means that her name and style of playing

⁴³ Medtner's handwriting is on the manuscript of the 'Russian Round Dance', Op. 58 No. 1 (EIMC, Box 1).

⁴⁴ M. Anderson, 'Edna Iles. Pianist and Champion of Medtner', *The Independent* (24 March 2003).

⁴⁵ She never married.

⁴⁶ See Lemy Sungyoun Lim, *The Reception of Women Pianists in London, 1950-60* (London: City University PhD, 2010).

may now become more widely known.⁴⁷ Edna Iles died on 29 January 2003 at St Bernard's Residential Care Home in Solihull, near Birmingham.



Plate 9. The Edna Iles Medtner Collection (© The British Library Board)⁴⁸

The ‘Edna Iles Medtner Collection’

In 1977 Iles donated her extensive collection of lesson notes, Medtner letters, newspaper cuttings, photographs and concert programmes to the British Library in London. The majority of her collection is currently distributed among six grey large boxes. To date, relatively few people have examined the EIMC. The Japanese researcher Satoru Takaku of Nihon University published the text of the ‘Early Book’ online in both Japanese and English.⁴⁹ The Russians Dolinskaya and her assistant

⁴⁷ For the full list of Iles’s recordings *see* Appendix 4.

⁴⁸ *See* Appendix 5 for a colour version of the photograph.

⁴⁹ Satoru Takaku, ‘Edna Iles’ Early Book: The Piano Playing Nicholas Medtner Taught Me Text with Annotations’

Part 1 <<http://ci.nii.ac.jp/lognavi?name=nels&lang=en&type=pdf&id=ART0008985244>> (date last accessed: 19 August 2014)

Part 2 <<http://ci.nii.ac.jp/lognavi?name=nels&lang=en&type=pdf&id=ART0008985265>> (date last accessed: 19 August 2014)

Rakhlenko were the last before me to work on it. I believe I am the first person to have undertaken a detailed study of the value and implications of the EIMC for Medtner performing practice. I have focused in particular on Iles's 'Notes on the Interpretation of Medtner's Works' made after her lessons with Medtner over a twenty-year period, and now stored in Box Six; my full transcription of the 'Notes' forms Appendix 2.

In the following quotation Iles describes her motivation for preserving what was, in effect, a transcript of her lessons:

Throughout my association with him, on every occasion when I played to him I wrote down immediately in the minutest detail everything he told me, so that numerous notes I have gathered enable me at any time to refresh my memory regarding the interpretation of every work I studied with him.⁵⁰

These notes can therefore be considered crucial primary evidence of the composer's views regarding the interpretation of his music, including general comments about piano playing as well as specific ones related to performance issues in nearly 30 of Medtner's opuses. Iles's 'Notes' are distributed between 5 notebooks (the 'Early Book' and Books 1–4). The variety of their form is astonishing: as well as fair-copy notebooks where notes from several lessons were perhaps conflated, loose sheets of hastily-written notes can be found too. Iles's first lesson with Medtner took place in March 1930, the last recorded one in August 1950. Book 1 contains notes from the lessons she took in 1935-1939; Book 2 reflects war years (1939-1943), Book 3 contains records on lessons taken between 1934 and 1950. Book 4 is a set of notes by Iles who attended Medtner's recording session in 1947. The 'Early Book' is oddly the latest one; written after Medtner's death it represents a summary of Medtner's teaching method. My detailed analyses of the contents of Iles's books form the heart of this dissertation.

Part 3

<http://ci.nii.ac.jp/els/110007055786.pdf?id=ART0008985286&type=pdf&lang=en&host=cinii&order_no=&ppv_type=0&lang_sw=&no=1408443016&cp=> (date last accessed: 19 August 2014).

The 'Early book' is part of Box Six of the EIMC. See Appendix 1 for the full contents of the EIMC.

⁵⁰ E. Iles, 'Medtner, Friend and Master', *Recorded Sound*, 70-71 (1978), p.791.

Iles was aware of the value of her ‘Notes’, even though forty-six years elapsed between Medtner’s death and her gift of the collection to the British Library. It is evident, even from cursory examination, that she carefully annotated and rewrote passages in the intervening time. Iles was the only Medtner student to leave such a legacy. In my dissertation, I shall establish what, according to Iles, constitutes ‘Medtner’s performing style’ and to what extent it reflects the present-day performance practice of Medtner’s music. My hope is that pianists today and in the future will benefit from her efforts to record his teaching.



Plate 10. Contents of Box Six – Iles’s lesson notes (© The British Library Board)⁵¹

⁵¹ See Appendix 5 for a colour version of the photograph.

CHAPTER 2

Fundamentals of Medtner's Piano Technique

According to Medtner, 'technique is energy'.¹ Iles's 'Notes' reveal that he devoted considerable time to teaching the fundamentals of piano technique to her, even though she was already an accomplished pianist. The 'Notes' cover all aspects of piano technique – articulation, expression, pedaling, phrasing and tone production, to name but a few. This is the first of three chapters devoted to the aspects of Medtner's piano technique. An understanding of Medtnerian fundamentals – the application of natural weight, use of fingers only, and ways of combining them – is essential before approaching the chapters on practising and pedaling.

Medtner's views on pianos are worth taking into account. During his time in Russia he preferred those made by Richard Lipp & Sohn, noted for their resonance, and powerful bass register in particular.² Prior to his Moscow recitals he would rehearse in Lipp's shop. We also know that he never particularly enjoyed playing Steinways and was heard to describe one as a 'wild beast'.³ In consequence he warned of the possible need to rein in left-hand sonorities when performing on modern pianos, first in the *Daily Work*, and then in his lessons with Iles, who reported:

Medtner said that particularly on Steinway pianos, the bass is stronger than middle and the middle is stronger than top, so be careful that left hand does not drown right hand ... particularly in those places where right hand crescendos [in an upward passage], because as right hand rises, piano gets weaker.⁴

The reverse is also true when the theme is in a low register: 'it sings more easily of its own accord'. Medtner specifically warned against allowing the right-hand part to

¹ Nikolay Medtner, *Povsednevnyaya rabota pianista i kompozitora* [The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer] (Moscow: State Music Publishers, 1963), p.32.

² Isaak Zetel', *N.K. Medtner – pianist. Tvorchestvo. Ispolnitel'stvo. Pedagogika* [N.K. Medtner – A Pianist. His Compositions, his Art of Interpretation and his Teaching] (Moscow: Muzika, 1981), pp.146-147 and 223.

³ *The Daily Work*, p.35.

⁴ EIMC, 6.1.2.8.

become less important. ‘Let it be heard, otherwise the effect is poor.’⁵ According to Swan, Medtner had a Bechstein piano in his London home and always enjoyed playing instruments of that make.⁶ Of the French piano firms Medtner favoured Erard, from whom he had hired an instrument for his recital at the Salle Gaveau on 29 October 1933.⁷

Position at the piano

Iles opens her ‘Early Book’ with the simplest of statements: ‘Sit comfortable and easily.’ She continues: ‘keep still ... do not come forward for a crescendo, or make a jerky movement for a *sforzando* etc. ... Have a fixed position on keyboard at which to look.’⁸ A stable fixed position at the piano was very important to Medtner. In the *Daily Work* he repeatedly stresses the importance of free posture at the piano.⁹ Examples of the application of this approach abound in the ‘Notes’. In Book 1, Iles writes of the fourth of Brahms’s Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24: ‘Sit still! Do not move body for *sforzandos*. Do all these with arms.’¹⁰ Of the second movement of Beethoven’s Sonata, Op. 53 she records: ‘Play with hardly any movement.’¹¹ Thus the stillness of the music is reflected in the pianist’s posture. The *Daily Work* offers confirmation: ‘The body should be the solid, stable centre, but never in a state of

⁵ EIMC, 6.1.3.5.

⁶ Zarui Apetyan ed., *N.K. Medtner: Vospominaniya, stat'i, material'i* [Reminiscences, Articles, Materials] (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1981), p.148.

⁷ Zetel', p.147.

⁸ EIMC, 6.1.1.2.

It is important to draw attention here to the seemingly authoritarian tone conveyed by Iles’ notes. The often cryptic, scrambled syntax of Medtner’s instructions may reflect the speed in which she wrote, but should be taken as a reasonably faithful echo of what she heard him say, also taking into account that he was not speaking in his native language. (The frequent absence of the definite article is a clear reflection of Medtner’s Russian-English.) The ‘Notes’ do, nevertheless, contain clear directives from Medtner, often closely replicating his printed comments, and as such they offer a reliable starting point for any pianist consulting them.

⁹ *The Daily Work*, pp.19, 23, 24, 45.

¹⁰ EIMC, 6.1.2.5.

¹¹ EIMC, 6.1.2.6.

convulsive tension.’¹² The explanation for this precept can be found in the ‘Notes’: ‘If one sits still one can listen to oneself much better, and one must be not only a player, but also a listener.’¹³ The importance of maintaining a stable, comfortable position at the piano was valued by other concert pianists and pedagogues of Medtner’s generation – György Sándor, Mark Hambourg and Ignacy Jan Paderewski among them – just as it is today.¹⁴

Medtner encouraged the use of ‘light movements’ of the hands, back and forth on the keys: ‘Sometimes use a forward movement to the back of keys when coming down, and a backward movement towards body when rising’.¹⁵ Examples of the application this technique in the ‘Notes’ relate to both Medtner’s music and that of other composers: in the opening of Medtner’s ‘Tragoedie-Fragment’, Op. 7 No. 2 he asked her to ‘push hand forward for legato chords’,¹⁶ and on the final accented chords of Variation 7 of Brahms’s Op. 24, to ‘push hands forwards to back of keyboard, wrists going up’.¹⁷ In an article, Vladimir Sofronitsky mentions being given similar advice by Medtner with regard to playing the chords of the opening theme of Schumann’s *Etudes Symphoniques* Op. 13. Medtner recommended a movement towards the back of the keys and playing with straight fingers; however for Chopin and Scriabin, he thought it appropriate to pull hand towards yourself when playing a chord or a note, as if taking the sound off the key. In the first instance the sound becomes dark, dense and vibrating, and in the second it lasts and becomes immaterial.¹⁸

¹² *The Daily Work*, p.45.

¹³ EIMC, 6.1.1.2.

¹⁴ György Sándor, *On Piano Playing* (London: Schirmer Books, 1981), 34; Mark Hambourg, *How to Play the Piano* (Philadelphia, PA: Theodore Presser Company, 1922), p.74; Paderewski, ‘Practical Hints on Piano Study’, Malwine Brée, *The Leschetizky Method. A Guide to Fine and Correct Piano Playing* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997), p.91.

¹⁵ EIMC, 6.1.1.3.

¹⁶ EIMC, 6.1.7.1.

¹⁷ EIMC, 6.1.2.5.

¹⁸ I. Nikonovich, ‘V mire Sofronitskogo’ [In Sofronitsky’s World], *Sovetskaya muzika*, 1 (1968), p.62.

Iles writes in detail about the hands: ‘Forget resistance and think only of making hands soft and supple. Play with flat hand.’¹⁹ Throughout the ‘Notes’ she reiterates his preference for using a flat hand, adding that ‘Medtner’s hand often had a sprawling appearance.’²⁰ He particularly recommended employing a flat hand for wrist staccato and in *piano cantabile* passages. The fingers were supposed to be fairly flat, and nails in view.²¹ The *Daily Work* confirms this view.²²



Plate 11. Portrait of Medtner at the keyboard

In the portrait that appears in the fifth volume of his *Complete Edition*²³ (see Plate 11 above), Medtner is seated at the piano with his hand positioned on the keyboard in a ‘sprawling’ manner. We also know that Medtner considered curved fingers too weak to carry the weight of hand.²⁴ While the piano pedagogues Henrich

¹⁹ EIMC, 6.1.1.2.

²⁰ EIMC, 6.1.1.3, 6.1.1.19 and 6.1.4.24.

²¹ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

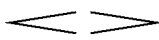
²² *The Daily Work*, p.48.

²³ Nikolay Medtner, *Complete Edition*, V (Moscow: State Music Publishers, 1961), p.3.

²⁴ EIMC, 6.1.15.

Neuhaus and Theodor Leschetizky disagreed,²⁵ playing with flat hands was also taught by a fellow Safonov pupil, Josef Lhevinne, who wrote that, ‘the main principle at the first is to see that the key is touched with as resilient a portion of the finger as possible, if a lovely, ringing, singing tone is desired’.²⁶ For Lhevinne, the most resilient portion of a finger was its cushion, though playing with the cushions and playing with flat fingers are much the same.

Position of the elbows

In the *Daily Work* Medtner asserted that, ‘the most natural position of the hands is that in which the elbows disconnect from the body as if moving in opposite directions, and at the same time the wrists [and fingers] turn towards one another.’²⁷ Iles’s notes from 1942 perfectly accord with what he wrote in 1924. Iles illustrates his point with ‘hairpins’: ‘Keep elbows out  and keep them perfectly still. Still elbows are in control of all movements and bows, and prevent jumps and jerks and unevenness.’²⁸ Iles’s drawing is identical to that published in the *Daily Work*, confirming that ‘elbows out’ was indeed the position Medtner intended. The position is also similar to the one that Lhevinne advocated to achieve the sensation of a ‘floating arm’, required for playing *cantabile*: the elbow slightly extended from the side of the body.²⁹ Maria Yudina also recommended it as a way to achieve fuller tone.³⁰ Medtner’s concept of free elbows is, however, at odds with the so-called French School, which advocates that elbows should be kept close to the body *à la Chopin*.³¹

²⁵ Henrich Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, trans. K.A. Leibovitch (London: Kahn & Averill, 1993); Brée, p.6.

²⁶ Josef Lhevinne, *Basic principles in Pianoforte Playing* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1972), p.18.

²⁷ *The Daily Work*, p.45.

²⁸ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

²⁹ Lhevinne, p.27.

³⁰ Marina Drozdova, *Uroki Yudinoy* [Yudina’s lessons] (Moscow: Klassika-xxi, 2006), p.40.

³¹ Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: pianist and teacher as seen by his pupils* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), p.30.

When playing chords, Medtner suggests the elbows should be ‘out and up a little’.³² The importance of free elbows is stressed at several points in the *Daily Work*, and his remark about Tale, Op. 14 No. 2 is especially pertinent in this regard: the repeated double thirds in the bar 11 of that Tale are considerably easier to play with elbows out and up.³³ Iles specifically mentions ‘elbows up’ with regard to the *Sonata romantica*, Op. 53, No. 1, and the Third Concerto.³⁴

According to the ‘Notes’, all hand movements, as well as the fingering should be fixed: ‘The right movement of hands must be found and timed according to rhythm, breathing pauses, emphasis etc.’³⁵ In the view of the late American pianist Charles Rosen, this is the approach one uses when ‘gestures ... become part of the interpretation’.³⁶ Iles comments throughout the ‘Notes’ on the importance of physical freedom and naturalness when playing the piano. These concepts are echoed in the reminiscences of Medtner’s Russian students, Shatskes and Gurvich, who recalled that the composer placed great importance on the economy of hand movements.³⁷ For Medtner the basics of piano technique can best be summarized by a characteristically terse quotation from the *Daily Work*: ‘elbows out, fingers straight, eyes closed, free breathing, free arm and complete absence of rigidity’.³⁸

³² EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

³³ *The Daily Work* (2011) pp.18, 20, 26.

³⁴ EIMC, 6.1.3.7 and 6.1.4.3 respectively.

³⁵ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

³⁶ Charles Rosen, *Piano Notes: The World of the Pianist* (New York: Free Press, 2002), pp.30-31.

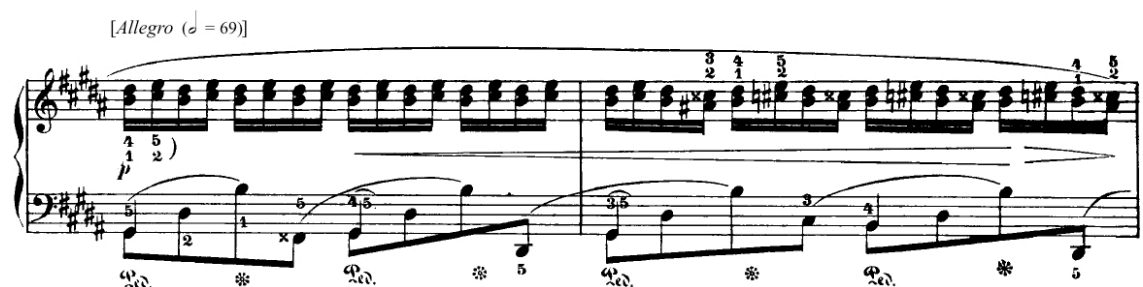
³⁷ Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, pp. 106, 127.

³⁸ *The Daily Work*, p.30.

Movements of the hands

There must be a continuous movement of both hands; they must not rest on keys doing nothing, but between long notes, or where there is a rest, or between short phrases or groups of notes, they must be raised ready for next note or group of notes.³⁹

Medtner compared the movements of a pianist's hands to those of a string player's bow.⁴⁰ He believed that hands must 'breathe', the 'same as the voice, or bow of stringed instruments'.⁴¹ Furthermore, to Medtner, playing a phrase on the piano was analogous to slurring notes in a single bow stroke. Expressions such as 'take each left-hand phrase in one', 'separate bow must be taken for each minim' and 'hand to represent bow of fiddle'⁴² recur frequently in the 'Notes', supported by musical examples, including Tale, Op. 34 No. 2 ('theme E-G-B must be played ... in one bow'), and the song 'Hymne Am Amboss', Op. 49 No. 2 ('catching must be in one bow').⁴³ His bowing analogy can usefully be applied to the music of other composers, for example, the left-hand part of Chopin's Etude, Op. 25 No. 6:



Example 1. Chopin, Etude, Op. 25 No. 6, bars 3-4

Similarly, Medtner advised restricting the hand to a single movement or gesture when playing a series of notes. In passages where the gesture is repeated, as in a sequence, he suggested lifting the hand between each repetition.⁴⁴ This pertains, for

³⁹ EIMC, 6.1.1.3.

⁴⁰ EIMC, 6.1.1.3.

⁴¹ EIMC, 6.1.6.2.

⁴² EIMC, 6.1.4.3, 6.1.1.3 and 6.1.4.13, respectively.

⁴³ EIMC, 6.1.3.1.7, 6.1.3.15.

⁴⁴ EIMC, 6.1.4.25 and 6.1.1.3.

example, to the groups of demisemiquaver notes in Tale, Op. 51 No. 2. The effect of playing groups of notes as gestures is to enhance the sense of direction within a phrase. It also opens up new interpretive possibilities for pieces such as Tale, Op. 26 No. 3 and the first movement of *Sonate-Idylle*, Op. 56, where the principal subject consists of combinations of long and short notes.⁴⁵

Medtner's views on 'piano bowing' were shared by a number of renowned German pedagogues, including Deppe, Breithaupt, Alfred Cortot and Sándor. Breithaupt suggested an exercise in which a group of five notes are played as in one bow stroke, using a rotary movement.⁴⁶ Iles summed up Medtner's 'bowing' concept as 'rotary movement [of hands] controlled by elbows'.⁴⁷

Free falling and rising of the hands

Another cornerstone of Medtnerian piano technique was the free falling and rising of the hands. This follows on from the aforementioned equation of hand movements with those of a string player's bow. Medtner insisted that Iles strictly observe how her hands moved: 'It is absolutely essential to watch hands and see that they fall and rise with a full and free movement wherever requisite.'⁴⁸ His own strategy was to memorise a work as quickly as possible in order to be able to watch the free falling and rising of his hands. He advised initially practising with the 'hands very close to keyboard to make sure of chord positions ... but when these are sure, raise both hands well between chords, short phrases, etc. as a stringed instrument player would raise his bow'.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Detailed analyses of the *Sonate-Idylle* forms Chapter 7 of this dissertation.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Caland, *Artistic Piano Playing as Taught by Ludwig Deppe* (Nashville, TN: The Olympian Publishing Co, 1903), p.10; Rudolf Breithaupt, *Natural Piano Technique* (Vol. II: *School of Weight-Touch*) (Leipzig: C. F. Kahnt Nachfolger, 1909), p.36; Alfred Cortot, *Rational Principles of Pianoforte Technique* (Paris: Editions Salabert, 1972), p.72; Sándor, p.66.

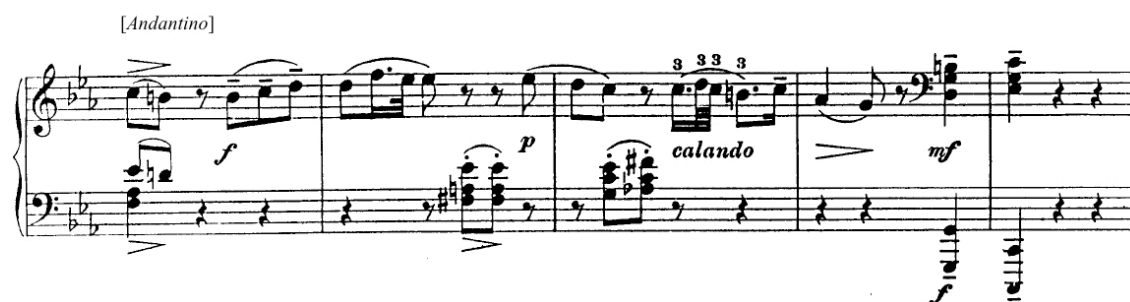
⁴⁷ EIMC 6.1.4.25

⁴⁸ EIMC, 6.1.1.2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

The degree to which the hands should be raised varies from piece to piece. For example, the height of the hand immediately before playing the chord in bar 5 of Chopin's Scherzo No. 4 – 'raise hands and come down on to this chord with accent'⁵⁰ – would be quite different from that required to play the opening chords of Scherzo No. 1. For Medtner, however, playing *forte* was only one of the purposes of raising the hands: it also produced a beautiful tone.

He also advised raising the hand when playing long solo notes with the same finger in order to make efficient use of its natural weight. This technique can, for example, be applied to bars 75, 83 and 91 of Medtner's First Piano Concerto, where the melody requires the use of the third finger, at the end of Rachmaninov's *Etude-Tableaux* in D Minor, Op. 39 No. 8, which is a solo for thumbs, and in Busoni's version of the *Andantino* from Mozart's Concerto K271.



Example 2. Mozart/Busoni. *Andantino* from Concerto in E flat, K271, bars 131-135

Further references to the free falling and rising of the hands can be found in Iles's Books 2 and 3 in regard to the concertos and *Tema con variazioni*, Op. 55. The concept of 'free fall' is hardly new to piano technique, having been described at different times by Safonov, Walter Giesecking, Ernest Hutcheson, Sándor and Lhevinne among others. Fellow Pabst student Konstantin Igumnov also advocated the free falling and rising of the hands, and wrote about it in an article entitled 'Some Technical Observations':

⁵⁰ EIMC 6.1.2.7.

To produce a sound it is better to slightly raise and then immediately lower the hand. ... The weight and fall of the hand play important part. ... You just need to raise and lower, but without any throwing.⁵¹

Follow-through movement

Medtner advocated the follow-through movement when playing pairs of notes, intervals or chords as well as when highlighting separate notes or chords. The first case is illustrated by the following example:



Example 3. Medtner, Concerto No. 2, Op. 50, 'Romanza', bars 119-121

In bar 121, the group of octave quavers in the left hand leading to the crotchet is meant to be played in a single gesture; lifting the hand to play the crotchet was prohibited:

... come down on to quavers and follow-through with the same movement onto crotchet ... throw hand off crotchet, still moving in the same direction as well as upwards, and raise ready to drop on to next two notes.⁵²

In the example above, the follow-through movement enhances the *risoluto* character of the passage. Example 4 from the *Sonata romantica*, Op. 53 No. 1, and bar 15 in particular, illustrates the second case, 'where one works up to a climax, and starts theme at top of climax, it gives more *élan* [momentum] to release note with following through movement.'⁵³ Further examples of this can be found in the *Sonata romantica* (bar 88 of the 'Meditazione' and bar 102 of the 'Finale') and are mentioned in the 'Notes'.

⁵¹ K. Igumnov, 'Some Technical Observations', Christopher Barnes ed., *The Russian Piano School* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2007), p.78.

⁵² EIMC, 6.1.1.3.

⁵³ EIMC, 6.1.2.10.



Example 4. *Sonata romantica*, Op. 53 No. 1, 'Meditazione', bars 13-16.

Medtner's follow-through movement complements his advice about lifting hands after the long notes described earlier in the chapter (see 'Free falling and rising of the hands').

Accents

According to Iles, *sforzandi* in Medtner should be accented, though not necessarily loudly.⁵⁴ In concertos, particularly where the orchestration is thin or in a fairly high register, he advised her not to make 'any *sforzandos* ... too loud'⁵⁵, an observation based on experience and deep knowledge of the nature of piano. Where an accent is required Medtner recommended raising the hand sideways while 'still keeping it flat'.⁵⁶

He employed a wide range of accentuation marks: >, *sf*, *fz*, *sff*, most of which appear in what he termed music of 'energetic' character. Indeed, not a single accent or sforzando mark appears in pieces like Tale Op. 14 No. 1, which he considered to be of

⁵⁴ EIMC, 6.1.1.16.

⁵⁵ EIMC, 6.1.1.20.

⁵⁶ EIMC, 6.1.1.12.

‘rounded’ character.⁵⁷ He labeled a succession of accents ‘*marcato*’ (as, for example, in Tale Op.14 No. 2 and the ‘Finale’ of *Sonate-Ballade*, bars 31-36) without necessarily signifying an increase in volume. Medtner sometimes marked the melodies that he wanted to highlight with *tenutos* (see his *Sonate-Ballade*, ‘Introduzione’, bars 25-32); accents in Medtner, then, must not be confused with single *tenutos* and hairpins towards a single note, though they all represent different degrees of highlighting.

Medtner’s recordings confirm what he taught Iles about playing accents. One never hears him sharply attacking the keys. In his recordings, accents always serve the overall musical interpretation.⁵⁸ It should be noted, however, that while Medtner indicated both sforzandos and accents in the left-hand melody in the score of the First Concerto (bar 511, section number 48), neither he nor Iles differentiated audibly between them in their recordings.

Playing chords

According to Iles, Medtner used the free-fall technique when playing chords. He recommended allowing the hand to fall softly onto a chord, without preparation or resistance.⁵⁹ This approach echoes Safonov, who wrote in his *New Formula* that,

A chord must never be prepared in a stiff position... the chord must, so to speak, be hidden in the closed hand, which opens, in falling from above for the necessary position, just at the moment of striking the keyboard.⁶⁰

Iles’s ‘Notes’ contain two examples of free-fall technique. Of bar 15 in the ‘Tragoedie-Fragment’, Op. 7 No. 2, she writes, ‘throw hands off on first chord’.⁶¹ Of the chords in bar 28 of the ‘Scherzo’ in the *Sonata romantica*, Medtner reminded her to ‘practise

⁵⁷ See Chapter 6 for a discussion of Medtner’s concepts of ‘energetic’ and ‘rounded’ music.

⁵⁸ *Listen*, for example to the syncopations in Tale, Op. 14 No. 2, bars 72-4 and Tale, Op. 20 No. 1, bar 27 and 31.

⁵⁹ EIMC, 6.1.1.3.

This rule also has an obvious parallel with Rudolf Breithaupt’s method of playing, described in his *Natural Piano Technique* (Vol. II: *School of Weight-Touch*, Leipzig: C. F. Kahnt Nachfolger, 1909).

⁶⁰ Vasily Safonov, *New Formula for the Piano Teacher and Piano Student* (London: Chester, 1916), p.27.

⁶¹ EIMC, 6.1.7.1.

these chords also closing hand between each chord, and falling on to it from this position'.⁶² It is interesting that free-fall was Medtner's preferred way of playing the chords, while Sándor advocated both free-fall and thrusting the hand to produce a fuller sound.⁶³

Medtner claimed that 'one should be able to play a chord and make any note of that chord sound above the others'.⁶⁴ In order to make one note of a chord dominate the rest, he recommended applying weight to the finger playing the note being given precedence, and allowing the other fingers hang loosely.⁶⁵ Similar exercises can be found in the Polish pianist Carl Tausig's *Daily Studies* (Book I, No. 24a and No. 24b) and Safonov's *New Formula*. Medtner's fascination with exercises, and particularly with those of Tausig and Brahms, was well known.⁶⁶ This technique is essential in order to bring out the middle voice in bars 33-34 of Tale, Op. 20 No. 1:



Example 5. Tale, Op. 20 No. 1, bars 33-34

To make chords strong, especially in the middle register of piano, Medtner recommended turning the hand sideways so that the wrists face one another. This technique is required to execute bars 358 and 371 of the 'Finale' of the *Sonate-Ballade*:

Run up *arpeggio* as written on bottom stave, throw hand thence on to chord on middle stave finishing with left hand turned over sideways and wrist pointing to right hand. ... He [Medtner] held this chord and slapped his wrist to show me how firm it was.⁶⁷

⁶² EIMC, 6.1.3.7.

⁶³ Sándor, pp.108-110.

⁶⁴ EIMC, 6.1.3.20.

⁶⁵ EIMC, 6.1.1.7.

⁶⁶ Maria Gurvich, 'V klasse Medtnera' [In Medtner's studio], Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, p.127; *The Daily Work*, p.46.

⁶⁷ EIMC, 6.1.4.6.



Example 6a. *Sonate-Ballade*, 'Finale', bars 357-358.



Example 6b. *Sonate-Ballade*, 'Finale', bars 368-373.

This recommendation also highlights the role of the thumb.

When spreading chords larger than an octave, Medtner suggested that Iles 'throw weight on bass note, and play instantaneous, as if all notes together'.⁶⁸ The exception occurs when the top note is deemed more important than the bass. Chords larger than an octave are, however, relatively rare in Medtner's music.

When two chords are played in quick succession, especially when the first one functions as a grace note, the pianist should apply follow-through movement. Iles dubs these 'double knocks': 'For double knocks ... go forward to back of keyboard for second knock; do not do two downward movements.'⁶⁹ Examples in Medtner are numerous, exemplified by 'Shopot, robkoye dikhan'ye' [Whisp'ring, Nature faintly stirring], Op. 24 No. 7, bar 8, and the 'Finale' of the *Sonate-Ballade*.

⁶⁸ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

⁶⁹ EIMC, 6.1.1.19.

*Articolando*⁷⁰

Medtner demanded that all his music be carefully articulated. Consequently, one of the terms that appears most frequently in Iles's 'Notes' is *articolando*, especially with regard to passagework and where clarity in polyphonic textures is crucial. Medtner encouraged Iles never to play in an inarticulate, 'flimsy' or 'feeble' manner⁷¹ and asked her to practise all runs *articolando*, i.e., 'elbows out, feeling each finger and with weight on keys'.⁷² Examples of textures requiring the application of *articolando* include the introduction to 'Elfenliedchen', Op. 6 No. 3, 'Mogu l' zabīt' to sladkoye mgnoven'ye' [The Waltz], Op. 32 No. 5, Elegiya [Elegy], Op. 45 No. 1, and the opening of Tale, Op. 51 No. 1.⁷³ Medtner's insistence on the use of *articolando* is not surprising, considering that most of his music consists of polyphonic textures, or is in some sense virtuosic.

Staccato

According to Iles, Medtner distinguished between two types of staccato: one produced by the finger, the other by the wrist. The former is executed with a flat hand and the wrist 'perfectly stable'; the pianist is expected to draw each finger sharply into palm of hand 'immediately after it strikes the note'. In other words, the fingers do all the work.⁷⁴ Medtner recommended playing both staccato and *non legato* passages using this technique to achieve faster speeds.

When practising finger staccato, the wrist must be still enough to support a glass of water on the back of the hand, and the entire finger drawn into the palm of the

⁷⁰ Medtner's artistic vocabulary incorporates relatively unusual Italian words – '*pieghevole*, '*tenerezza*', '*con pianto*', '*tempo di passo*', '*tempo assoluto*' '*disinvolto*' – are just a few examples. It is possible that this was due to his fascination with Italian culture in general (Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, p.177).

⁷¹ EIMC, 6.1.6.27.

⁷² EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

⁷³ EIMC, 6.1.3.19, 6.1.3.18.

⁷⁴ EIMC, 6.1.1.4.

hand. Elbows might be kept in a slightly outward position, the hands and arms still. Medtner assured Iles that ‘with finger staccato movement one can play quick little notes much more quickly, strongly and evenly’.⁷⁵ The ‘little notes’ include mordents and groups of two or more notes. Examples of finger staccato indicated in Iles’s music include the main subject from the Finale of Beethoven’s Fourth Concerto (in particular, the semi-quaver turn in the right hand), bars 16 and 18 in Medtner’s First Concerto, and the ‘Finale’ of the *Sonata romantica*, where he wrote ‘finger staccato’ at the top of her copy.⁷⁶

[Allegro (♩ = 180)]

Example 7. Concerto No. 1, Op. 33, bars 15-18

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ EIMC, 6.1.3.7.

Finger staccato can also be used to achieve a sharp, ringing effect in passagework, as, for example, in the works of Scarlatti, Chopin, Schumann and Liszt.

The pianist Aleksandr Gol'denveyzer, himself once a student of Pabst, wrote that,

The technique of bending fingers under when playing staccato was regarded as essential and applied with consummate virtuosity by Nikolay Medtner. Hardly any pianist could compete with Medtner in the precise articulation of fast passagework.⁷⁷

Vasil'yev remarked to his Conservatory students in Moscow on the emphasis Medtner placed on teaching finger staccato.⁷⁸ On the evidence of Iles's 'Notes', he may have been the first pianist to codify this technique.

Medtner also found occasion to use wrist staccato, which involves lifting the hand immediately after striking the note.⁷⁹ The visual impression of this movement reminded him of a 'chicken's peck', which is why there are so many references to the 'chicken movement' throughout the 'Notes'.⁸⁰ Medtner's manner of playing wrist staccato closely accords with that of Leschetizky:

In the stronger wrist-staccato, the fingers are lifted with the wrist, and a blow struck from above the keys by the swinging of the wrist downward. The wrist should immediately be brought back to its raised position, as if rebounding from the keyboard.⁸¹

Rotary and 'motor' movements

For Medtner, a rotary movement involved a slight increase in the sideways movement of hand, which he used for playing *tremolo* and brief passagework. The movement is in

⁷⁷ Aleksandr Gol'denveyzer, 'Sovetī pedagoga-pianista' [Advice from a Pianist and Teacher], Barnes, p.62.

I was taught finger staccato technique by two graduates of the Moscow Conservatory, both of whom were connected with Pabst through Igumnov.

⁷⁸ Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, p.79.

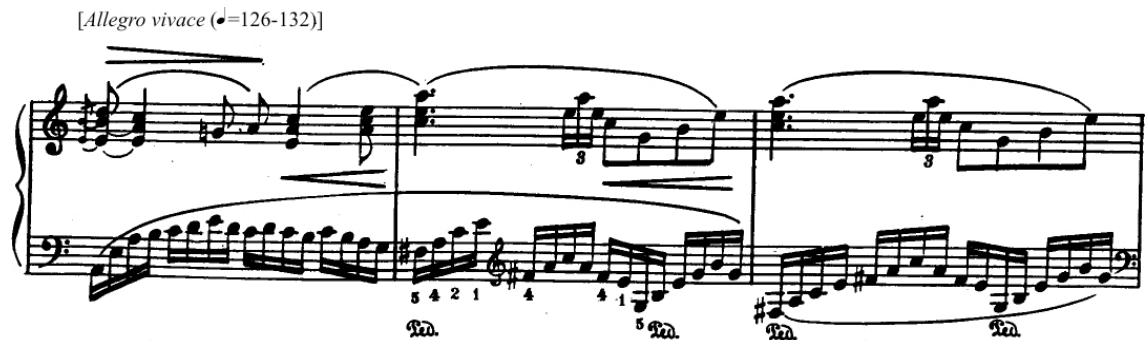
⁷⁹ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

⁸⁰ See Novella, Op. 17 No. 3, 'Das Rauschen der Menge' from *2te Improvisation*, Op. 47 and chords in the third bar of the *Sonata romantica*). EIMC 6.1.3.9, 6.1.4.19 and 6.1.3.7 respectively.

⁸¹ Brée, p.27.

Wrist staccato would, for example, be appropriate in Rubinstein's Etude, Op. 23 No. 2.

fact only a small one, as the elbows must remain still.⁸² Iles mentions rotary movement in connection with bar 9 of ‘Hymne Nach der Arbeit’, Op. 49 No. 3:



Example 8. ‘Hymne Nach der Arbeit’, Op. 49 No. 3, bars 8-10

Medtner advised her to play the semiquaver triplet in the right hand ‘very *articolando* and strong, with sideways movement of hand, keeping elbow still’.⁸³

The technique of rotating the hand did not originate with Medtner. Ludwig Deppe anticipated Medtner when he observed that the ‘shaking movement ... used in preparation for the performance of broken octaves, sixths, thirds, and other tremolo figures’ involved the same underlying principle as that required for the execution of trills.⁸⁴ The advocates of hand rotation included Leschetizky (in Chopin’s Etude, Op. 25 No. 1) and later Breithaupt, Giesecking, Sándor and Leschetizky’s student Frank Merrick.⁸⁵ Breithaupt divided instances of hand rotation into three types: (1) rotations with a curved hand, (2) at keyboard level and (3) with a low arched hand. Breithaupt’s description of the second type (with ‘the hand straightened out flat’) seems to be the one Medtner used when practising.

Medtner the pianist influenced Medtner the composer when devising his own idiosyncratic version of trilling, which involved the downward octave transposition of the main note and the addition of an inner sustained note that serves as pivot point for

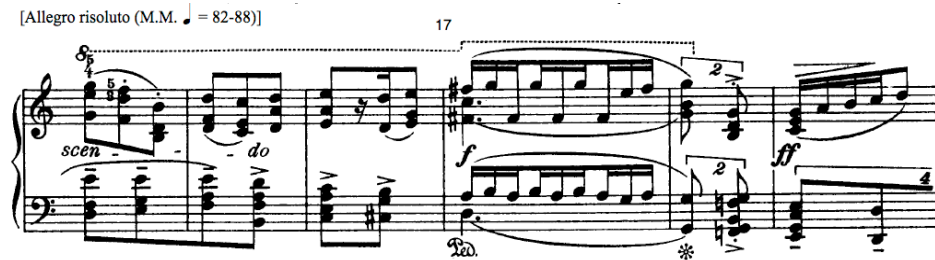
⁸² EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

⁸³ EIMC, 6.1.3.15.

⁸⁴ Caland, p.97.

⁸⁵ Brée, p.58; Breithaupt, p. 36; Walter Giesecking and Karl Leimer, *Piano Technique* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1972) pp.109, 112; Sándor, p.79; Frank Merrick, *Practising the Piano* (London: Rockliff, 1958), pp.85-86.

the hand. In the example below, the trill in bar 17 is expanded between f sharp and g'' while the hand balances on the c''.



Example 9. Tale, Op. 48 No. 1, bars 14-19

Other examples of this variant of trilling occur in *Sonate-Ballade*, specifically in bars 70 and 218-219 of the first movement and bars 346-347 of the 'Finale'. The tremolo effect of this trill can only be achieved by using rotary movement.

The growing list of distinctive Medtnerian terminology continues with 'motor' movement', which refers to the uniform movement of the hands in figurations consisting of repeating groups of notes. 'In a places like beginning of the *Novella*, Op. 17 No. 1, left-hand movement must be continuous like a motor which is wound up.'⁸⁶ The movement, involving a combination of high and low wrist positions, needs to be executed effortlessly in order to avoid fatigue.⁸⁷ Medtner applied it to groups of octaves, such as those occurring in his 'Elegy' Op. 45 No. 1, and the following excerpt from the *Sonata romantica*:



Example 10. *Sonata romantica* Op. 53 No. 1, 'Meditazione', bars 32-33

⁸⁶ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

⁸⁷ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

It can be applied to the passage of octaves in Schumann's *Toccata*, Op. 7 and the right hand part of Schubert's 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' (D.118).

The use of motor movement here is suggested by the repetitive rhythm in the left hand. Iles wrote of this passage: ‘remember ... raising of hand in motor movement in left hand’.⁸⁸ Medtner sometimes indicated the motor movement by writing ‘*egualmente*’ in the score (see, for example, *Novella* Op. 17 No. 1).

Use of thumb

Medtner considered the thumb to be ‘the most important of all fingers’.⁸⁹ From Safonov he learned that the thumb could helpfully serve as ‘the pivot of all technical difficulties’, but that ‘care must be taken to give it utmost facility in combination with other fingers’.⁹⁰ This technique offers another parallel between Medtner and Safonov.⁹¹ Certainly, at some point in his career, Igumnov, too, decided that a ‘well-cultivated thumb is essential’.⁹²

Zetel’ remarked in 1981 on the importance of the thumb in Medtner’s music,⁹³ and, in particular, on the ways in which it can facilitate polyphonic textures, *cantilena* playing, and provides a pivotal point for the wrist as, for example, in Sonata, Op. 5, and Tale, Op. 51 No. 5. Medtner’s printed instruction to ‘bring out thumbs’, in the 1959 edition of Improvisation, Op. 31, No. 1, further emphasises this point.⁹⁴ His use of thumb on the black keys in Tale, Op. 51 No. 5 is similar to that of Chopin who first introduced the idea in his Etude, Op. 10 No. 5 (1830-32). The importance of using the thumb for *cantabile* playing is also an essential feature of Lhevinne’s teaching method.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ EIMC, 6.1.3.7.

⁸⁹ EIMC, 6.1.1.8.

⁹⁰ *New Formula for the Piano Teacher and Piano Student* (London: J. & W. Chester, 1916), p.7.

⁹¹ Medtner’s views on Safonov’s teaching tradition will be discussed in the Conclusions of the present work.

⁹² *The Russian Piano School*, p.80.

⁹³ Zetel’, p.107.

⁹⁴ *Complete Edition*, II, p.276.

⁹⁵ Lhevinne, p.19.

Medtner advised applying weight to the thumb in passages of *forte* octaves and octave chords: ‘this gives a warmer, more sonorous tone.’⁹⁶ Examples include the middle section of *Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1 No. 6 and the opening of the ‘Sonata tragica’.⁹⁷

Legato playing and good tone

In legato passages Medtner recommended keeping the hands and fingers soft and free, each finger releasing its note as soon as the next is played. The hands should be free, the elbows still.⁹⁸ For very soft legato playing, as in Brahms’s *Intermezzo*, Op. 118 No. 6, and in *pp* melodies more generally, Medtner recommended that the performer ‘keep everything still’ and, while avoiding any extra movement, ‘make fingers play tune’ by raising them between notes; he also suggested keeping the fingers flat as well as soft.⁹⁹

The trick was to play with intensity (‘resistance’), while achieving a good legato:

‘Keep hand perfectly soft, wrist perfectly loose, carry weight from finger to finger by movement of hand and forearm. This movement is greater for *forte*, less for *piano* and for very *piano* legato, play absolutely without movement, keeping hand and fingers close to keyboard, and still!’¹⁰⁰

Igumnov likewise advocated the use of flat fingers, whereas Sándor disagreed, claiming that

...for the notes tied together by a slur, we use an upward motion of the arm and hand. At the beginning, we always use a relatively low wrist, hand, and arm position, and at the end of a group, the wrist, hand, and arm position is higher. ... There is no way to play a real legato by the fingers alone!¹⁰¹

Breithaupt shared Medtner’s views on producing legato through the transference of weight from key to key, although for him ‘legato thus obtained rather constitutes a rapid

⁹⁶ EIMC, 6.1.1.8

⁹⁷ This ‘rule of thumb’ is also pertinent to the octaves and octave chords in the development of the opening movement of Tchaikovsky’s Concerto No. 1 and the second subject in the first movement of Brahms’s Concerto No. 2.

⁹⁸ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Barnes, p.79; Sándor, pp. 67 and 117.

non-legato, a relative legato' and was convinced that larger hand movements are required to produce an absolute legato.¹⁰²

Legato *cantabile* themes, in Medtner's view were to be played with the 'elbows slightly out and up'.¹⁰³ He recommended that Iles practise specific exercises for legato, such as playing Chopin's Etude, Op. 25 No. 8, very slowly with rounded finger movements between each note and by weighting the top line in order to make it sing.¹⁰⁴ For *piano cantabile* passages, he recommended that she 'use a very very very [sic] flat hand and do not raise fingers or make any movement whatever; simply glide from one note to the other with perfectly flat fingers'.¹⁰⁵ Admonitions to her included: 'don't do unnecessary accents, let nothing stand out of the line, don't do sudden hits, [and] don't bang out basses to break melodic line'.¹⁰⁶

Medtner shared Lhevinne's concern for 'maintaining the same touch for at least one phrase'.¹⁰⁷ For him, the tone in legato *cantabile* passages must always be intense, soft and rounded, intense even at its quietest, 'never flimsy'.¹⁰⁸ According to Iles, he seemed to rest his hand on the keys fairly flatly, and glide from note to note without any extraneous movement, yet produced tone that was very full and sonorous.¹⁰⁹ Speaking of the main subject of the first movement of the Second Violin Sonata, Medtner noted that 'if the first note of a tune is not good and does not sing, the entire tune is killed! Fairly flat hand. ... Keep fingers perfectly loose.'¹¹⁰ 'Playing legato tunes *cantabile* may, however, still require some movement of the hands, especially if the piano has a light touch.

¹⁰² Breithaupt, 49.

¹⁰³ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

¹⁰⁴ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

¹⁰⁵ EIMC, 6.1.1.12.

¹⁰⁶ EIMC 6.1.4.24, 6.1.4.25.

¹⁰⁷ Lhevinne, p.38.

¹⁰⁸ EIMC, 6.1.6.1.

¹⁰⁹ EIMC, 6.1.2.2.

¹¹⁰ EIMC, 6.1.2.3.

Medtner recommended approaching *dolce* themes by letting the hand fall softly and gently from above: ‘don’t push the notes with a tight movement,’¹¹¹ he would say. Dropping onto the first note of a *dolce* theme was also Lhevinne’s preferred technique.¹¹² Inevitably, successful implementation depends on the skills of the pianist and the mechanical response of the piano. Beginning a *dolce* theme from above can produce a hard sound, worse still an unwanted accent. It may be that the similarity between Medtner’s and Lhevinne’s views on how best to achieve a *cantabile* effect – via flat fingers, proper use of the thumb, the separation of the elbows from the body and free-fall – was a reflection of their studies with Safonov.

According to Iles, Medtner would not, under any circumstances, countenance harsh tone.¹¹³ In the *Daily Work* we find corroborating comments: ‘everything always should sound beautiful’, ‘seek beautiful sound despite at any cost, *dolce*, legato – even in exercises’, ‘think constantly ... about beautiful sound’, ‘always elicit beautiful sounds, also in exercises’.¹¹⁴ Indeed, contemporaries went out of their way to praise the beauty of Medtner's sound. The Russian music critic Marietta Shaginyan observed that

Medtner possessed a distinctive touch at the piano, he despised a soft, caressing, wiping of the keys – he had his own view on the art of piano playing, his own school of pianism, and his own style, which to many seemed harsh and severe. But how this tough and honest touch, without any mawkish skating over the keyboard, this rugged, austere stroke could "exhaust" an incredible depth of sound, coming, it seemed, from the innermost soul of the instrument, and how, with such a "hard" touch, the sudden, lyrical phrases of his sublime melodies were borne away!¹¹⁵

Medtner's remarkable tone control is discernable in his recordings of the second movement of Beethoven’s Sonata, Op. 57 (‘Appassionata’), ‘Meeresstille’, Op. 15 No. 7, ‘Danza jubilosa’, Op. 40 No. 4, and the Third Concerto. Remarks about the need for

¹¹¹ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

¹¹² Lhevinne, p.22.

¹¹³ EIMC, 6.1.3.2 (emphasis original).

¹¹⁴ *The Daily Work*, pp.20, 35, 47 and 54 respectively.

¹¹⁵ M. Shaginyan, ‘Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove’ [Reminiscences about Rachmaninov], Zarui Apetyan ed., *Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove*, 4th ed. II (Moscow: Muzika, 1974), p.153.

the good tone occur regularly in the ‘Notes’, and apply to whole tunes and sections of pieces (Opp. 21 and 44) as well as to separate notes (bars 23 and 63 of Tale, Op. 42 No. 2).¹¹⁶ Further obvious examples include the opening of the *Sonate-Ballade*, Op. 27, or ‘Sonata-Reminiscenza’, Op. 38 No. 1. Medtner’s way of teaching *legato* and how to achieve a beautiful tone coincides with the views of Charles Rosen on the subject – ‘The real source of a beautiful tone quality is the musicianship and intelligence of the performer’¹¹⁷ – and those of Rudolf Breithaupt – ‘True legatissimo ... is in reality a purely mental process... [it] presupposes a musical intelligence of extreme sensibility, and a most delicate touch.’¹¹⁸

Medtner’s teaching methods, as set down by Iles, bear a strong resemblance to those of Safonov, and reflect the Russian tradition. From a great teacher Medtner inherited a love of technical exercises, clean technique (with the thumb often acting as a fulcrum for the hand), complete physical freedom, the aim of always producing a beautiful tone, as well as an ‘ability to make each individual pupil think and feel in his own personal way’.¹¹⁹ His decision to play *cantilena* with flat fingers was his own technical solution, and in my experience makes *cantabile* passages in his music easier to play.

Medtner valued freedom of the hands and arms, above all else, aware that it required secure command of the techniques outlined in this chapter. The positioning of the body and arms, the free manner in which the hands fall and rise from the keys, the follow-through of the hands, the manner of playing accents and chords all depend on the mindful application of natural weight. The proper positioning of the arms facilitates the playing of finger staccato and articolando passages. The most demanding aspects of

¹¹⁶ EIMC, 6.1.2.2.

¹¹⁷ Rosen, p.27.

¹¹⁸ Breithaupt, p.51.

¹¹⁹ Y. Catterall, ‘Nicolas Medtner, the Man and his Music’, *Makerere Journal*, 4 (1960), p.81.

Medtner's technical approach relate to legato playing, which relies on both natural weight and unfettered finger-work, and is among the most refined of all his expressive effects. For him, there was a balletic elegance about the subtle blending of natural weight and finger dexterity, which he used to achieve still more sophisticated effects, specifically by employing the thumb to play *cantabile* and facilitate rotary movements in virtuosic passagework. It is hardly surprising, then, that Medtner once compared a concert pianist to a circus artist.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ P. Vasil'yev, 'O moyom uchitele i druze', Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, 79; the foreword to *The Daily Work*, p.9.

CHAPTER 3

Pedalling in Medtner

Anton Rubinstein once remarked: ‘The more I play, the more I am thoroughly convinced that the pedal is the soul of the piano. There are cases where the pedal is everything.’¹ Medtner was exceptionally skilled in the art of pedalling, and, according to his student Vasil’yev, enormously influenced by Scriabin: ‘Even on my deathbed, I shall not forget Scriabin's way of pedalling.’² A sensitive, informed performance of Medtner’s music presupposes a clear understanding of his approach to pedalling:

... the only means of achieving not only a *cantilena* on the piano, but also the principal way to get fullness of tone or, more precisely, for filling the empty registers of the piano arising from the remoteness of one hand from the other.³

Medtner devoted considerable attention to pedal sonorities and took care in their notation in his scores, both printed and handwritten.⁴ The sheer diversity of his pedalling is enormous, from simple indications – *Pedale, con Pedale, senza Pedale, con poco Pedale* and *poco Pedale* – to those less common – *pochissimo Ped, poco più Pedale, meno Pedale, Pedale tenuto* and *Pedale tenuto al segno*. He even occasionally inserted ‘1/4 Pedal’ and ‘1/16 Pedal’ into his scores. This degree of specificity has no precedent in the Russian piano tradition, and in some ways presages the highly detailed performance instructions that became common practice later in the twentieth century.

The *Daily Work* offers important advice on pedalling. For practising and pre-concert preparation, Medtner recommended dry, economical pedalling. He justified

¹ Anton Rubinstein and Teresa Carreño, *The Art of Piano Pedaling. Two Classic Guides* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. Mineola, 2003), p.xi.

² Panteleymon Vasil’yev, ‘O moyom uchitele i druze’ [About my teacher and friend], Zarui Apetyan ed., *N.K. Metner: Vospominaniya, stat’i, materiali* [Reminiscences, Articles, Materials] (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1981), p.77.

³ Zarui Apetyan, ed. *N.K. Metner: Pis’ma* [Letters] (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1973), p.424.

⁴ Maria Gurvich, ‘V klasse Metnera’ [In Medtner’s studio], Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, p.127.

By writing ‘pedal’, I am presuming the sustaining pedal, and in the cases where the left pedal is intended, it is signaled by ‘*una corda*’.

pedal-free practising, noting that, ‘playing without the pedal enables our fingers to find the necessary nuances, movements, and position and at the same time gives our ears a break and full tranquility to our body’.⁵ Iles’s later notes on pedalling offer further, invaluable insights into Medtner’s approach to pedalling, as do his recordings, though their value is limited by poor sound quality. Taking account of all the aforementioned sources, I have formulated ten Medtnerian principles of pedaling, some of which may seem obvious to serious pianists and previously formulated, but when taken together flesh out Medtner’s approach to pedaling and interestingly reflect his response to Iles’s playing at her lessons.

⁵ Nikolay Medtner, *Povsednevnyaya rabota pianista i kompozitora* [The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer] (Moscow: State Music Publishers, 1963), p.33. Practising without pedal is discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.

For the right pedal:

1. Take the pedal off gently in *dolce cantabile* passages and at ends of phrases.
2. Use the pedal to help round off ends of phrases.
3. Make complete changes of pedal whenever the harmony changes.
When the melody is moving over a single harmony, make incomplete changes on the non-harmonic notes.
4. Release the pedal in consecutive chords.
5. Use incomplete changes of pedal or no pedal in melodies and harmonies moving over sustained notes.
6. When changing pedal frequently, avoid depressing it completely.
Use half- and quarter-pedals in runs and fast accompaniments.
7. Use the pedals to change tone colour.
8. Use the right pedal when finger legato is impractical.
9. Use the vibrating pedal in passages based on the same harmony, and in order to avoid creating a ‘sizzling’ sound when releasing it.

For the left pedal:

10. Use the left pedal for quiet sonorities in *dolce*, *tranquillo* and *sotto voce* passages.

Chart 2. Medtnerian principles of pedalling

1. Take the pedal off gently in *dolce cantabile* passages and at ends of phrases.

From the ‘Early Book’ we learn that Medtner paid special attention not only to how the right pedal should be depressed, but also to the way it should be released. He specifically instructed Iles not to take the pedal off too abruptly in passages of *cantabile* character and at the ends of phrases. For him, all movement in piano playing was

connected, and ‘placidity’ and naturalness of movement of the hands in *cantabile* passages matched by the pedalling.

In her ‘Notes’, Iles included an excerpt from ‘Danza jubilosa’, where a four-bar phrase, constructed from four shorter phrases separated by slurs, aptly demonstrates this principle. Here, taking the hands off during rests and releasing the pedal should be executed simultaneously and subtly. She elaborates: ‘in this part hands must be much more soft and supple. ... Take pedal off s_l_o_w_l_y_ a_n_d_ g_e_n_t_l_y_ on the last note of each phrase’.⁶

[*Allegro alla breve e molto sfrenatamente* M. M. $\text{♩} = 88$]



Example 11. Medtner, ‘Danza jubilosa’, bars 57-61

Joseph Banowetz concurs in *The Pianist’s Guide to Pedaling*, writing that ‘the slow release of the damper pedal is often desirable when rounding off the final note or chord of a phrase, or when tapering off the sound of a chord before silence’.⁷

2. Use the right pedal to help round off ends of phrases.

Iles provides both Medtner’s description of how to round off phrases and an example from the *Sonate-Ballade*:

In two-note phrases, rhythm $\text{♩} \text{♩}$ for example, the second note is shorter than the first, as if written $\text{♩} \text{♩}$, and must also be played more quietly than the first. Put pedal down on the first note, raise on the second and leave off.⁸

⁶ EIMC, 6.1.1.13 (emphasis original).

⁷ Joseph Banowetz, *The Pianist’s Guide to Pedaling* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.46.

⁸ EIMC, 6.1.1.16.



Example 12. *Sonate-Ballade*, 1st mvt, bar 11

The pedal indication in this example is notably absent from the first and second editions of the *Sonate-Ballade*,⁹ but present in both Iles's copy (as a handwritten annotation) and in the posthumous Russian edition.¹⁰ The Russian publishers had, of course, access to Medtner's personal, annotated copies, brought from England by his widow on her return to the USSR. Iles's annotated copy represents a unique concordance, and as such it further strengthens her authority. The 'Notes' provide still further enlightenment:

The last note of a phrase should be generally a shade less than its full time value, enough to separate it from the next note without losing time. Take pedal off simultaneously with the last note of a phrase.¹¹

The implication is that this practice applies mainly to music of moderately fast tempo rather than slow *cantabile* pieces where the last notes of the phrases require pedalling, as for example in bars 3, 13 and 15 of the 'Sonata tragica':



Example 13a. 'Sonata tragica', bars 1-3

⁹ Nikolay Medtner, *Sonate-Ballade* (Berlin: Édition Russe de Musique, 1913); Nikolay Medtner, *Sonate-Ballade avec Introduction et Finale* (Berlin: Édition Russe de Musique, 1914).

¹⁰ Nikolay Medtner, *Complete Edition*, II (1959), p.202-243.

¹¹ EIMC, 6.1.1.16.



Example 13b. 'Sonata tragica', bars 13-15

In a detailed analysis of Tale, Op. 42 No. 2 found in the 'Notes' Iles wrote of bars 31-36: 'put it [the pedal] down on left hand accented thematic note, take it off on a last note of each phrase'.¹²



Example 14. Tale, Op. 42 No. 2. bars 31-33

Since this pedalling directive does not appear in the printed score, Iles's 'Notes' offer unique interpretive evidence of how Medtner used the right pedal to bring out the playful character of the passage. In the following example, the printed pedal marking clearly indicates a release on the last note of the phrase:



Example 15. Second Improvisation, 'Meditation', bars 40-42

¹² EIMC, 6.1.2.2.

Other instances where the pedal should be released together with the last note of the phrase include: Tale, Op. 42 No. 3 (bars 17-20, 25-26, 29-30 and 37-38, 72-73), *Sonate-Ballade*, 1st movement (bar 34), and 'Danza festiva', Op. 38 No. 3 (bars 262-266, left hand).

3. Make complete changes of pedal whenever the harmony changes. When the melody is moving over a single harmony, make incomplete changes on the non-harmonic notes.

From Iles we learn that

Where a melody is moving over a sustained harmony, as long as the harmony remains the same change pedal incompletely for each melody note which is not a harmony note, i.e. do not lift it quite to the top before depressing again; but when the harmony changes change pedal completely to make harmonies absolutely clear and pure, i.e. be very careful to raise pedal right up.¹³

She later adds, with particular reference to instances where non-harmonic tones are absent, that

Where the same harmony is kept going, and there are no notes outside the harmony to mix it up, and melody notes consist entirely of harmony notes, keep pedal down right through. Never release it.¹⁴

She then quotes the following passage from the Cadenza of the Concerto No. 2, warning that the pianist must

... put pedal down for D $\flat$ harmony [bar 333] and keep it right through [bars 335-337] into middle of bar 338. The melody coming in bar 337 will have a magnificent effect, and pedal can still be held because melody notes are also harmony notes.¹⁵

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*



Example 16. Concerto No. 2, 'Toccata', bars 332-340

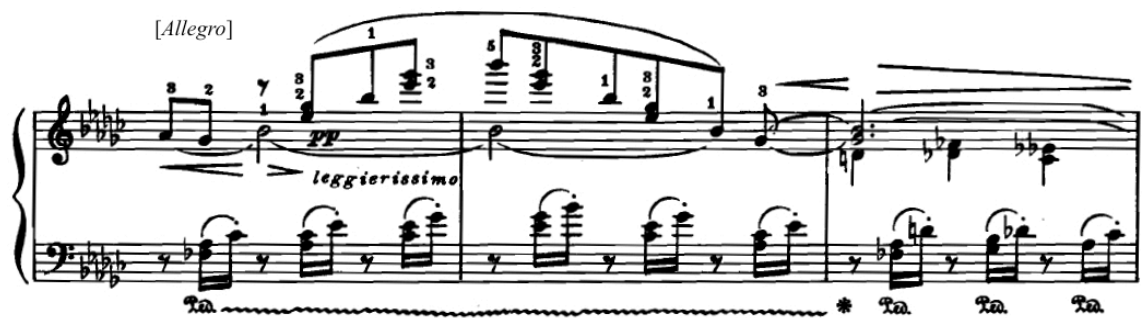
Sustaining one pedal throughout the D $\flat$ harmony produces a warmer and richer sound. Interestingly, this is not something Medtner chose to do in his recording of this work.¹⁶ In bar 336 he ignores his own *Pedale* marking, as well as the slurs, and takes time to observe the *allargando*. The impression it creates is that of a Russian folk dance. For some unknown reason, when he recorded the Concerto he decided to play that particular bar differently from the way he originally marked it in the score. As Medtner rarely digressed from his printed text, we must assume that on that day his decision to play the bar differently was instinctive rather than planned.¹⁷ Despite his otherwise rigid approach to interpretation – ‘There might be many different ways of playing the work

¹⁶ Medtner/Dobroveyn/Philharmonia (1947), HMV DB6559/63, Melodiya M10-41171, Testament SBT1027, St-Laurent YSL 78-005.

¹⁷ In Book 4 of the EIMC, Iles documents several occasions on which Medtner played the Concerto No. 1 slightly differently from the way he had taught her. Changes are less radical in the case of Example 16. Iles records how uncomfortable Medtner was during the recording.

but there is always one way that is the best!¹⁸ – this example suggests the interpreter is allowed a greater degree of artistic licence than otherwise supposed.

When applying this principle it is important to consider the tempo indication, character and tessitura of the passage. Instances of ‘pure’ harmony are few in Medtner, but when we do encounter them, we can take it as a rule of thumb that he wanted only one pedal.¹⁹ The one-pedal-per-harmony rule can be applied to more sophisticated chord combinations too, as for example, in bars 230-231 of the ‘Scherzo’ of the *Sonata romantica*.



Example 17. *Sonata romantica*, ‘Scherzo’, bars 230-232

Here, one pedal is held through a sequence that produces an $F\flat_{11}$ chord. Iles writes of this: ‘Harmony! Make very harmonious, and hold harmony by pedal.’²⁰ This rule can also be applied to short passages:



Example 18. *Tale*, Op. 42 No. 2, bars 5-6

¹⁸Lincoln Jenkins, 'Music As I remember' (a radio documentary about Edna Iles and her studies with Medtner), BRMB Radio (1984).

¹⁹See the last three bars of the First Violin Sonata where he indicated that the tonic chord with the 6th degree is supposed to be held by pedal throughout.

²⁰EIMC, 6.1.2.9.

In bar 5 Medtner indicates staccato with pedal.²¹ The descending notes of the C Minor scale in the right hand create a suitably exotic blur appropriate to a work subtitled ‘Phrygian Mode’.

4. Release the pedal in consecutive chords.

This principle can be applied to any series of chords and chords that are played tenuto. Iles tells us that, ‘in a succession of loud emphatic chords, take pedal right off between each chord, so that they are perfectly clear and well defined’.²² This involves creating momentary silence between chords.²³ By way of an example she quotes the last four chords of Chopin’s *Ballade* in A♭, Op. 47:



Example 19. Chopin, *Ballade* in A♭, Op. 47, last two bars

Changing the pedal between the final chords makes them sound both rhetorical and clearly defined. This is how Medtner ends the *Sonate-Ballade* on his 1947 recording.²⁴ Despite the fact that the F# Major chords in bars 369-70 are notated in dotted crochets, he detaches them by shortening their value and taking his hands and the pedal off between chords. He also takes it off on the semiquaver rest in bar 372:

²¹ EIMC, 6.1.2.2.

²² EIMC, 6.1.1.21.

²³ Many pianists use syncopated pedalling in this and similar passages.

²⁴ *Nicolas Medtner. The Complete Solo Piano Recordings.* Appian Publications and Recordings (vol.3), APR5548.



Example 20. Medtner, *Sonate-Ballade*, 'Finale', bars 368-373

Tale, Op. 51, No 1 contains another passage of chords that benefit from being separated and played without (or only a little) pedal:

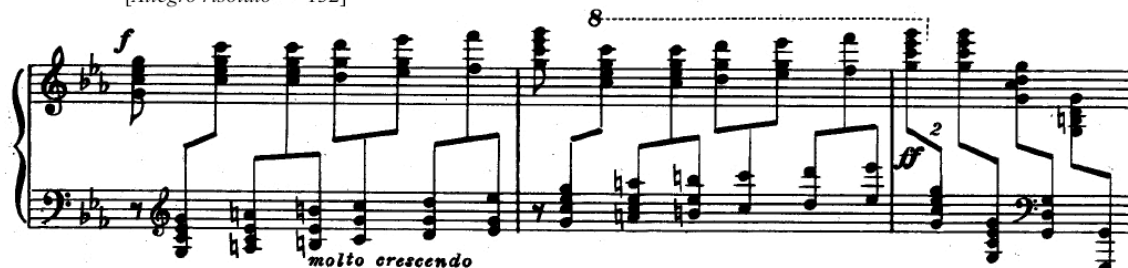
[Allegro molto Vivace al rigore di tempo e sempre leggerissimo ♩=160]



Example 21. Tale, Op. 51 No. 1, bars 251-261

In 1934 Iles remarked that these chords sounded 'slightly stumpy as he played [them]',²⁵ and on his 1947 recording, Medtner clearly plays the chords in bars 258-261 without pedal, and uses it only sparingly in bars 254-257. In the 'Sonata tragica' (bar 202) he plays the *fortissimo* chords without pedal:

[Allegro risoluto ♩=132]



Example 22. 'Sonata tragica', bars 200-202

²⁵ EIMC, 6.1.3.20.

In the score of Tale, Op. 51 No. 3, Medtner indicated short pedals on each left-hand chord:



Example 23. Tale, Op. 51 No. 3, bars 1-5

After a lesson that took place in London in 1936, Iles wrote: ‘Put pedal down on each [chord], take hands off after each one. ... Take pedal off soon after each one.’²⁶ From this we can assume that where there are consecutive chords, they should be either pedalled carefully so that each is clearly articulated, or played with no pedal at all, as in Medtner’s recording of the ‘Sonata tragica’. Ultimately, the pianist’s ear determines when and how to change pedal, which in turn is dependent on his or her skill and discrimination.

5. Use incomplete changes of pedal or no pedal in melodies and harmonies moving over sustained notes.

In Book 2 Iles writes: ‘For changing melody notes over the same harmony raise pedal *nearly* to the top and quickly depress again.’²⁷ And later,

Where a bass is kept going with pedal, and a melody with different harmony is played above quietly with incomplete changes of pedal so as not to lose bass, the melody must be very well brought out and isolated. If it is well isolated, one need not worry too much about pedal, but if it is not isolated, and pedal continues to carry on bass, the melody will be completely lost.²⁸

For example:

²⁶ EIMC, 6.1.2.8.

²⁷ EIMC, 6.1.1.21 (emphasis original).

²⁸ *Ibid.*



Example 24. *Sonate-Ballade*, 'Finale', bars 36-39

Here, Medtner wanted the A# octave in the second beat of bar 36 to be sustained by the pedal even while playing bar 38: 'Bring out and isolate very well top note of melody [bar 38], keeping down left hand figures. Change pedal incompletely on second beat of bar 38 so as not to lose A# in bass.'²⁹ Without Iles's entry in the 'Notes', it would have been impossible to divine from the score alone that Medtner only intended an incomplete change of pedal in bar 38. Changing the right pedal incompletely maintains resonance and sonority that would be lost were the pedal to be changed completely.

Incomplete, or half changes of pedal are extremely difficult to notate. It is, of course, up to a performer to decide whether or not a passage requires this sort of pedalling, but there is certain criterion that can help in making a judgment. The passage must remain in the same harmony for a significant period of time, as in the arpeggio figurations in the left hand in Tale, Op. 42 No. 2:

²⁹ EIMC, 6.1.1.21.



Example 25. Tale, Op. 42 No. 2, bars 19-24

The first three notes in bars 19 and 21-23 form tonic arpeggios for the duration of the slur that constitute what Medtner called ‘pure’ harmony; notes in the right hand and whatever follows the arpeggio in the left are considered non-harmonic.

It is common practice to change the pedal with the harmony. What is not obvious from Medtner’s score, however, is that he presumed the pedals would be depressed for the duration of the harmony with only incomplete changes. This requires considerable skill to implement and will take into account the instrument, acoustics and even the touch of the performer, but with sensitive application of incomplete pedalling, a magnificent ‘veiled’ effect will be created.

Medtner’s recording of the ‘Finale’ of the *Sonate-Ballade*, Op. 27 (bars 114-118) illustrates how Medtner intended a harmonic progression to be articulated while sustaining a bass note.³⁰

³⁰ Nicolas Medtner. *The Complete Solo Piano Recordings*. Appian Publications and Recordings (vol.3), APR5548.



Example 26. *Sonate-Ballade*, 'Finale', bars 113-122

A similar situation arises in the last 11 bars of Tale, Op. 26 No. 3, producing an effect described by Sydney Miller as 'exquisite pedal-blurred mistiness'.³¹

6. When changing pedal frequently, avoid depressing it completely.

Use half- and quarter-pedals in runs and fast accompaniments.

The *Daily Work* presents Medtner's early thoughts on incomplete pedalling: 'Pedal! Do not exhaust by it. More 1/8, 1/4, 1/2 pedals!'³² Iles later echoed these injunctions: 'When pedal has to be changed very frequently and quickly, do not push it right down; use 1/4 or 1/2 pedal.'³³ He recommended quarter pedalling as early as 1928, in Tale,

³¹ Sydney Miller, 'Medtner's Piano Music: An Appreciative Study', *MT*, 82/1185 (November 1941), p.394.

³² *The Daily Work*, p.33.

³³ EIMC, 6.1.1.21.

Op. 51 No. 5: at the bottom of the first page he even specified ‘1/16th of pedal!’³⁴ According to Zetel’, Medtner’s request for this degree of refinement ‘emphasises not so much a measure of gradation, as a tendency to the uttermost subtlety of nuance’,³⁵ a view that highlights the extreme subjectivity of quarter- and half-peddalling. Evidence that Medtner realistically expected quarter-peddalling from his students can be found in Iles’s notes dating from 1934, when she wrote that ‘[Medtner] said I must put pedal down only 1/4’.³⁶

Medtner recommended to Iles that she ‘take all harmony into very light pedal (1/4)’ in the introduction to ‘Elfenliedchen’, Op. 6 No. 3.³⁷ The *sotto voce* indication suggests that the left pedal might also be used.³⁸



Example 27. ‘Elfenliedchen’, Op. 6 No. 3, bars 1-5

In his recording, he goes even further by delaying the pedal until bar 4. In Medtner, the use of pedal is determined by the texture of the piece, its character and dynamic marks. Choosing not to use the pedal at the beginning of ‘Elfenliedchen’ helps to create an otherworldly atmosphere and also brings out the briskness implicit in the musical texture. In Tale, Op. 34 No. 2, Medtner advised Iles that, ‘in general pedal must be only

³⁴ *Complete Edition*, IV, p.86.

I would treat this remark as a simple precaution against over-flooding the piece with pedal, and by no means should pedal here be used as a substitute for finger legato in the right-hand triplets or in the left-hand quavers.

³⁵ Isaak Zetel’, *N.K. Medtner – pianist. Tvorchestvo. Ispolnitel’stvo. Pedagogika* [N.K. Medtner – A Pianist. His Compositions, his Art of Interpretation and his Teaching] (Moscow: Muzika, 1981), p.117.

³⁶ EIMC, 6.1.3.20.

³⁷ EIMC, 6.1.3.19 (emphasis original).

³⁸ See Rule 10 for further consideration of this point.

half depressed'.³⁹ By using half-pedals instead of full pedal here, and in passages of 'elaborate left-hand virtuoso writing', the performer can avoid both dryness of sound and blurred harmonies. Instances include passages in the lower register where the clarity of melodic lines are easily blurred, passages in fast tempos notated in smaller note values, for example semiquaver accompaniments or in long *staccato* passages. Medtner even advocated playing longer passages entirely without pedal in order to preserve clarity of texture, a technique that can be heard in his recordings. His overarching intention was to avoid using the right pedal whenever possible.



Example 28. Tale, Op. 34 No. 2, opening bars.

7. Use the pedals to change tone colour.

The 'Introduzione' from the *Sonate-Ballade* illustrates this principle well. Zetel' described the beginning as a juxtaposition of *una corda* and *tre corde* sonorities.⁴⁰ The first eight bars, marked '*una corda*', are followed by eight bars of '*tre corde*', then four bars of '*una corda*' followed by '*tre corde*'. This juxtaposition corresponds to the overarching theme of the Sonata, symbolising the battle between the darkness and light.

Once again, Medtner's use of pedal to make the same material sound different was not new. Chopin used it in his Etude, Op. 25 No. 9, notating the opening motive

³⁹ EIMC, 6.1.3.17.

⁴⁰ Zetel', p.120.

first without pedal, then with it. In Medtner, this technique should be considered as part of a more general approach, also involving variation of touch, intended to intensify the contrasts between ‘rounded’ and ‘energetic’ music.⁴¹ In this context, Iles cited Concerto No. 1 in Book 2 of her ‘Notes’:

Example 29. Concerto No. 1, bars 496-499

Medtner asked her to play the quaver chords in the left hand in bars 496-498 with short pedals; then, in bar 499, where the music changes character, the quaver chords should be played *dolce* and rounded, using longer pedals.⁴² As Medtner’s writing is not always idiomatic, the effect described above will be particularly revelatory. This particular instruction to Iles provides an excellent example of how to use pedalling to achieve colouristic effects. Using the pedal to signal a change of style is a suggestion he repeated on numerous occasions. In his comments on Tale, Op. 51 No. 6, he directed

⁴¹ Medtner’s concepts of ‘rounded’ and ‘energetic’ music are discussed in Chapter 6.

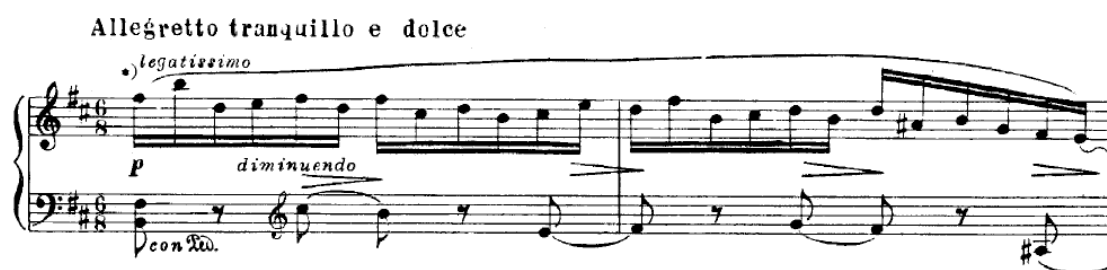
⁴² EIMC, 6.1.3.18.

her to ‘use less pedal in staccato; more in legato’, stressing that ‘this is very important’.

⁴³ Clearly, Medtner considered the pedal to be an essential tool for reinforcing contrasts, such as juxtaposing *con pedale* and *senza pedale* sonorities, even within the span of a single bar or a short phrase.

8. Use the right pedal when finger legato is impractical.

Medtner’s precise and intelligent use of pedal, seen in the analyses found in the *Daily Work*, suggests that he would not have accepted pedalling as a substitute for proper legato playing. Other Medtner researchers concur. In 1981 Zetel’ wrote that, ‘*cantabile* playing requiring *legatissimo* [in Medtner] is entrusted first of all to finger legato, which is then supported by pedal’.⁴⁴ More recently, Saida Kafarova has remarked that, ‘in most lyrical themes, Medtner still insists on the perfect legato achieved without using the pedal’.⁴⁵ The following excerpt from ‘Ein Idyll’, Op. 7 No. 1, suggests why Medtner could not accept the use of pedal as a substitute for finger legato:



Example 30a. *Drei Arabesken*, Op. 7, No. 1 – ‘Ein Idyll’, bars 1-2

At the bottom of the first page in the *Complete Edition* and Jurgenson (the first edition, prepared with Medtner’s authorisation),⁴⁶ Medtner specifies that the figures in the right hand quoted above should be executed as follows:

⁴³ EIMC, 6.1.3.20.

⁴⁴ Zetel’, p.120.

⁴⁵ Saida Kafarova, *An Introduction to Nikolai Medtner and Performance Analysis in Dialogue Form of His Works for Two Pianos – Russian Round Dance and Knight Errant* (University of Texas at Austin DMA, 2003), pp.100-101.

⁴⁶ *Complete Edition*, I, p.143; Medtner. *Drei Arabesken*, Op. 7, ‘Ein Idyll’ (Jurgenson, 1905), p.2.



Example 30b. A way of executing the right hand of 'Ein Idyll', Op. 7 No.1

This is a classic case of using the 'finger pedal' to achieve legato. To ensure no gaps occur in the melody, the fingers must sustain each note for as long as four times its value. A combination of finger pedal and the right pedal is applicable to the opening of 'Ya vas lyubil' [I loved thee well], Op. 32 No. 4. Here Medtner told Iles to 'take great care with pedal'.⁴⁷ Notated slurs in the left-hand part and the use of the term 'legatissimo e carezzando' also imply finger pedalling:



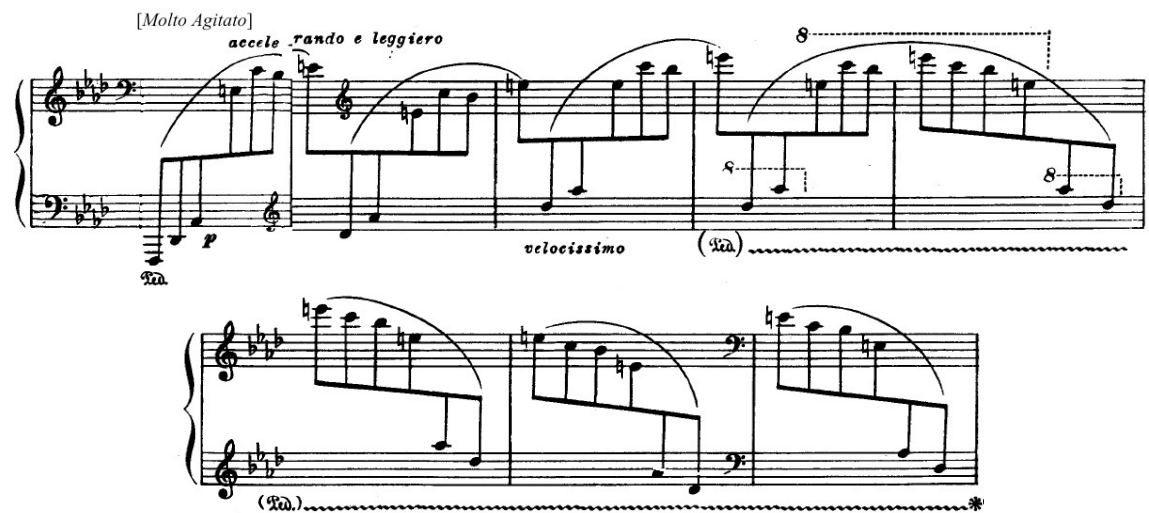
Example 31. 'I loved thee well', Op. 32 No. 4, bars 1-3

9. Use the vibrating pedal in passages based on the same harmony, and in order to avoid creating a 'sizzling' sound when releasing it.

The term 'vibrating pedal' refers to the quick, incomplete depression and release of the right pedal. The first pianist to describe this technique was Anton Rubinstein, in his *Guide to the proper use of the Pianoforte Pedals*.⁴⁸ Medtner employed vibrating pedal in passages built on a single harmony, usually where a chord is notated in long notes with passagework in quicker notes passing over it. In his scores he indicated it with a wavy line. Examples can be found in the 'Thema' from the *Second Improvisation*, 'Meditazione' from the *Sonata romantica*, the 'Sonata tragica', the opening of *Hymn vor der Arbeit*, and at the end of 'Romanza', Op. 39 No. 2:

⁴⁷ EIMC, 6.1.3.19.

⁴⁸ Rubinstein and Carreño, p.37.



Example 32. 'Romanza', Op. 39 No. 2, bars 262-275

Medtner also specified vibrating pedal at the end of the *Sonata-Idylle*, Op. 56.⁴⁹

Pedal vibrations are capable of producing unexpectedly exotic sound effects. It is, of course, impossible to notate the exact timing of pedalling fluctuations, making the discussion attached to the following examples in Iles's notebooks invaluable. First, in bar 131 of *Tale*, Op. 51 No. 1, Medtner asked Iles to 'hold on accented E in left hand with pedal right through next bar' and then to 'change slightly without losing [the] E':⁵⁰



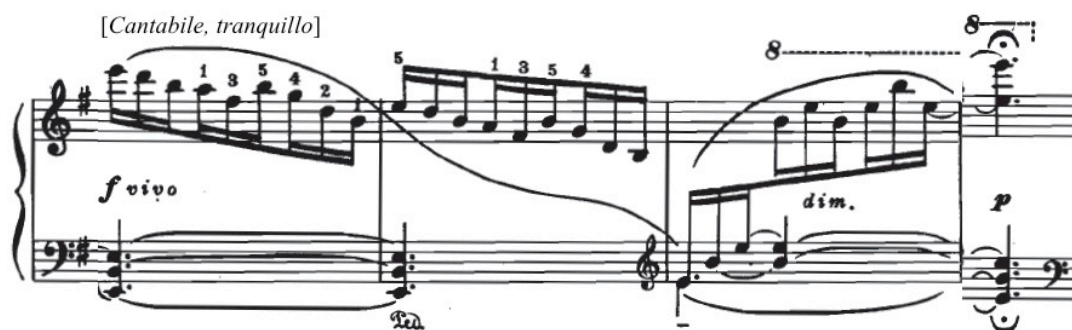
Example 33. *Tale*, Op. 51 No. 1, bars 130-132

In light of this comment, we can better understand why he added an extra pedal indication (in brackets) in bar 131. It is simply the e', not the entire passage of E Minor harmony that must be carried on to the next bar; the pedal is changed quickly but incompletely while holding down the e' with the finger and continues through bar 132.

⁴⁹ *Complete Edition*, IV, p.261; *The Complete Sonatas*, II (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2012), p.221.

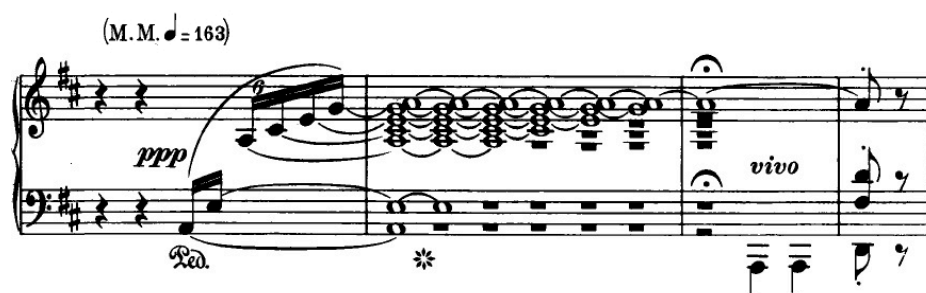
⁵⁰ EIMC, 6.1.3.20.

In Tale No. 2, a vibrating pedal clearly audible in Medtner's recording contradicts the printed edition.⁵¹



Example 34. Tale, Op. 51 No. 2, bars 9-12

Yet at Iles's lesson in March 1934, Medtner discussed vibrating pedalling on the E Minor chord in bar 12, saying: 'Lift pedal several times letting one note disappear at a time, starting with disappearance of bottom note, finishing with top still being heard.'⁵² The suggested effect would be somewhat similar to the ending of Schumann's *Papillon*, Op. 2:



Example 35. Schumann, *Papillon*, Op. 2, last four bars

Schumann was one of the composers Medtner taught most frequently at the Moscow Conservatory. *Papillon* could, indeed, be the inspiration behind the pedalling suggested for bar 12 of Tale, Op. 51 No. 2; but in his 1936 recording of the piece⁵³ Medtner executes a gradual release of the pedal; contrary to expectations, it is the lower rather than the upper E that is heard at the end of the bar.

⁵¹ Nicolas Medtner. *The Complete Solo Piano Recordings*. Appian Publications and Recordings (vol. 2), APR5547.

⁵² EIMC, 6.1.3.20.

⁵³ Nicolas Medtner. *The Complete Solo Piano Recordings*. Appian Publications and Recordings (vol. 2), APR5547.

The typically cryptic comment taken down by Iles with regard to the closing passage of ‘Das Rauschen der Menge’ from the *Second Improvisation* (bar 75)⁵⁴, nevertheless reveals at a stroke Medtner’s deep understanding of the nature of the piano, even piano mechanics, and the value he placed the use of vibrating pedalling: ‘To effect diminuendo do a lot of quick changes of pedal to prevent ugly sizzling noise which comes when pedal is released slowly.’

10. Use the left pedal for quiet sonorities in *dolce*, *tranquillo* and *sotto voce* passages.

Medtner made use of the left pedal in two specific circumstances: to mute the piano in passages requiring quiet sonorities (*piano*, *pp*), and to achieve a ‘svelte’ tone in those marked ‘*dolce*’ and ‘*dolcissimo*’. It would be impractical to rely on the left pedal for every *piano* or *dolce* melody, but this principle offers pianists a useful tool when further colour is desirable.

According to Iles, in the opening movement of Beethoven’s Sonata Op 109, ‘Medtner played the sudden *pianos* in this passage very quietly and with great contrast. He put the left pedal down for them each time.’⁵⁵



Example 36. Beethoven, Sonata in E, Op. 109, 1st mvt, bars 13-14

⁵⁴ EIMC, 6.1.3.3.

⁵⁵ EIMC, 6.1.1.16.

This suggests that he considered it acceptable to use left pedal to highlight dynamic contrasts. In a lesson on ‘Hymn vor der Arbeit’. Medtner instructed Iles to put the left pedal down in bars 7 and 8, and 11 and 12.⁵⁶ The application of *una corda* here further enhances the contrast between *forte* and *piano* passages:

[Allegretto molto tranquillo]

*sempre cantabile e legatissimo
espressivo sereno*

legatissimo (sempre)

Example 37. Medtner, ‘Hymne vor der Arbeit’, Op. 49 No. 1, bars 5-12

The fact that Medtner twice offered the same advice – in 1940 and then later, during the war – suggests that his thinking did not change over time. Moreover, Iles’s comment gains value when we take into account that Medtner did not annotate his own score with the *una corda* mark, nor was his application of it subsequently taken into account in the preparation of the *Complete Edition*. However, based on the evidence of his recordings it is unclear whether he himself ever consistently applied this principle.

On another occasion, in ‘Whisp’ring, Nature faintly stirring’, Medtner advised Iles to play with the left pedal down nearly all the way through.⁵⁷ In this instance, the *una corda* mark, absent in the first edition, does appear in the *Complete Edition*.⁵⁸ One

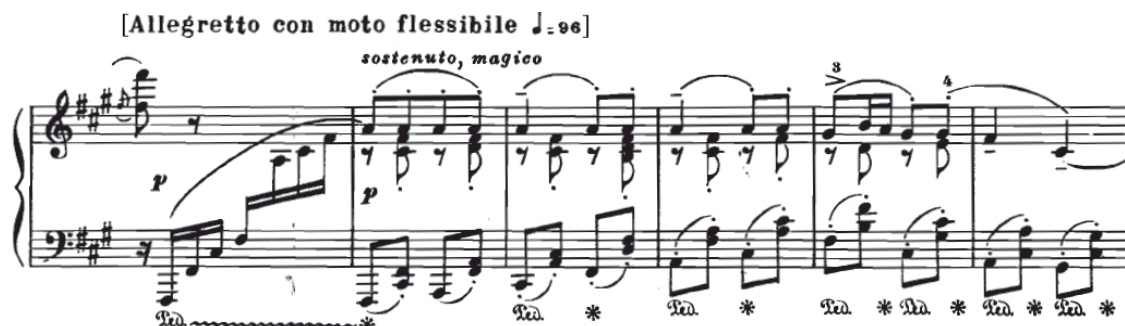
⁵⁶ EIMC, 6.1.3.5 and 6.1.3.15.

⁵⁷ EIMC, 6.1.4.1.

⁵⁸ Medtner, ‘Ombre, brise qui murmure’, *Huit Poèmes de Fét et Tioutcheff*, Op. 24 (Berlin: Édition Russe de Musique, 1917), p.2; *Complete Edition*, V, p.177.

conclusion to be drawn here is that it is acceptable in quiet music of mysterious and/or tender character to use the left pedal to achieve subtle colouring.

Elsewhere, Medtner suggested using the left pedal to achieve a nostalgic atmosphere: ‘[From bar 7 on] keep left pedal down, play with soft hand and *mou* tone, and charm!’⁵⁹ Although the *una corda* remark is absent in the *Complete Edition*, Iles’s ‘Notes’ preserve what seems to have been the ‘composer’s live pedagogical word’.⁶⁰



Example 38. Tale, Op. 51 No. 4, bars 6-11

On 24 August 1936 she wrote: ‘I noticed when Medtner did crescendos and decrescendos he took off and put down left pedal a great deal, often putting it on and off in the middle of short runs and passages.’⁶¹ So, Medtner not only employed the left pedal for *piano* sonorities, he also used it to emphasize crescendos and diminuendos. ‘In first bar [of Tale, Op. 51 No. 5] I am inclined to think that Medtner started with left pedal down, and took it off about halfway through the bar.’⁶² ‘Medtner also used the same device in ‘similar places.’⁶³ If we assume that he used the left pedal here to create better *piano* at the beginning of the crescendo – ‘crescendo’ always meant ‘*piano*’ to Medtner⁶⁴ – then this principle could be applied to every crescendo in the piece. However, in bar 31, he advises lifting the left pedal to highlight certain notes: ‘Play G#,

⁵⁹ Medtner’s comments on Tale, Op. 51 No. 4, EIMC, 6.1.2.8.

⁶⁰ I. Rakhlenko, ‘Nikolay Metner i Ėdna Aylz. Artisticheskiye kontakti’ [Nikolay Medtner and Edna Iles. Artistic contacts], *Nikolay Metner: Voprosi biografii i tvorchestva* [Issues of Biography and Creativity] (Moscow: Biblioteka-fond ‘Russkoye zarubezh’e’: Russkiy put’, 2009), p.155.

⁶¹ EIMC, 6.1.2.8.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ EIMC, 6.1.1.15.

E, and C# loudly without left pedal.’⁶⁵ This suggests that the beginning of the *piano dolce* phrase [bar 29] should be played with the *una corda* pedal, even though it is not indicated in the printed score. Finally, in the ‘Scherzo’ of the *Sonata romantica*, Medtner asked Iles to the left pedal in the opening of the middle section: ‘Play as if very easily, with soft hand, push down left pedal.’⁶⁶ The theme is marked ‘*dolce*’, and once again the *una corda* indication is absent in the score.

It is important to reiterate that some of my ‘Medtnerian principles of pedalling’ have been described before by earlier pianists. Medtner’s instinct to ‘use lots of pedal to create more sound or to create sense of space’, has its antecedents in Rubinstein, Teresa Carreño and – according to Banowetz – Chopin and Liszt.⁶⁷ His reliance on the left pedal for diminuendos was also practised by Rubinstein: ‘The pedal is used during a crescendo passage especially in one having an ascending melody.’⁶⁸ Banowetz’s view – that a ‘partial change of pedal is most often needed when a bass sonority that cannot be held with the fingers must be carried over as a pedal point into the next harmony’⁶⁹ – concurs with my fifth principle (regarding incomplete changes of pedal for moving harmonies over sustained notes). His concept of using it to create contrast (as embodied in my seventh principle) echoes Rubinstein precisely: ‘The pedal increases and sharpens the contrast between two phrases of different character.’⁷⁰ The Medtnerian principles of half changes of pedal for non-melodic notes within the same harmony and using the left pedal for colour changes were echoed by Neuhaus, who also applied them to the music of Chopin and Glazunov.⁷¹

⁶⁵ EIMC, 6.1.2.8.

⁶⁶ EIMC, 6.1.3.7.

⁶⁷ Rubinstein & Carreño, pp.14, 68; Banowetz, pp.192 and 207.

⁶⁸ Rubinstein & Carreño, p.15.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.77.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁷¹ Heinrich Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, trans. K.A. Leibovitch (London: Kahn & Averill, 1993), p.165.

Knowledge of the traditions of the earlier Russian pedalling practices, together with the evidence of Medtner's documented preferences, is indispensable for any serious re-interpretation of his works. In this regard, the EIMC provides important corroboration with other Medtner primary sources, as well as uniquely penetrating insights. Given the subjective nature of interpretation *per se*, the ten principles that I have derived from Iles's notes should be considered as a starting point – rules to be absorbed and applied as appropriate. After all, Medtner himself indulged in a degree of creative flexibility in his recorded performances, and most probably in concert.

CHAPTER 4

Medtner's Philosophy of Practising

Iles recorded only a few, if essential, suggestions on how to practise. They are found both in her 'Notes' and the manuscript exercises that she compiled.¹

Learning a new work

When learning a new work, Medtner encouraged Iles to 'go through the whole [piece] and get general idea of it, then take half a page at a time and memorise and practise from memory'. He believed that, 'if one tries to play a whole work with the music before memorising any of it, one wastes a lot of time, as one cannot read music and watch hands at the same time'.² Iles uncharacteristically disagreed, later remarking in the introduction to the 'Notes' (1976) that,

I found this to be memorising by drudgery. It is best to learn a work with the music until the complete sound and details are clearly in one[']s mind. Memory is then beginning to come naturally and one must then analyse and analyse and analyse away from keyboard and at keyboard to reinforce memory and make it as safe as possible. Edna Iles. September 15th 1976.³

Medtner's student Yelena Karnitskaya claimed that 'every new piece had to be played from memory from the very first lesson. 'We were never allowed to play from music in Medtner's class', she claimed.⁴ When Medtner left Russia he decided to focus on performing his own music, and abandoned learning any further large-scale works by other composers, so his views on memorisation refer specifically to *his* music rather than to piano music in general. It should be noted, however, that he used the music of

¹ For a facsimile copy of Iles's compilation of exercises *see* Appendix 3.

² EIMC, 6.1.1.2.

³ Introduction to the Early Book.

⁴ Elena Karnitska, 'I was a Pupil of Nicolas Medtner', in Richard Holt ed. *Nicolas Medtner*, London: Dobson, 1955, p. 100.

his Third Concerto in an early private performance with Myra Hess (playing the orchestral reduction on a second piano) at her home.⁵

In the *Daily Work*, Medtner spoke of the need to determine the ‘character of motion’ early on when learning a new work.⁶ Later on he advised Iles to think of the theme, not the accompaniment, when deciding on the tempo.⁷ Iles tells us that Medtner had a vision for every work: ‘... he analyses it and practises it, and finally tries to return to reproduce vision without thinking of technique or physical means.’⁸ This ‘vision’ relates closely to his overarching concept of *fil rouge*, discussed in Chapter 5.

Dialectic practising

The advice on practising dialectically contained in the ‘Notes’ generally accords with that found in the *Daily Work*. The requirement to ‘practise everything which should be staccato, legato; and everything which should be legato, staccato’⁹ is stated in both sources and parallels his instruction to Iles to play *piano* everything that should be *forte*, and vice versa.¹⁰ The *Daily Work* also mentions the need for practising ‘gradual disappearances’.¹¹ This recommendation was made in reference to the ending of Tale, Op. 14 No. 2 (‘Ritterzug’); later, he called for a ‘gradual disappearance’ at the end of the *Sonate-Idylle*.¹²

One finds still further, related directives in the *Daily Work* and reminiscences of Vasil’yev: ‘[everything] slow must be able to become quick, *forte-piano*; *piano*

⁵ ‘Mining the Archive’, Iles’s interview with Geoffrey Norris, 1991.

⁶ Nikolay Medtner, *Povsednevnyaya rabota pianista i kompozitora* [The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer] (Moscow: State Music Publishers), p.25.

Medtner’s categories of tempo are discussed in Chapter 5.

⁷ EIMC, 6.1.3.2.

⁸ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

⁹ EIMC, 6.1.1.2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *The Daily Work*, p.38.

¹² ‘Gradual disappearance’ is also required at the end of the first movement of Second Violin Sonata.

forte; staccato-legato; legato- staccato; energetic-rounded.’¹³ Medtner also took the technique a step further by specifically recommending that the pianist practise everything already learnt in a variety of seemingly counterintuitive ways:

1. in a slow tempo, *forte* and without pedal, using an ‘organ Bach touch’ (presumably *articolando*, taking care to minimize any movement of the wrists), taking hands and fingers off the keys precisely; then
2. in a mobile, even but flexible tempo, with pedal, ‘highlighting the primary and not playing the secondary too loud’.¹⁴

To find the most practical hand movements for a particular piece, he recommended slow practise: ‘like slow-motion pictures’. Thereafter, slow practise should be done at half-speed.¹⁵ He also advocated initially practising slowly and then repeating it in a faster tempo.¹⁶ It was important to Medtner to practise at different tempos for specific ends.

Of particular fascination is his instruction to Iles to practise a work ‘quicker than the tempo, very quietly, and absolutely metronomic; no *rubato* or pauses!’ His expectation was that afterwards, her interpretation of a work would be fresher and more sincere. ‘One will be able to see where one has been exaggerating and how much.’¹⁷ Amusingly, Medtner dubbed this type of practising ‘*repasser le linge*’ (ironing clothes). Carl Tausig was known for a similar practising routine, which he applied to works he knew very well: after a performance he would return home and play through his whole programme, quietly and at a moderate tempo.¹⁸ Conversely, Medtner also advised Iles

¹³ *The Daily Work*, p.21; Zarui Apetyan, ed. *N.K. Medtner: Vospominaniya, stat'i, materialy* [Reminiscences, Articles, Materials] (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1981), p.80.

¹⁴ *The Daily Work*, p.23.

As we will see in Chapter 5, this type of practising helps to develop the sense of *fil rouge* within the piece.

¹⁵ EIMC, 6.1.1.2.

¹⁶ *The Daily Work*, p.31.

¹⁷ EIMC, 6.1.1.2.

¹⁸ Heinrich Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, trans. K.A. Leibovitch (London: Kahn & Averill, 1993), p.80.

to practise expressive passages with exaggerated, even sentimental expression, then, to ‘retouch these places, so that they will not be too free and exaggerated’.¹⁹

Medtner is known to have had a strong personal preference for practising in both fast and moderately fast tempos. The absence of this particular practising technique in the ‘Notes’ may be taken to indicate that while he could trust to himself to practise at high speeds, suggesting this to a student – even Iles – was another matter.

Practising runs

The execution of ‘runs’, or passagework, is a common challenge encountered in piano literature. Medtner paid great attention to passagework both in the *Daily Work* and when teaching Iles. On several occasions he told her to practise passages with flat fingers and then finger staccato, though not at the same time.²⁰ His advice was prompted by his belief that ‘curved fingers are always weak and are unable to carry weight of hand and arm.’²¹ The use of flat fingers in complex passagework is also suggested in the *Daily Work*.²² Although, it is difficult for any pianist to contemplate performing some of Medtner’s passagework with flat fingers, the kernel of his recommendation – to practise passages in a variety of ways – makes sense. The consistency and reliability the player ultimately achieves by applying a series of approaches to passages, such as the one in below, produces both a remarkable lightness touch and brilliance of tone:

¹⁹ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

²⁰ EIMC, 6.1.1.2, 6.1.1.5.

²¹ EIMC, 6.1.1.5.

²² *The Daily Work*, p.47.



Example 39. Concerto No. 2, 'Romanza', bars 114-116

Evenness and clarity of passagework unsurprisingly figure highly among Medtner's priorities: 'In quick passages be very careful about making the notes very equal. Sometimes watch hammers on piano to see that they are working evenly and equally.'²³

When playing arpeggios involving wide stretches, he recommended maintaining the chord positions, and,

Where stretch is too big to allow notes to be joined, do not leap from one note to the next, but hold first note of large interval as long as possible and glide on to next note so smoothly as to give the impression of perfect legato.²⁴

This technique can be applied to Chopin's Etude, Op. 10 No. 1.

Practising different touches

Medtner paid particular attention to variety of touch at the piano, typically giving descriptive names to many of them: aside from the earlier-mentioned 'organ Bach' touch, he coined the terms 'ballerina' and 'jeweller's fingers'.

'Ballerina' touch refers to a way of playing as if wearing ballet slippers on one's fingers. Fingers, or 'ballerina's feet', should be taken off the keys as quickly as

²³ EIMC, 6.1.1.5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

possible; the result is *articolando* playing.²⁵ The term ‘prima ballerina touch’ appears in both the *Daily Work* and the reminiscences of Medtner’s students, Vasil’yev and Shatskes.²⁶ Iles specifically mentions it with regard to the second movement of the First Violin Sonata and Variation 3 of the Second Violin Sonata.²⁷ Maria Levinskaya, herself a student of Safonov, mentions the ‘ballerina touch’ in her book, *The Levinskaya System of Pianoforte technique and tone-colour through mental and muscular control* and claimed that her teacher ‘developed in perfection the art of lifting the arm weight and playing what he called “on the toes”’.²⁸ Medtner obviously acquired this technique from their teacher.

One of Medtner’s favourite analogies – for which he was famous among his Russian students – compared the quick finger passagework of a pianist with the skilled work of a jeweller’s or watchmaker’s hands.²⁹ He recommended using this technique in the G Minor variation in the First Concerto (figure 23, bar 263) to Iles: ‘Think of how a worker in delicate and fine jewellery would use his fingers.’³⁰ It would be equally appropriate to apply this delicate touch to Chopin’s Etude, Op. 10 No. 8, Medtner’s ‘Canzona matinata’, Op. 39 No. 4 and ‘Auf den Wogen’ from the *Second Improvisation*. Another famous Russian pianist and teacher, Yudina, similarly compared a pianist’s fingers to those of sculptors and surgeons.³¹

²⁵ See Chapter 2 for the detailed explanation of *articolando*.

²⁶ *The Daily Work*, p.21; Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, pp. 80 and 107.

²⁷ EIMC, 6.1.2.1 and 6.1.2.3 respectively.

²⁸ Maria Levinskaya, *The Levinskaya system of pianoforte technique and tone-colour through mental and muscular control* (London: Dent, 1930), pp. 42-43.

²⁹ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

³⁰ EIMC, 6.1.3.18.

³¹ Marina Drozdova, *Uroki Yudinoy* [Yudina’s Lessons] (Moscow: Klassika-xxi, 2006), p.41.

Blind practising

Playing with closed eyes is repeatedly mentioned in both the *Daily Work* and the 'Notes' as a means of improving finger control and in order better to listen to oneself.³² Medtner particularly recommended blind practising to Iles in legato passages.³³ In the *Daily Work* he asserted that one can only listen properly when the eyes are closed, and therefore practising in that manner should be part of learning any new work.³⁴ Safonov had already suggested that 'even exercises and passages should be practised with closed eyes, listening with concentration to the sounds produced by your instrument'.³⁵ Two of Medtner's students independently reported that he sometimes played in public with his eyes closed in order that he might fall into an 'interpretative slumber'.³⁶

The importance of technical exercises

The importance of practising technical exercises is universally acknowledged. According to Iles:

[Medtner] said one did not get enough by playing pieces because the difficulties did not last long enough. One must keep on doing exercises for about twenty minutes without stopping, so as to overcome any tendency to get tired. ... He said one must sometimes think only of technique.³⁷

Medtner's Russian students Vasil'yev, Shatskes and Aleksandrov confirmed this, adding that Medtner preferred Cramer's Etudes to those of Czerny, but believed that the choice of exercise is unimportant, as long as one practises attentively.³⁸ He nevertheless composed a set of exercises that were included in the *Daily Work*, addressing all five

³² *The Daily Work*, pp.19, 26, 27.

³³ EIMC, 6.2.4.25.

³⁴ *The Daily Work*, p.10.

³⁵ Vasily Safonov, *New Formula for the Piano Teacher and Piano Student* (London: Chester, 1916), p.30.

And so had Chopin (Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: pianist and teacher as seen by his pupils*. Cambridge: CUP, 1986, p.28.)

³⁶ Abram Shatskes and Panteylemon Vasil'yev in Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, pp.81, 108.

³⁷ EIMC, 6.1.3.20.

³⁸ Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, pp.79, 80, 103 and 106.

fingers, trills, scales, double-notes and chords. While many of the exercises he later dictated to Iles complement and develop those that appear in the *Daily Work*, some are unique to the EIMC:

1. 'isolation'³⁹
2. finger staccato
3. forward/backward movements of the hand described as 'towards the end of the keys'

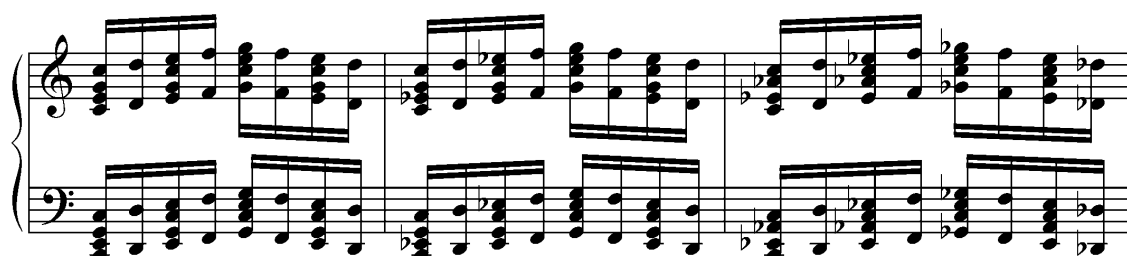
The following exercise demonstrates the technique with which Medtner intended finger staccato could be developed:



Example 40. An exercise from Iles's collection

Finger staccato should be executed with a flat hand, a stable but flexible wrist, yet without the involvement – upward and downward or forward and backward movement – of the wrist or hand.⁴⁰

The exercise for the forward-backward movement of the hands can be applied to full chords, where the wrist must be raised and the hand pushed towards the back of the keys, and to simple octaves, where the wrist is lowered and the hand drawn backwards:



Example 41. An exercise from Iles's collection

³⁹ See page 125 in Chapter 6.

⁴⁰ EIMC, Box 2, 'Exercises Given by Medtner', p.5.

This exercise is extremely beneficial for playing prolonged passages of octaves at fast tempos, as it trains the wrist to move smoothly up and down while the fingers remain on the surface of the keys.

Medtner's firm insistence on the value of technical exercises is easily explained: he himself had developed a superb technique and approached every performance methodically.⁴¹ To maintain his pianistic fitness, he regularly practised Schumann's *Toccata*, Op. 7 and Chopin's Etude, Op. 25 No. 8.⁴² However, the exercises he devised relate first and foremost to the technical challenges he created in his own music.

In Medtner's mind, piano music fell into two styles of playing, those of Czerny and Chopin.⁴³ By 'a Czerny technique' he meant pieces requiring a fixed wrist position in which the fingers do all the work, as opposed to those he associated with 'a Chopin technique' in which suppleness of the wrist is vital. By his definition, his own compositions are riddled with so-called Czerny technique. For example, the pianist must play with compact hands and fingers drawn inwards from the very beginning of Tale, Op. 51 No. 1:



Example 42. Tale, Op. 51 No. 1, bars 1-4

Czerny technique applies directly to *articolando* passages in the 'Wagon of Life', Op. 45 No. 2 (bars 13, 16, 19, etc.) and Tale, Op. 14 No. 2 (bars 11-26). Chopin technique is

⁴¹ Zarui Apetyan ed., *N.K. Medtner: Pis'ma* [Letters] (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1973).

⁴² Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, pp.103, 138; Vasily Yakovlev, *Nikolay Medtner* (Moscow: Muzikal'niy sektor, 1927).

⁴³ EIMC, 6.1.3.20.

appropriate in the ‘Finale’ of the *Sonate-Ballade* (bars 45-70), where the right-hand part requires a flexible wrist to produce *legato*:



Example 43. *Sonate-Ballade*, Op. 27, ‘Finale’, bars 45-51.

Medtner’s juxtaposition of the techniques he associated with Czerny and Chopin provided Iles with a compass for determining the most appropriate way to execute any given passage

Medtner strongly recommended that Iles practise double-thirds, and not without reason. We know that he kept the Chopin Etudes in his repertoire (though he performed a small selection in public only once),⁴⁴ and it is possible that Op. 25 No. 6 may have inspired his approach to practising thirds. His personal fondness for them is abundantly evident in his music. The opening movement of the First Concerto alone contains four examples of extended runs in double-thirds (bars 145-146, 166-167, 610-614 and 618-623); at the climax of the second movement of Sonata, Op. 25 No. 2, the pianist is confronted with a further passage of *fortissimo* double-thirds (bars 236-237) and in bars 69-72 and 77-78 of Tale, Op. 35 No. 4, quick double-sixths scales present a formidable challenge to the performer.⁴⁵

Passages of double-thirds in Medtner always require virtuoso execution, whether they occur in the melody or the accompaniment. Technical mastery of double-notes,

⁴⁴ Christoph Flamm, *Der Russische Komponist Nicolaj Medtner. Studien und Materialien* (Berlin: Ernst Kuhn Verlag, 1995), p.626.

⁴⁵ The close connection between Medtner’s musical textures and his double-note exercises is discussed in Chapter 7.

thirds in particular, and voicing (articulating how they function in context)⁴⁶ are vital for any performer of this music. The ‘Danza festiva’, for example, requires subtle voicing of the double-notes. While there is a clear delineation between theme and accompaniment, the theme in bars 9-22 is stated throughout in double-notes:



Example 44. Medtner, ‘Danza festiva’, Op. 38 No. 3, bars 9-22

For Medtner ‘the theme is not only a melody ... it is capable of turning into a continuous melody the most complex construction of form’.⁴⁷ Considering the ‘presto’ tempo indication, we might assume that bringing out the top voice isn’t the priority here, but in his recording Medtner clearly isolates the top line. Obviously, finely judged voicing is required here and in similar passages.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See Chapter 6.

⁴⁷ Nikolay Metner, *The Muse and The Fashion. Being a Defence of the Foundations of the Art of Music*, trans. A.J. Swan (Haverford, PA: Haverford College Bookstore, 1951), p.44.

⁴⁸ Voicing is discussed in Chapter 6.

The execution of double thirds was specifically discussed at a lesson on 14 March 1934: 'First practise bringing out top note, then bringing out bottom note.'⁴⁹ Iles's manuscript copy of 'Exercises given by Medtner' offers corroborating evidence of how to practice double-notes (sixths as well as thirds) in major and minor scales and involved a peculiarly Medtnerian technique — that of 'isolation'— in which the two notes of the chord are differently articulated, one legato and the other staccato.⁵⁰ While not mentioning isolation, Gol'denveyzer echoed Medtner in his own advice to students on practising double-notes: '... playing and sustaining first the upper note, followed by the lower, and then also vice versa'.⁵¹ Bringing out first the top line and then the bottom enables the player to develop a level of control perhaps not otherwise possible to achieve.

Medtner's multifaceted approach to practising reinforces our sense of him as a practical and deeply analytical musician. Simple repetition was not for him; instead, he spoke of approaching music from different 'angles'. Fortunately, Iles's 'Notes' have allowed us to glimpse 'Medtner the composer' inspiring 'Medtner the performer and teacher' to seek ingenious and ever more expressive means of expressing and imparting his musical ideals to others.

⁴⁹ EIMC, 6.1.3.20

⁵⁰ The 'Exercises Given by Medtner', from Box 2 of the EIMC, are reproduced in Appendix 3. For further discussion of isolation, see page 125.

⁵¹ Aleksandr Gol'denveyzer, 'Soveti pedagoga-pianista' [Advice from a Pianist and Teacher] in Christopher Barnes ed., *The Russian Piano School* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2007), p.62; Dmitriy Blagoy and Yelena Gol'denveyzer, *V Klasse Gol'denveyzera* (Moscow: Muzika, 1986), p.36.

CHAPTER 5

Medtner's Approach to Tempo

Medtner associated tempo with several theoretical constructs operating on different levels within a work or movement. He even created his own vocabulary for some of what he considered to be essential perspectives. For example, when determining the tempo of a work, he calculated its impact on the pacing of the whole work, the logic of which he termed the '*fil rouge*' ['thread'], and once determined, he rarely adjusted it. In relying on the *fil rouge* concept Medtner was taking for granted the harmonic coherence and unity of form that characterise his music, but as a pianist he worked methodically to articulate it. According to Iles: 'First Medtner has vision. Then he analyses it and practises it, and finally tries to return to reproduce vision without thinking of technique or physical means.'¹ He also applied the *fil rouge* to individual phrases in order to impart a sense of wholeness. According to Iles, Medtner conceived his music in seemingly arbitrary terms of strict or relaxed tempos, describing the former category as '*al rigore di tempo*' and the latter as '*flessibile*'. Dividing all music into these two categories can be only approximate, so exceptions are to be expected, as we will see later in this chapter. The essential distinction is nevertheless central to the interpretation of Medtner's music, not least because it comes directly from him.

The *fil rouge*

Medtner made frequent reference in the *Daily Work* to following the principal ('red') line of a composition. 'Think about the key points! ... think about wide perspectives!'² Iles echoes this refrain in her 'Notes': 'When playing, think of the *Fil Rouge* of the

¹ EIMC 6.1.4.25

² Nikolay Medtner, *Povsednevnyaya rabota pianista i kompozitora* [The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer] (Moscow: State Music Publishers, 1963), p.24.

theme’, ‘always keep perspective in mind. ... the point to which you are moving.’³ The method of indicating them is simple and intended as part of the regime associated with learning a new work: themes are to be ‘underlined in red ink’. In this way, Medtner sought to encourage pianists to think in terms of reaching musical goals by maintaining better focus.⁴ Not surprisingly, his *fil rouge* concept closely resembles Rachmaninov’s views on ‘forming the proper conception of a piece’ before one starts to learn it.⁵

Medtner urged Iles to follow the ‘red line’ in the *Sonata romantica* (‘Always look on ahead, and do not let it become static’), Tale, Op. 51 No. 3 (‘This piece must have a continuous effect ... keep perspective in mind.’), and the ‘Sonata tragica’ (‘Look ahead, think of the perspective, and keep it going in one long whole.’).⁶ The impact of this strategy in his playing was often palpable. Listeners and critics alike have noted Medtner’s ability to convey a clear sense of the whole work.⁷ In many of his recordings, he created an impression of moving forward, as for example in Tale, Op. 14 No. 2, and performed Tale, Op. 20 No. 2 (‘Campanella’) as if sung in a single breath. But while an overarching perspective distinguishes the composer’s performance of the First Violin Sonata, it seems to me sadly missing from his recording of the First Concerto. The consistent application of this concept remained, even for him, an aspiration.

Although Medtner did not restrict the application of *fil rouge* to his own works, it does help the performer to understand and embrace their wholeness, and thereby avoid the tendency to become preoccupied with the sheer abundance of detail that characterises his compositional style. The composer himself urged the performer not to miss the forest for trees.⁸

³ EIMC, 6.1.1.8 and 6.1.4.24.

⁴ EIMC, 6.1.6.5.

⁵ James Francis Cooke, *Great Pianists on Piano Playing* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999), p.208.

⁶ EIMC, 6.1.3.6, 6.1.3.12, 6.1.3.3.

⁷ Apetyan, N.K. *Metner: Vospominaniya, stat'i, materiali* [Reminiscences, Articles, Materials] (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1981), p. 84; Christoph Flamm, *Der Russische Komponist Nicolaj Medtner. Studien und Materialien* (Berlin: Ernst Kuhn Verlag, 1995), p.252.

⁸ *The Daily Work*, p.74.

Unfortunately, Medtner only left us hints about how to visualise and convey this sense of perspective in performance. He remarked in the *Daily Work* that, ‘in piano playing as in all musical performance, the first and foremost [thing] is to find an axis, fulcrum, a nexus, around which all the motion would gather.’⁹

Iles echoed this in her article, ‘Medtner, friend and master’: ‘The principal requirement in the interpretation of his music is keeping the basic tempo, what he called ‘keeping the line’, so that the work is held together as a whole.’¹⁰ Her natural ability to hold the work together amazed Medtner when he first heard her play in 1930. Iles recalled him exclaiming: ‘She is very brilliant, and she can *gather* it.’ She learnt only much later that, ‘this was his way of expressing the ability to see a work as a whole’.¹¹

Phrasing

Medtner particularly stressed to Iles the importance of separating phrases: ‘Notice all breathing places and breaks between phrases.’¹² In her ‘Notes’ she writes about two aspects of phrasing: first, the importance of making a clear separation between them, and second, the need for a sense of direction within a phrase. Sometimes slurs merely indicate sub-divisions within a longer phrase, as in the following excerpt from the second movement of *Sonate-Idylle*:

⁹ *The Daily Work*, p.49 (Medtner’s remark dates from 24.05.1932).

¹⁰ E. Iles, ‘Medtner, Friend and Master’, *Recorded Sound*, 70-71 (1978), p.793.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.791

¹² EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

1 2 3 4

Allegro moderato e cantabile (sempre al rigore di tempo) ♩ = 80-72

5 6 7 8

9 10 11 12

13 14 15 16

Example 45. *Sonate-Idylle*, Op. 56, 2nd mvt, bars 1-16

The full length of his musical thought is 16 bars. An understanding of *fil rouge* is helpful here. Shorter slurs obviously indicate divisions within the longer phrase, signposting unusual divisions within a bar or a phrase, and as such constitute a significant aspect of Medtner's musical language. So, too, does the simultaneous juxtaposition of different time signatures and slurring patterns, which must be considered both separately and together in order to interpret the passage as Medtner intended.

Andantino con moto ♩ = 88

p dolce, grazioso e tranquillo

p

con Pedale

Example 46. 'Canzona' for violin and piano, Op. 43 No. 1, opening bars



Example 47. Tale, Op. 8 No. 2, bars 4-5

While the clear delineation of short phrases enhances the rhythmic character of motives within Medtner's music, the performer should not be overawed by the sophistication of his writing. The length of the opening phrase in the Canzona is 7 bars (Ex. 46), and 15 in the Tale (Ex. 47). Accentuation of the first of a group of melodic notes should be avoided – when Medtner wanted a syncopation to stand out he usually called attention to it in his scores by writing '*tenuto*':



Example 48. *Drei Arabesken*, Op. 7, No. 3 – 'Tragoedie-Fragment' in G Minor, Op. 7, bars 1-6

Comma marks also figure prominently in Medtner's notation, serving as further indications of the need to separate phrases. In Iles's Book 2 we find Medtner's elaboration on the use of the comma mark referred to as a 'breath mark' for the hands, but apparently not as long as a pause: 'Do not pause there', he admonished her.¹³ This idea is reiterated elsewhere in her 'Notes' and elaborated on in the foreword to the *Sonate-Vocalise*, Op. 41 No. 1, where he states that a comma sign means a gap, a

¹³ EIMC, 6.1.3.6.

fleeting pause, but not a new breath.¹⁴ In Medtner, notated commas do not license taking additional time. If anything, they imply a gasping effect: ‘Every time it occurs ...make a break as if pausing for breath.’¹⁵ Quite independently, the Medtner scholar Christoph Flamm came to a similar conclusion: ‘The tendency towards dissection, so typical in Medtner’s late works, can also be seen in the later insertion of rests and caesuras [that] Medtner intended less for drawing breath than to signify a sudden catching of one’s breath.’¹⁶ In her latest book Dolinskaya also remarked on the abundance of commas in Medtner’s texts.¹⁷

The opening of the First Concerto offers a pertinent example of the use of commas to achieve expressiveness. During a lesson in 1943, Medtner asked Iles to take a breath before the last octave (C in bar 2) in order to make it the strongest of all,¹⁸ exactly as he had in his recording of the work. What makes this remark especially helpful is that neither the full score nor the two-piano version has a comma indication before the last octave.

Elsewhere, in order to form a long line in the music of what he called ‘rounded’ character, Medtner recommended joining the last note of a motive or phrase to the beginning of the next by a decrescendo.¹⁹ This technique applies to the beginning of Medtner’s *Novella* No. 1, which I have annotated with decrescendos in bars 2 and 3:

¹⁴ Nikolay Medtner, *Complete Edition*, VI (Moscow: State Music Publishers, 1961), p.97.

¹⁵ EIMC, 6.1.4.4 and 6.1.4.5.

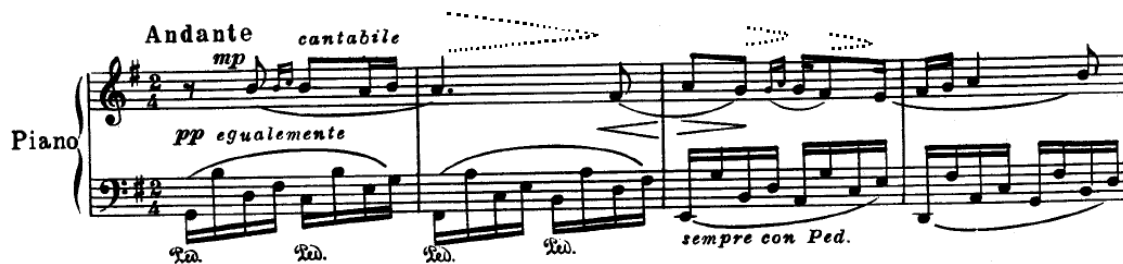
¹⁶ *Nicolas Medtner. Vergessene Weisen, Op. 39, ii Zyklus* (Frankfurt: Zimmermann, 2005), ‘The new edition’ (foreword by Christoph Flamm).

¹⁷ Yelena Dolinskaya, *Nikolay Medtner* (Muzika/Jurgenson, 2013), p.177.

¹⁸ EIMC, 6.1.3.18.

¹⁹ NB: Medtner used the term ‘rounded’ interchangeably with ‘cantabile’. See page 117 for a fuller discussion.

EIMC, 6.1.2.5.



Example 49. *Novella*, Op. 17 No. 1, opening

Medtner was particularly fond of this effect and executed it with great subtlety. He employed it in his recording of ‘Danza festiva’,²⁰ expressively linking the last note of bar 9 to the first note of bar 10 with a decrescendo.



Example 50. ‘Danza festiva’, Op. 38 No. 3, bars 9-12.

This interpretation further highlights the difference between bars 9-10 and 11-12, where the motive is syncopated - the notation of articulation in bar 12 clearly indicating that the accentuation has shifted to the second beat. Deliberate rhythmic destabilisation of thematic material is characteristic of Medtner’s style. The ‘Finale’ of *Sonata romantica* offers a further example of separation of phrases: Iles played it to him on two different occasions and was advised to ‘crescendo a little through second [semiquaver] figure, then pause before descending more quietly and expressively on to first note of second bar’.²¹



Example 51. *Sonata romantica*, ‘Finale’, bars 4-6

²⁰ ‘Nicolas Medtner. The complete solo recordings.’ Vol.1. APR 5546.

²¹ EIMC, 6.1.2.10 and 6.1.3.7.

According to Iles, ‘points of rest’ apply to the most important notes in any given phrase. They are usually the highest as well. Every note of a phrase must lead to the point of rest. By implication, the player may take a little time on that note: ‘Look for long notes and points of rest. Move towards these, and pause on them a little. They are the most important places, and attention must be drawn to them.’²² The point of rest is marked with asterisks in the following excerpt:²³



Example 52. Chopin, Ballade in A $\flat$, Op. 47, opening

‘Limpid’, clean-cut phrasing plays a major role in Medtner’s performing style. In his recordings he clearly separated phrases in order to imbue them with declamatory qualities. In his recording of ‘Tragoedie-Fragment’, Op. 7 No. 2, he makes a clear point of rest in bar 7, and in the opening line of ‘Einsamkeit’, he pauses on the top A (signalled with an asterisk in Ex. 53):



Example 53. Medtner, ‘Einsamkeit’, Op. 18 No. 3, opening

²² EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

²³ EIMC, 6.1.1.14.

The concept of points of rest serves as expressive device for articulating the larger sense of direction, or *fil rouge*: ‘Don’t let anything get static; find always the point to which one must move.’²⁴ In holding fast to this conviction he was not alone, Josef Lhevinne wanted his students to ‘find the long line of melody and analyze at what point its peak occurs’. Giesecking, too, believed that ‘every phrase should have *only one* dynamical climax’ while Gol’denveyzer, less dogmatically, acknowledged that ‘any melody has certain strong points towards which it aims and which provide its shape and character’.²⁵ Medtner additionally combined moving towards the main note of a phrase with the application of either rubato or a change of dynamics (*see* Ex. 53).²⁶

*Al rigore di tempo*²⁷

The importance of *al rigore di tempo* (in strict tempo) to Medtner is widely acknowledged.²⁸ He repeated ‘*al rigore di tempo*’ on every page of the published edition of Tale, Op. 20 No. 1, and is said to have remarked rather testily: ‘Whoever is bored by playing this piece *al rigore di tempo* may as well leave it alone.’²⁹ He most often specified it in connection with quick or moderately fast ‘energetic’ works and those of march-like character (*see*, for example, Tale, Op. 14 No. 2). *Al rigore* may also be appropriate in the first and last sections of an ABA piece such as ‘Danza festiva’, Op. 38 No. 3, but in Tale, Op. 51 No. 3 the opposite is true: the outer sections of the piece should be freely expressed and involve rubato – as we shall see, Medtner’s term

²⁴ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

²⁵ Josef Lhevinne, *Basic Principles in Pianoforte Playing* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1972), p.vii; Walter Giesecking and Karl Leimer, *Piano Technique* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1972), p.59.

²⁶ Medtner’s concept of rubato is explained later in this chapter.

²⁷ The editor of the Dover edition of the Sonatas suggests that the term ‘*al rigore di tempo*’ was misused by Medtner because of his imperfect command of both Italian and English. In my opinion, however, the editor’s suggested substitution ‘*senza rubato*’ does not reflect the true meaning of Medtner’s concept.

²⁸ Isaak Zetel’, *N.K. Metner – pianist. Tvorchestvo. ispolnitel’stvo. pedagogika* [N.K. Medtner – A Pianist. His Compositions, his Art of Interpretation and his Teaching] (Moscow: Muzika, 1981), p.110; Dolinskaya, *Metner* (2013), p.168.

²⁹ Zetel’, p.110. *See* Medtner’s copy of Op. 20 No. 1 (Glinka Museum, Moscow).

for this style of playing was '*flessibile*' – while the middle section is marked '*al rigore di tempo*'.

Medtner's ability to play in remarkably strict tempo can be heard in his recordings of the last movement of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 57 and in his own 'Tragoedie-Fragment', Op. 7 No. 3.³⁰ In 'Danza festiva', marked *sempre al rigore di tempo*, Medtner departs from personal convention and takes time in bar 10 of the repeat (both in the APR5546 and APR5547 versions); this, however, may be simply a manifestation of another of his principles, namely the importance of varying repeated material.³¹

Although *al rigore di tempo* translates as 'in strict tempo', it is arguable how strictly Medtner really intended his music to be played. Because it is difficult to play absolutely metronomically, a certain flexibility of tempo should be assumed. I believe that Medtner wrote '*al rigore*' not merely in places where a steady tempo was necessary, but often as a precaution, where the abundance of textural details might distract the performer's attention from maintaining a strict tempo and the *fil rouge*. Iles noted that in the 'Finale' of *Sonate-Ballade* Medtner played bar 248 (marked *piu appassionato* in the score) a shade slower, in spite of telling her '... not change the tempo',³² and, as mentioned above, deviations from *al rigore* can be heard in some of his recordings. He takes time, for example, around bar 278 of Tale, Op. 51 No. 1, and slows down quite noticeably in bar 51 in the *Ditirambo* of the First Violin Sonata; while no *rallentando* is indicated in the latter score and the passage precedes a dynamic explosion that he clearly wished to highlight.

³⁰ See also Tales, Op. 14 No. 2, Op. 20 No. 2 ('Campanella'), Op. 26 No. 2, the second movement of *Sonate-Ballade*, 'Serenade', Op. 28 No. 2, 'Danza jubilosa', First Concerto, and the 'Toccata' from the Second Concerto.

³¹ See 'Playing similar passages differently' on page 148.

³² EIMC, 6.1.4.5.



Example 54. Violin Sonata Op. 21, 'Ditirambo', bars 51-52.

Medtner is quoted in the *Daily Work* as saying: 'Don't exaggerate *al rigore di tempo*'.³³ The admonition 'Don't hurry' also appears frequently in Iles's 'Notes': 'When making slight nuances of tempo within a certain fundamentally fixed tempo, be careful not to exaggerate. Hold the reins!'³⁴ He also stressed the importance of not hurrying when preparing the arrival of a new theme.³⁵ This simple advice is particularly valuable in *al rigore di tempo* pieces.

Flessibile

Medtner's preference for a style of playing that he described as 'flessibile' (pliable or flexible) in contexts in which other musicians would use 'rubato' is never fully explained, and while Iles's 'Notes' shed some light on varying the tempo in his music, *The Daily Work* contains only one brief description: 'Rhythmic *flessibile* involves a barely noticeable gradualness of acceleration and deceleration designed not to disturb the relationship between the adjacent notes.'³⁶ He described it to Iles in the following manner:

Begin a phrase almost in tempo, accelerando slightly in gradation towards the middle of the phrase, and rallentando in gradation towards the end of the phrase. ... if one exaggerates flexibility, that is not art. But if one does nothing (playing a phrase absolutely straight) that is not art either.³⁷

³³ *The Daily Work*, p.41.

³⁴ EIMC, 6.1.1.15 and 6.1.6.27.

³⁵ EIMC, 6.1.3.7.

³⁶ *The Daily Work*, p.25.

³⁷ EIMC, 6.1.3.7.

Later, she recorded that, ‘in a piece with flexibility of rhythmic line, take middle or average tempo, and work from this tempo in both directions’.³⁸ The painstaking attention Medtner devoted to teaching Iles how to apply *rubato* to his music is a striking reflection of the importance he assigned to it. His advice to her, the principles that he formulated as set down in her notebooks and the evidence of his recordings³⁹ constitute an invaluable guide to modern-day pianists wishing to develop their own approach to the modification of tempo in his music.

The need for a *flessibile* approach to tempo is often made clear from the score: in the outer parts of ‘Danza’ from the First Violin Sonata, Medtner notated accelerandos and rallentandos with consistency. In Op. 31 No. 1, *flessibile* is suggested by the title of the piece, *Improvisation*, and evident in his recording of it. Though rare, the written word ‘rubato’ does occur in Medtner. How much to apply is, again, left to the discretion of the performer. The distinction between *al rigore di tempo* and *flessibile* in Medtner’s music is usually obvious, so that if a work doesn’t fall into one category, it automatically belongs in the other. Iles confirmed this arbitrary division, summing it up succinctly in a entry written dated 1943: ‘In *al rigore di tempo* pieces, don’t hurry ... in all other pieces, think of flexibility of rhythm.’⁴⁰

The *Second Improvisation* provides an illustration of how flexibility of tempo works:

³⁸ EIMC, 6.1.4.25

³⁹ Examples of Medtner’s *flessibile* interpretations can clearly be heard in ‘Selbstbetrug’, Op. 15 No. 3, Tale, Op. 26 No. 3, ‘Hymne Vor der Arbeit’, Op. 49 No. 1 and ‘Voron’ [The Ravens], Op. 52 No. 2.

⁴⁰ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

Example 55. *Second Improvisation*, 'Gesang der Wassernymphe', bars 8-16

Medtner advised Iles to start slowly after the key change (bar 8), accelerate through bars 9 and 10, then 'rallentando in bar 11, play bar 12 more slowly, pause on right hand B in bar 13, accelerando a little through remainder of bar 13 and bar 14, rallentando in bars 15 and 16'.⁴¹ This is a rather detailed way to play just eight bars of music, especially since only the accelerando in bar 9 is indicated in the score by 'poco agitato', but his instructions presumably helped Iles to portray the placid character of the water nymph. Identical rubato should be applied in bars 17-24. In their lesson on the 'Gesang der Wassernymphe' (and elsewhere in the 'Notes'), Medtner dictated extremely detailed instructions on how to achieve *flessibile*. His precise instructions reflect his passionate desire to pass on a tradition of rubato playing appropriate to his music, but he stopped short of notating every last variation of tempo, rightly assuming the performer would naturally make them.

⁴¹ EIMC, 6.1.3.3.

Further tempo modifications

In addition to *al rigore* and *flessibile*, Medtner advocated further means of modifying tempo both in the *Daily Work* and in his lessons with Iles. They include (i) beginning phrases, sections and whole pieces slightly under tempo and then gradually increasing the speed; (ii) carefully pacing accelerandos and ritardandos; (iii) stretching single notes for expressive effect; and (iv) playing ‘rounded’ (*cantabile*) music slower than ‘energetic’.

At the beginning of ‘Canzona serenata’, Op. 38 No. 6, for example, he suggested ‘get[ting] into tempo with gradual accelerando during first two bars’, and in the ‘Elegy’, Op. 45 No. 1, ‘begin[ning] very slowly, accelerando slightly and reach tempo in bar 2’.⁴² Thus, starting under tempo would seem typical of Medtner’s *flessibile* pieces, especially those composed in a meditative character.⁴³ Medtner frequently asked Iles to begin a section slower than one might have assumed from the printed indications and then increase the tempo. This approach is appropriate when arriving at recapitulations (for example, in *Novella*, Op. 17 No. 3) and introducing a new theme (Tale, Op. 51 No. 3, bar 30) or episode (Tale, Op. 51 No. 1, bar 64 and Tale, Op. 51 No. 2, bar 69). However, indulging in rubato at the beginning of a major work was to be avoided: ‘It is not good to change tempo near the beginning of a work, before the tempo has hardly had time to establish itself.’⁴⁴ Igumnov gave remarkably similar advice: ‘When the theme is still fresh, it should be played as simply as possible without major fluctuations. ... As the piece progresses, though, the rhythmic complexity can increase.’⁴⁵ Once again, their common approach can be attributed to having studied with the same teacher, in this case Pabst. That said, there are instances in his vocal works

⁴² EIMC, 6.1.3.8 and 6.1.3.19 respectively.

⁴³ I myself use it when playing Brahms’s *Intermezzo*, Op. 118 No. 6.

⁴⁴ EIMC, 6.1.2.9.

⁴⁵ Christopher Barnes ed., *The Russian Piano School* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2007), p.167.

where deliberately starting slower is evidently permissible, including at the beginning of a piece or new section. In his recordings of his songs, Medtner often begins the accompaniment under tempo: ‘Chto tī klonish’ nad vodami’ [Willow, why forever bending?], Op. 24 No. 2 and ‘Spring Solace’, Op. 28 No. 5). Sometimes the reason for moving gradually into a new section coincides with a modulation to a new key,⁴⁶ as in Tale, Op. 14 No. 2 (bar 37), signalled by the indication ‘*poco sostenuto e poi a tempo*’.

In common with Neuhaus and Leschetitzky,⁴⁷ Medtner believed that accelerandos and ritardandos should be gradual, a point he made to Iles.⁴⁸ If tempo changes aren’t subtly managed, ‘the unity of the work will be destroyed’.⁴⁹ Sometimes Iles wrote down ‘very gradual gradation’ (without apparent concern for the tautology), to emphasize the importance of the principle. Occasionally Medtner inserted ‘*con gradazione*’ in scores, such as those of ‘Improvisation’, Op. 31 No. 1 and ‘Canzona matinata’. In her 1994 interview with the BBC presenter Chris de Souza, Medtner’s pupil Yvonne Caterrall recalled him saying: ‘... with my music it is always poco a poco.’⁵⁰

Medtner often asked Iles to highlight single notes by pausing on them. In the following extract from *Sonata romantica*, Medtner suggested highlighting the f’ in the right-hand part (bar 15):

⁴⁶ EIMC, 6.1.2.3.

⁴⁷ Heinrich Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, trans. K.A. Leibovitch (London: Kahn & Averill, 1993), p.80; Malwine Brée, *The Leschetizky Method. A Guide to Fine and Correct Piano Playing* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997), p.53.

⁴⁸ EIMC, 6.1.1.15, 6.1.6.1, 6.1.4.24, 6.1.4.25 and 6.1.6.27.

⁴⁹ EIMC, 6.1.6.1.

⁵⁰ ‘A Portrait of Medtner’. BBC talk, 4 October 1994, [Chris de Souza (presenter), interview with Dmitry Alexeev, Hamish Milne, Yvonne Catterall, Barrie Martyn]



Example 56. *Sonata romantica*, 'Romanza', bars 14-15

This draws attention to the dissonance created by the non-harmonic tone set against the A $\flat$ dominant chord in the left hand. He made similar suggestions to her with regard to bar 28 and the preceding triplet in 'Tragoedie-Fragment', Op. 7 No. 2, and the syncopated rhythms in bars 18-26 of 'Zauber' from the *Second Improvisation*. The key for performers today is to gain an understanding of the circumstances in which Medtner considered it appropriate to pause on individual notes for expressive purposes, and for this Iles's 'Notes' are indispensable.

Finally, Medtner advised Iles that '... *cantabile* places must be a shade slower, and the livelier, more energetic places a shade quicker'.⁵¹ For example, he applied this rule to the middle section of 'Danza festiva' in a lesson with Iles, even though the printed edition gives no hint of it. When, in bar 167 of the first movement of the Second Violin Sonata, the style changes from 'energetic' to a more 'rounded' one, Medtner advised her to 'play a little slower'.⁵² He also asked that the lyrical episode in the 'Finale' of the *Sonate-Ballade* be taken slower, even though the movement is marked '*al rigore di tempo*'. The evidence for taking time when changing from one character to another is corroborated by another source: a copy of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 belonging to Gurvich; in it Medtner wrote '*ritardando*' at the end of bar 195 of the first movement where within the space of two bars the opening 'energetic' theme becomes

⁵¹ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

⁵² EIMC, 6.1.2.3.

‘rounded’.⁵³ While even *al rigore* presumes a certain degree of flexibility, the performer will wish to avoid alternating too frequently between approaches.

Through his remarks to Iles on *al rigore* Medtner was able to prescribe the circumstances in which strict tempo should be applied to his music. One reason for prescribing ‘*al rigore*’ might have been his reluctance to allow her very much freedom. Despite Medtner’s well-known antipathy for Stravinsky, Richard Hudson’s remarks about the latter could equally be applied to Medtner: ‘He opposed the rubato added by interpretive performers and felt it as a threat in the performance of his own compositions.’⁵⁴ In his most austere moments Medtner advocated only slowing the tempo – whether in the melody or accompaniment figuration - (1) at formal junctures in *al rigore* music and (2) in music of *cantabile* character. This approach to changing tempo calls to mind that of Wagner, who asked singers initially to observe ‘the strict value both of notes and bars’, and only after they had gained an understanding of his music were they encouraged to sing freely, indeed with ‘an almost entire abandonment of the rigour of the musical beat’.⁵⁵ Medtner used the same word – ‘abandonment’ – in a lesson with Iles on his Third Concerto, urging her to ‘play more madly, with rhythmic abandon’ and ‘still more abandon in this rhythmic dancy passage’.⁵⁶ Like Chopin, Medtner strangely rarely used the word ‘tempo’.

⁵³ Zetel’, p.178.

⁵⁴ Richard Hudson, *Stolen Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p.400.

⁵⁵ William Ashton Ellis, trans., *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, III, ‘The Theatre’ (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1894), p.175.

⁵⁶ EIMC, 6.1.4.13.

Medtner indicated ‘*abbandonamente*’ in ‘*Gleich und Gleich*’, Op. 15 No. 11, the first movement of *Sonata-Skazka*, Op. 25 No. 1, ‘*Nezhdanniy dozhd*’, Op. 28 No. 1, ‘*Ya perezhil svoi zhelan’ya*’, Op. 29 No. 5, the First Concerto, Tale, Op. 34 No. 1 and again in the ‘Prelude’ from Op. 54.

AL RIGORE DI TEMPO

FLESSIBILE

on the authority of the printed scores and the EIMC

'Tragoedie-Fragment', Op. 7 No. 3	<i>Novella</i> , Op. 17 No. 3
<i>Novella</i> , Op. 17 No. 2	'Danza' from First Violin Sonata, Op. 21
Tale, Op. 20 No. 2	'Whisp'ring, Nature faintly stirring', Op. 24 No. 7
'Ditirambo' from Violin Sonata, Op. 21	Tale, Op. 26 No. 3
Coda of the 1 st mvt, 'Introduzione' and 'Finale' of <i>Sonate-Ballade</i> , Op. 27	'The Muse' and 'The Singer' from Op. 29
Parts of the First Concerto, Op. 33	Parts of First Concerto, Op. 33
Tale, Op. 34 No. 3	'Canzona fluviala' and 'Canzona serenata', Op. 38
'Danza festiva' and 'Danza rustica' from Op. 38	'Zauber' and 'Gessage der Wassernymphe' from <i>Second Improvisation</i> , Op. 47
Coda of 'Sonata tragica', Op. 39 no. 5	Tale, Op. 48 No. 2
'Danza sinfonica' and 'Danza jubilosa' from Op. 40	'Hymne vor der Arbeit' and 'Hymne Nach der Arbeit', Op. 49
Tale, Op. 42 no. 1	Tale, Op. 51 No. 2 and No. 4
Finale of Second Violin Sonata, Op. 44	'The Ravens', Op. 52 No. 2
'Meditation', 'Waldgeist', 'Humoreske', 'Beschwörung', 'Drohung' from <i>Second Improvisation</i> , Op. 47	'Romanza' and 'Meditazione' of <i>Sonata romantica</i> , Op. 53 No. 1
'Toccata' from Second Concerto, Op. 50	
Tales, Op. 51 No. 1 and No. 6	
Middle part of Tale, Op. 51 No. 3	
'Spanish Romance', Op. 52 No. 5	
'Scherzo' and 'Finale' from <i>Sonata romantica</i> , Op. 53 No. 1	
Tale ('Scherzo') from <i>Romantische Skizzen für die Jugend</i> , Op. 54 (II, No. 2)	
Variation 3 from <i>Tema con variazioni</i> , Op. 55	
Second mvt of <i>Sonate-Idylle</i> , Op. 56	
Two-piano pieces, Op. 58	
Second and Third mvts of Third Concerto, Op. 60	

further examples

Stimmungsbilder, Op. 1 No. 7	‘Prolog’ and No. 5 from <i>Stimmungsbilder</i> , Op. 1
‘Im Vorübergehn’, Op. 6 No. 4	‘Wandrer’s Nachtlid II’ and ‘Aus “Claudine von Villa-Bella”’ from Op. 6
Tale, Op. 8 No. 1	‘Tragoedie-Fragment’, Op. 7 No. 2
Tale, Op. 14 No. 2, ‘Ritterzug’	Tale, Op. 14 No. 1, ‘Opheliens Gesang’
‘Glückliche Fahrt’, Op. 15 No. 8	<i>Drei Nachtgesäng</i> , Op. 16
Second mvt of Sonata, Op. 25 No. 2	<i>Novella</i> , Op. 17 No. 1
Tale, Op. 26 No. 2	‘Eimsamkeit’, Op. 18 No. 3
‘The Butterfly’, Op. 28 No. 3	‘Spring Solace’, Op. 28 No. 5
‘Marche funèbre’, Op. 31 No. 2	Tale, Op. 34 No. 2
‘The Wagon of Life’, Op. 45 No. 2	‘The Flower’, Op. 36 No. 2
Middle part of ‘Romanza’ and ‘Divertimento’ from second Concerto, Op. 50	‘Sonata-Reminiscenza’ and ‘Alla Reminiscenza’ from Op. 38
Tale, Op. 51 No. 5	‘Canzona’, Op. 43 No. 1
‘The Captive’, Op. 52 No. 7	‘Thema: Gesang der Wassernymphe’ and ‘Abschluss’ from <i>Second Improvisation</i> , Op. 47
Variation 2 from <i>Tema con Variazioni</i> , Op. 55	Outer parts of ‘Romanza’ from Second Concerto, Op. 50
1 st mvt of Third Concerto, Op. 60	Outer parts of Tale, Op. 51 No. 3
Second subject of the 1 st mvt and ‘Finale’ of Quintet, Op. Posth	Prelude (Hymne) from <i>Romantische Skizzen für die Jugend</i> , Op. 54 (IV, No. 2)
	‘Pastorale’ from <i>Sonate-Idylle</i> , Op. 56
	Two Elegies, Op. 59
	‘Rieselied’ and ‘Midday’ from Op. 61

Chart 3. Approximate division of Medtner’s works into *al rigore* and *flessibile* styles.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Titles are expressed in the language of their first publication with the exception of the ‘Tales’. Following Iles’s recommendation as expressed in her article ‘Medtner, friend and master’, I use the word ‘Tale’ instead of commonly accepted ‘Fairy Tale’.

CHAPTER 6

Interpreting Medtner

What defines Medtner's style? Having explored his technical approach to piano playing and teaching, his philosophy of *fil rouge* and views on tempo in the previous chapters, it remains for me to introduce his interpretive palette. In 1913 the Russian composer Nikolai Myaskovsky used the term 'graphic' to describe Medtner's early compositional style in an article on Medtner's creative personality.¹ The following year the Russian critic Vyacheslav Karatigin wrote of Medtner: 'His music has a colouring which is strict, severe and manly.'² While Medtner claimed to have changed his style after composing the *Sonate-Ballade* (1914),³ Myaskovsky's remark still rings true. Medtner's music has a linear quality, evoking drawing rather than painting, and Myaskovsky admired his exceptional skill in this, though at the same time asserted that Medtner's music could be somewhat monochromatic. Myaskovsky's article has, in the meantime, been widely read and continues to influence popular opinion of Medtner's music. From his recordings and the legacy of Edna Iles in particular, we know that Medtner's interpretative palette was in fact subtly nuanced with expressive devices that included the strategic use of silence, shaded dynamics, alteration of the printed duration of notes, melodic phrasing, rubato and even the withholding of expression.

Energetic and rounded music

Medtner had a penchant for polarities of one sort or another. I have already discussed two prominent examples: those inherent in dialectic practising and the *al rigore* versus

¹ Campbell, Stuart, trans. and ed. *Russians on Russian Music, 1880-1917: An Anthology*. Cambridge: CUP, 2003, p.191.

² *Ibid.*, p.231.

³ Nikolay Stember, 'Iz vospominaniy o N.K. Medtner' [From Reminiscences about Medtner] in Apetyan, *Reminiscences*, 87.

flessibile treatment of tempo. His distinction between music of ‘energetic’ and ‘rounded’ character, documented at length by Iles but mentioned only once in the *Daily Work*, represents yet another. Simply stated in her ‘Notes’: ‘All music consists of contrasts between energetic  parts and rounded and singing  parts.’⁴ As if to illustrate the distinction, Medtner carefully marked all the energetic and rounded passages in her copy of the ‘Finale’ of the *Sonata-Ballade*.⁵

Such rigorous categorization of music is of course arbitrary and simplistic, and while we can acknowledge that degrees of energy and roundness do exist, it is difficult to imagine all music fitting comfortably within one or the other category. Nevertheless, he advised Iles to go through every work to ‘mark off where it is energetic and where rounded and singing’.⁶ By this method, he presumably intended that she would develop more consciously characterful interpretations. The only other composer to impose a similar system of musical categorization was Kabalevsky, who sorted all music into ‘song’, ‘dance’ and ‘march’.⁷

Iles’s ‘Notes’ provide a number of recommendations on how to play music of rounded character that assume a piano with a light action. When beginning a quiet piece, ‘put hands on keys, play first note very quietly, without any movement ... effect will be hypnotic’.⁸ Medtner gave this advice in reference to the opening of ‘Canzona serenata’, Op. 38 No. 6, and Tale, Op. 51 No. 3.⁹ This device could also be applied to the opening of one of Medtner’s most popular compositions, the ‘Sonata-Reminiscenza’ as well as to the G Minor episode of the First Concerto (*see* section number 23, bar 263 in the score) and the opening of Rachmaninov’s Second Concerto.

⁴ EIMC, 6.1.1.13.

⁵ EIMC, 6.1.4.4-5.

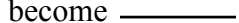
⁶ EIMC, 6.1.1.13.

⁷ Dmitry Kabalevsky, *Pro tryoh kitov i pro mnogoye drugoye* [Of Three Whales and of Other Things] <<http://www.litmir.net/br/?b=99409>> (date last accessed: 17 July 2014).

⁸ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

⁹ EIMC, 6.1.3.8, 6.1.3.12.

The shift from rounded to energetic passages can occur either suddenly or when preceded by a build-up. In the first case, the rounded section has to be ‘completely without accent or energy, so that energetic parts stand out in relief’,¹⁰ as in Medtner’s First Concerto.¹¹ When there is an extended build-up to a climax,

... the two lines –  and  – become  ; one must work up gradually from the straight line, making the music neither very rounded nor very energetic at the commencement.¹²

Instances of extended build-ups can be found in the *pp* episode preceding the recapitulation of Tale, Op. 51 No. 1, the organ point in Tale, Op. 20 No. 1, and at the beginning of the Coda in the last movement of Rachmaninov’s Third Concerto.

Medtner’s ‘rounded’ music embraces such pieces as Tale, Op. 34 No. 2, and the ‘Hymne Am Amboss’.¹³ Despite the seemingly stormy semiquaver triplets in the left-hand part of the Tale, the determining factor is the *cantabile* tune in the right hand. The subtitle of the Hymn informs us that the piece is a blacksmith’s song.¹⁴ We can conclude, then, that for Medtner rounded music was defined not by the density of texture or a tempo, but rather by the underlying concept. A song, a hymn and a Ditirambo were, for him, music with lyrical, rounded colours; Medtner also specifically defined *cantabile* passages as ‘rounded’.¹⁵

Energetic music, in his mind, included marches such as *Novella*, Op. 17 No. 2, lively dances like ‘Danza festiva’, Op. 38 No. 3, and fast music in stable tempos – for example, the codas of the ‘Sonata tragica’ and the First Concerto, and the first movement of the Second Concerto. Though not necessarily marked *forte*, such passages of energetic music were signalled in the scores by ‘*al rigore di tempo*’ and ‘*risoluto*’.

¹⁰ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

¹¹ See section number 75, bar 755 in the score.

¹² EIMC, 6.1.1.13.

¹³ EIMC, 6.1.3.17.

¹⁴ EIMC, 6.1.3.15.

¹⁵ EIMC 6.1.1.13

Juxtapositions of rounded and energetic playing can be clearly heard in Medtner's recordings of 'Tragoedie-Fragment', Op. 7 No. 2, Tale Op. 8 No. 1, 'Zimniy vecher' [Winter Evening], Op. 13 No. 1, 'Telega zhizni' [The Wagon of Life], Op. 45 No. 2, and the First Concerto. The transitions between them often involve a considerable degree of shading.

Voicing

Voicing, which for Medtner was 'the art of highlighting the melody and contrasting the secondary',¹⁶ is an essential aspect of performing his music because of the unusually dense textures that characterise it. The pianist has at all times to know which notes to bring out and which to hide, and why.

Iles's 'Notes' provide a remarkably detailed guide to voicing that is undoubtedly one of her most valuable contributions to Medtner performing practice. The need to voice musical textures in Medtner has been remarked on before, but never examined in any detail.¹⁷ The rigorousness of Medtner's musical thinking suggests that he would have developed subtle techniques well beyond merely playing all voices of a texture loud or soft. Indeed, his decisions regarding what to project and what to suppress were undoubtedly informed by analysis and observation.

This section of Chapter 6 limns Medtner's approach to voicing and shaded dynamics, and explores the underlying technical means— such as how to 'isolate' a melody – for achieving what are often complex musical effects. They pertain to the execution of octaves and octave chords as well as instances of theme and accompaniment in a single hand, pedal points and fugal themes, and operate on both vertical and horizontal planes in his music.

¹⁶ *The Daily Work*, p.20.

¹⁷ *Zetel*, p.101.

Dynamics and shading

Iles's 'Notes' elucidate Medtner's views on playing *forte*. According to the composer there are two types, which he called *forte solo* and *forte tous*.

In *forte solo* the theme is *forte* but the accompaniment is *piano*. In *forte tous* both theme and accompaniment (all parts) are *forte*. For *forte solo* decide which hand is the most important and make the other hand quieter.¹⁸



Example 57. Tale, Op. 35 No. 4, opening bars

By way of an example, the opening bars of Tale, Op. 35 No. 4 illustrate both dynamic nuances and the transition between them. The *fortissimo* remark in bar 1 suggests that both hands must be played equally loudly; in bar 5 however a melody in the right hand emerges (marked *cantando*) which must be given priority over the left hand's *forte*, thus the *forte tous* at the beginning becomes *forte solo* at this point.

His admonition 'not let the accompaniment kill the theme'¹⁹ reflects the importance of bringing out the top voice, so in this context he was referring to *forte solo*. In a *forte tous* passage every note will be strongly played.²⁰ To produce a good tone, both hands must rise and fall equally. Medtner was adamant that a powerful sound could be achieved solely through the application of gravity-enhanced weight in the hands and arms. Significantly, he apparently never mentioned to Iles using the upper

¹⁸ EIMC, 6.1.1.11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ EIMC, 6.1.2.6.

body and shoulders to aid sound production, and it is evident from reviews of her playing dating from the 1950s that she did not lack for power at the keyboard:

‘In this taxing programme Miss Iles showed herself a klavier-tiger in the best sense: vigorous, untiring, vital. ... As an interpreter, she was direct, sincere, and innately musical. ... Her tone was deep and rich.’²¹

From Iles we learn that all dynamic changes must be gradual. Medtner also remarked on the importance of pacing crescendos and diminuendos in the *Daily Work*.²² In the printed score of the Second Concerto he specified ‘*crescendo con gradazione*’ in the cadenza of the first movement. More than once Iles wrote down an instruction to start a crescendo *piano* and, conversely, for a diminuendo begin *forte*.²³ Neuhaus and Giesecking agreed.²⁴

Medtner’s approach to changes of dynamics is further amplified by another instruction to Iles: ‘where left hand gradually rises in a crescendo passage, it aids the crescendo, and should be brought out’,²⁵ which is illustrated by bars 5-7 of *Tema con variazioni*:



Example 58. Medtner, *Tema con variazioni*, Op. 55, opening

²¹ *The Times*, 25 November 1955, p.3.

²² *The Daily Work*, pp.47-8.

²³ EIMC, 6.1.1.16 and 6.1.3.20.

²⁴ Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, trans. K.A. Leibovitch (London: Kahn & Averill, 1993), p.80; Giesecking & Leimer, p.105.

²⁵ EIMC, 6.1.3.6.

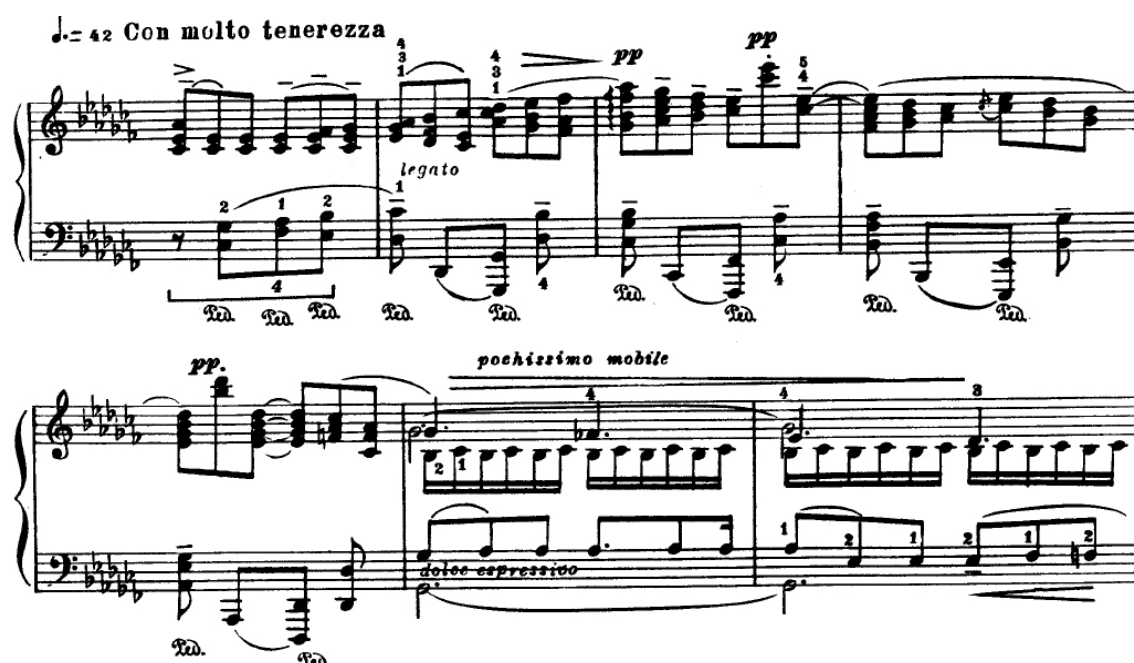
The ‘gradualness’ – or pacing – of dynamic changes, such as the extended diminuendos found at the ends of Tale, Op. 14 No. 2, and the ‘Ditirambo’ of Op. 21, is regularly mentioned, allowing us to speak of it as a defining stylistic element of Medtner's expressive language.

One of the very few methods of shading mentioned in Iles’s ‘Notes’ addresses playing certain notes *pianissimo*. Iles writes somewhat lyrically: ‘Decide which notes you love most, and show that you love them.’²⁶ The printed score of Tale, Op. 42 No. 1 offers notated corroboration, where in bar 110, at the climax of the phrase, the *eb* is unexpectedly marked *pp*.



Example 59. Tale, Op. 42 No. 1, bars 109-111

Pianissimo indications in bars 59 and 61 of ‘Primavera’, Op. 39 No. 3 (thirds *cb''* - *eb'''* and *bb''* - *db'''*) further illustrate his approach:



Example 60. ‘Primavera’, Op. 39 No. 3, bars 57-63.

²⁶ EIMC, 6.1.4.25; also 6.1.1.16, 6.1.4.3, 6.1.4.9 and 6.1.4.24.

And if further proof were needed, Medtner can be heard using this shading effect in his recordings, for example, in the expressive *pp* intervals in bars 14 and 20 of Improvisation, Op. 31 No. 1, and in bar 90 of ‘Canzona Matinata’, where the note to be highlighted is marked with an asterisk:



Example 61. ‘Canzona Matinata’, Op. 39 No. 4, bars 87-90

Shading can also be applied more generally to *cantabile* music, as for example in Chopin’s Nocturnes.²⁷

Theme and accompaniment in the right hand

Performers take the importance of drawing attention to thematic material for granted. In Medtner’s music, pianists are confronted with textures in which themes are interwoven with accompanying voices. This applies to both hands, but most often to the right, and examples – such as the middle section of ‘Danza festiva’ and bar 24 of *Novella* No. 1, or the ‘Ditirambo’ of the First Violin Sonata – abound.

²⁷ In own my practice I use shading in Brahms’s *Intermezzo*, Op. 118 No. 2 (a" in bar 2).

Festivamente. Sempre al rigore di tempo ♩ = 66-72

meno f e con leggerezza

meno f e con leggerezza

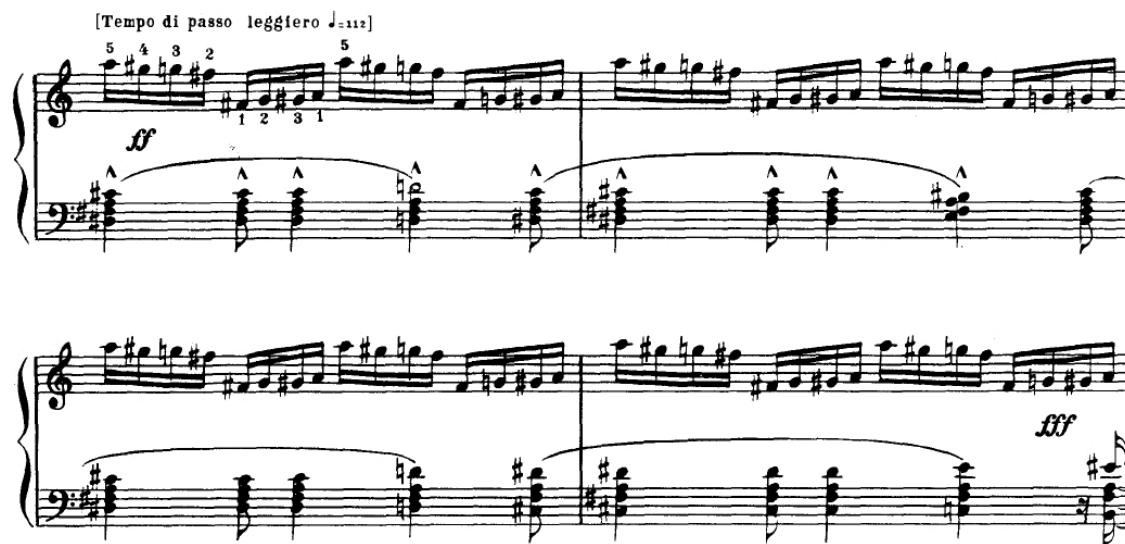
Red.

Red.

Example 62. First Violin Sonata, Op. 21, 'Ditirambo', bars 60-61.

'Isolation'

To ensure the melody would stand out from the surrounding material, Medtner developed a technique that he called 'isolation', which allows one voice to subjugate the rest, regardless of the hand in which it appears. He can be heard applying it in his recordings of Beethoven's 'Appassionata' Sonata, Op. 57, and his own song 'Im Vorübergehn', Op. 6 No. 4, where he isolates the melody with the left-hand thumb:



Example 63. 'Im Vorübergehn', Op. 6 No. 4, bars 32-35

This is not always quite as arbitrary as it sounds because supporting voices often require shading. In the 'Early Book' Iles illustrated Medtner's scheme for prioritizing voices in multi-layered textures: 'in the case of four-part harmony with the theme in the treble, the top note is the first in importance – *forte*, the bass next – *mezzo-forte*, and the two middle voices least – *piano*:

f
p
p
mf ²⁸

Iles's notes refer to vertically shaded dynamics²⁹ in relation to the opening of Tale, Op. 51 No. 1,³⁰ but Medtner's concept of prioritizing voices is equally relevant to homophonic and contrapuntal textures. In *Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1 No. 1, for example, it could be applied as follows: accompanying triplets and quavers – *piano*, semi-quavers – *forte*, crochets – *mezzo-forte*, thus:

²⁸ EIMC, 6.1.1.9.

²⁹ Yudina mentions 'the principle of distribution of priorities between voices' in connection with Medtner's Sonata in A Minor, Op. 30. See Drozdova, p.76.

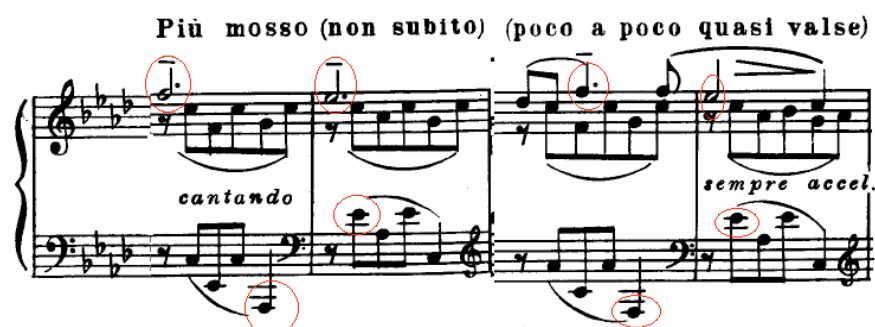
³⁰ See Example 42 on page 94.



Example 64. 'Stimmungsbilder', Op. 1 No. 1, opening with an example of vertically terraced dynamics

In his recordings of *Novella* No. 1 (bar 24), and 'Frühlingsmärchen' (Primavera), Op. 39 No. 3 (bars 54-67) one can clearly hear vertically shaded dynamics.

Further valuable advice on dynamics concerns how best to highlight echoes: 'where the accompaniment echoes the theme ... the echo should be well brought out, as it helps to emphasise the theme' and 'where a melody note is held, and the same note comes in another part, bring out well the echoing note, as it helps to emphasise the long note'.³¹ This latter suggestion can be applied to good effect in Tale, Op. 26 No. 3:



Example 65. Tale, Op. 26 No. 3, bars 17-20.

Medtner provided Iles with specific technical means for isolating a melody: 'Always play the melody notes legato and the others staccato', 'throw weight on the top melodic line and release immediately the notes underneath. The pedal will be sufficient to carry these on.'³² This advice is essential. By suggesting that the alto voice be played staccato, it not only makes it easier for the performer to focus on bringing out the top

³¹ EIMC, 6.1.1.9.

³² EIMC, 6.1.1.6 and 6.1.4.25.

voice, it facilitates it technically.³³ Specific mention of this principle in Iles's 'Notes' relates to the 'Elegy', Op. 45 No. 1 (bar 30) and 'Toccata' from Concerto No. 2 (bar 195).³⁴

Example 66. Concerto No. 2, 'Toccata', bars 195-199.

Leschetitzky also mentions isolating inner voices by playing them staccato; writing about the chordal passages in Rachmaninov's Prelude, Op. 3 No. 2, he urges the player to link the notes of the top voice wherever possible while releasing the lower notes of each chord by lifting the wrist.³⁵

Octave chords

Medtner voiced melodic octaves. Whenever a theme is expressed in *dolce* legato octaves, he recommended that Iles bring out the top voice, which in addition should be played smoothly. When a theme in the right hand is couched in non-octave chords, he encouraged her to 'throw weight onto melody note'.³⁶ In 'Einsamkeit', Op. 18 No. 3,

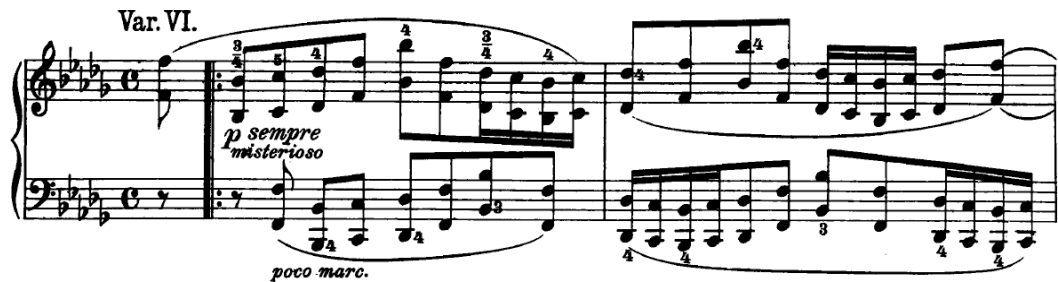
³³ A case study of the isolation of a melody is discussed in Chapter 7 (see pages 163-165).

³⁴ EIMC, 6.1.3.19 and 6.1.4.12.

³⁵ Brée, p.46.

³⁶ EIMC, 6.1.1.7.

Medtner advised bringing out the theme in the middle voice.³⁷ The rule for non-octave chords is also applicable in passages such as in bars 36-40 of the first movement of his *Sonata romantica* and in Chopin's Etude No. 2 from *Trois Nouvelles Etudes*. Iles's 'Notes' also reveal an occasion when Medtner asked her to bring out the melodic octaves in the sixth Variation of Brahms's Handel Variations.³⁸



Example 67. Brahms, Variations on a Theme of Handel, Op. 24, var. 6

When the theme is cast in octave chords he advised Iles to bring out the melodic line with the thumbs³⁹ when the music is marked *forte*, and the top line with the fourth or fifth finger when the music is *piano*. The effect can be heard in Medtner's recordings of 'Tragoedie-Fragment', Op. 7 No. 2, and Tale, Op. 8 No. 1. In both cases, when the octave melody chords are marked *piano* Medtner brings out the top line. Bar 70 of 'Hymne Am Amboss' (At the Anvil) offers another instance where the thumbs should be 'voiced up'; of this passage in the recapitulation Iles writes: 'Bring out terrifically right hand theme with thumbs.'⁴⁰ Medtner's technique solution was to apply weight to the finger that plays the melodic line – thereby achieving a warmer, more sonorous tone – and then to 'come down loosely'.⁴¹

³⁷ EIMC, 6.1.3.18.

³⁸ EIMC, 6.1.2.5.

³⁹ See 'Use of thumb' on page 53 for further explanation of this element of Medtnerian pianism.

⁴⁰ EIMC, 6.1.3.15.

⁴¹ EIMC, 6.1.6.1.

Theme and accompaniment in separate hands

When theme and accompaniment are taken by separate hands, Medtner stressed the importance of playing the accompaniment more softly than the tune.⁴² Medtner's accompaniments can be extremely complex (see Ex. 67 below) provoking the pianist to play them too loudly. Iles's 'Notes' tell us to give priority to the melody. For example, in bars 40-46 of Variation 3 of his Second Violin Sonata, Medtner advised her to bring out the right hand and subdue the left,⁴³ even though he had originally marked the left hand '*tenuto*'.



Example 68. Sonata for violin and piano No. 2, Op. 44, 2nd mvt, Var. 3, bars 39-43

While giving priority to the tune, Medtner sometimes drew attention to secondary melodies within the supporting voices. These remarks indicate that he did not, perhaps, always execute every mark in his own scores, but they could also simply be the reflection of a conversation with Iles on a particular day.

Pedal Points

Iles's 'Notes' contains detailed advice on playing pedal points, that is, where a note is sustained or repeated several times against a changing harmony. Medtner asked her to focus on the moving harmony wherever it occurs in the musical texture: 'Do not insist

⁴² EIMC, 6.1.4.4, 6.1.4.18, 6.1.4.24; *Daily Work*, pp.31, 39, 40, 43, 49.

In the copy of the Beethoven Fourth Concerto that belonged to Medtner's student Mariya Gurvich, the composer wrote *ppp* for the accompaniment of the connecting subject in bar 100 of the *Allegro moderato*. Zetel', p.179.

⁴³ EIMC, 6.1.2.3.

too much on the repeated note but bring out rather the notes that are changing.’ In general, the advice is very practical since pedal points, or passages in which the melody proceeds above a sustained bass notes, occur frequently in Medtner. The application of this technique, even in relatively brief passages, brings greater clarity to the voicing.⁴⁴ Once again, there are exceptions, as for example in bars 17-24 of *Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1 No. 2, where in a footnote in the score Medtner indicated that the repeated d# in the top voice is more important than the underlying motive⁴⁵ because it evokes the sound of a trumpet, thereby serving a further musical aim.

Playing fugal themes

Although Medtner incorporated relatively few fugues in his larger works – one thinks, for example, of the *Sonate-Ballade* and *Sonata minacciosa*, Op. 53 No. 2 – there are plenty of instances of fugato treatment, especially in development sections (*see* Tale, Op. 20 No. 2, ‘Campanella’, bars 21-23, and second movement of Sonata, Op. 25 No. 2, bars 27-35). Introducing a motive and then letting it sound in all voices of the texture (‘canon imitation’ as one critic described it)⁴⁶ is especially typical of him, and remarked on before.⁴⁷ The opening of the *Sonate-Idylle* and bars 57-59 of Tale, Op. 8 No. 1, offer clear examples. Iles records that, ‘in polyphonic music, where one voice comes in after another, bring out very well indeed the first two notes of each voice, and the rest can take care of themselves’⁴⁸ In bar 30 of ‘Meditation’ (from *Second Improvisation*), for example, Medtner strongly emphasized the first two notes of each new entry of theme (circled below):

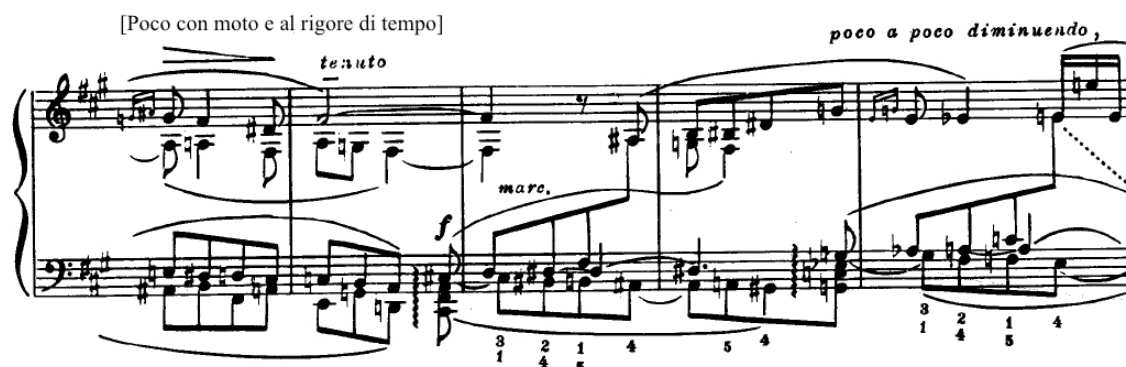
⁴⁴ For examples of organ points and moving voices in Medtner, *see* bars 101-104 of Tale, Op. 51 No. 5, and the opening of No. 6.

⁴⁵ *Complete Edition*, I, p.23.

⁴⁶ Sydney Miller, ‘Medtner's Piano Music: An Appreciative Study’, *MT*, lxxxii (October 1941), p.362.

⁴⁷ William Charles Jr. Bloomquist, *The ‘Fairy Tales’ of Nikolay Medtner*, (University of Texas DMA, 1993), p.125.

⁴⁸ EIMC, 6.1.3.7 and 6.1.1.10 (emphasis original).



Example 69. Medtner, *Second Improvisation*, 'Meditation', bars 29-33

It is an important technique that offers the performer yet another tool for colouring contrapuntal passages and facilitating voicing.⁴⁹ Sensitive applied to Medtner's music, it mitigates the tendency for it to sound cumbersome. To my knowledge, he is the only piano pedagogue to have advocated this approach to fugal themes.

Execution of grace notes, trills and arpeggios

Iles's 'Notes' preserve instances in both rounded and energetic music in which Medtner wished grace notes to be played quickly, without usurping time rightfully belonging to the main note.⁵⁰ He offered specific advice on playing grace notes quickly in the Tales, Op. 42 No. 2 and Op. 51 Nos. 2-3, 'Beflügelte Tänzer' from the *Second Improvisation*, and the opening of the *Sonata romantica*.⁵¹ The scope for its application is broad because he used grace notes so frequently, and his advice to Iles can spare later pianists from taking unnecessary interpretative decisions.

Medtner advised Iles generally to play trills 'even and free, to sound like vibration'.⁵² He did, however, elaborate on trills that are accompanied by 'rallentando' or 'diminuendo' indications: 'In a rallentando the trill must be fast right to the end; never let each note of the trill get slower, but let the trill itself last longer to fill out the

⁴⁹ See also the canon found at the end of Tale, Op. 14 No. 1 ('Opheliens Gesang'), the coda of No. 2 ('Ritterzug') and bars 17-20 of Novella, No. 3

⁵⁰ EIMC, 6.1.1.17, 6.1.2.9, 6.1.3.2, 6.1.3.7.

⁵¹ EIMC, 6.1.2.2, 6.1.3.6, 6.1.3.20, 6.1.4.19.

⁵² EIMC, 6.1.1.18.

This is an approach to playing diminuendo trills that I have yet to discover in any other source on piano playing.

rallentando.’⁵³ For diminuendo trills one must ‘keep the trill going but gradually let the movement of fingers get less and less until finally and imperceptibly they hold down first both notes of trill, then the last note’.⁵⁴ When taken with Medtner’s recommendation to play trills with flat fingers,⁵⁵ holding the two notes makes perfect sense, ensuring greater control and guaranteeing a diminuendo. The technique can be applied in bar 63 of the ‘Introduzione’ in *Sonate-Ballade* (mentioned in the ‘Notes’)⁵⁶ as well as in the music of other composers, such as the concertos of Rachmaninov and Liszt. In Medtner’s recordings, rallentando trills can be heard in bars 100-102 of ‘The Waltz’ Op. 32 No. 5, and bar 75 of ‘Primavera’, Op. 39 No. 3.

Medtner advocated a similar approach to arpeggiated chords: ‘Last arpeggio chords [in ‘Hymne vor der Arbeit’, Op. 49 No. 1] are to be played with quick arpeggios to give harp-like effect.’⁵⁷ This technique works well for the arpeggiated chords in the ‘Canzona serenata’ and the ‘Finale’ of the *Sonata romantica*.⁵⁸ Interestingly, he also favoured playing arpeggios quickly even in slow music.⁵⁹ In his recordings he can be heard playing grace notes and arpeggiated chords quickly in ‘Tragoedie-Fragment’, Op. 7 No. 2, Tale, Op. 8 No. 1, the last two movements of the First Violin Sonata, ‘Whisp'ring, Nature faintly stirring’, Op. 24 No. 7, and in the First Concerto.

Melodic phrasing

One of the most interesting insights to be gleaned from Iles’s ‘Notes’ addresses the interpretation of short notes. By short notes Medtner meant both notes that occur as part of repeated rhythmical patterns ( or ) and groups of short melody

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *The Daily Work*, p.69.

⁵⁶ EIMC, 6.1.4.4.

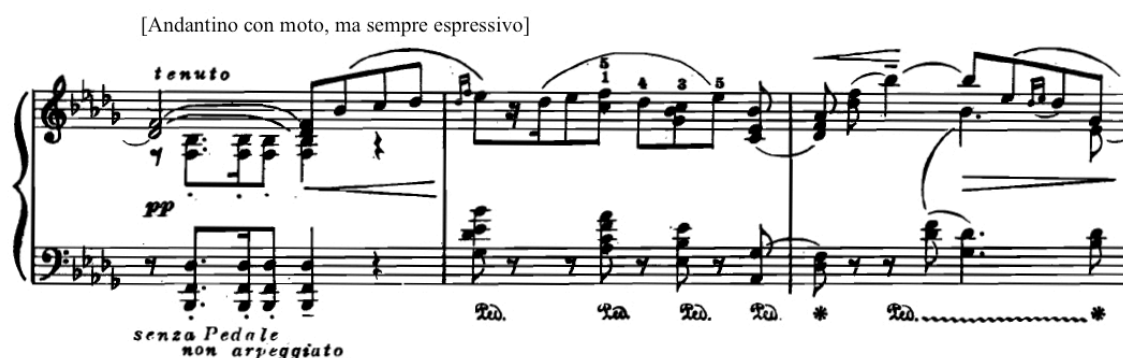
⁵⁷ EIMC, 6.1.3.3, 6.1.3.13.

⁵⁸ EIMC, 6.1.3.10, 6.1.3.7.

⁵⁹ EIMC, 6.1.1.17.

notes leading to a longer ones. Dotted rhythms in 6/8 or 3/4 meter, i.e.  or , are characteristic of Medtner. It may be that his fascination with dotted rhythms arose from a youthful interest in Scriabin's music (see his Sonata No. 3 or Etude, Op. 8 No. 12). Scriabin's influence has, of course, been noted before.⁶⁰

The recommendation to play 'short notes shorter' recurs frequently throughout the 'Notes'. A distinction should, however, be made between relatively short and long notes when playing *rubato* in rounded music: 'Always in true rubato, the long notes are longer and the short notes are shorter.'⁶¹ To illustrate this, he cited the opening of Chopin's Third Ballade (four quavers leading up to a crochet c' to be shortened, as in Ex. 52), and in the opening theme of his own *Sonata romantica*, he asked Iles to play the semiquaver within the dotted rhythm (bar 3) shorter:



Example 70. *Sonata romantica*, 'Romanza', bars 3-5

This advice also applies to repeated rhythmical patterns, both in melodic voices and in accompanying figurations. In bar 43 in the printed score of 'Romanza', Op. 39 No. 2, Medtner advised playing the quavers in the accompanying figuration shorter, 'closer to the semiquaver', in fact.⁶²

⁶⁰ Holt, *Medtner: A Tribute*, p.87; Elmore, p.126.

⁶¹ EIMC, 6.1.1.14.

⁶² *Complete Edition*, III, p.146.



Example 71. 'Romanza', Op. 39 No. 2, bars 42-48

Of the middle part of 'Danza jubilosa' Medtner remarked to Iles that the effect of the quavers in the left hand 'is almost as short as triplet quaver in right hand':⁶³



Example 72. 'Danza jubilosa', Op. 40 No. 4, bars 74-80

Although not indicated otherwise in the score, playing three against two was not, apparently, what he had in mind here. The lively tempo of the movement inevitably forces the assimilation of duple into triple meter. In his recording of the 'Danza jubilosa', Medtner does exactly that.

The notation in the opening of the Second Concerto does clearly illustrate the need to play short notes shorter:

⁶³ EIMC, 6.1.3.11.



Example 73. Concerto No. 2, 'Toccata', opening bars

In the course of Iles's lessons on the Concerto in November 1945 – by which time she had gained considerable command of Medtner's core principles – he specifically advised not to make short notes too long.⁶⁴ When she performed the work five years later, with Rudolf Schwarz and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, her interpretation of the opening initially puzzled the conductor. After the first rehearsal, she telephoned Medtner to ask him to sing the opening tune to her. Medtner replied that 'the third semiquaver, before the rest, must be cut very short, to make the rest clear'. She remarked in her notes that, 'he said it must not be treated in the classical manner, it is something new'.⁶⁵ The following day Schwarz was duly persuaded to follow Iles in the matter.

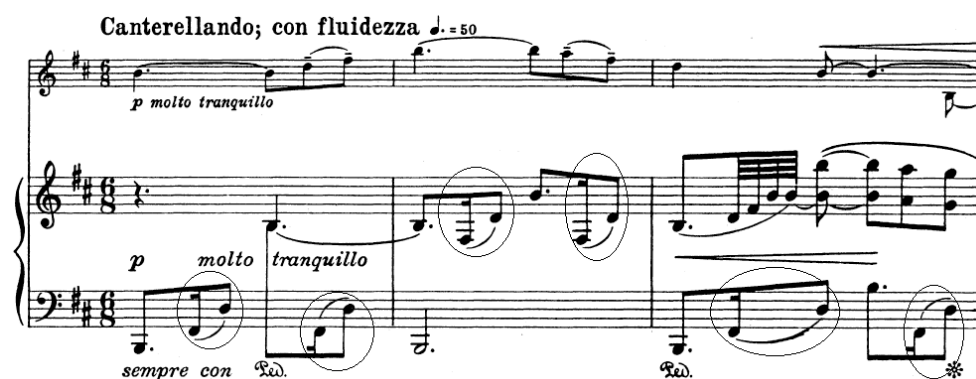
Iles cites other examples of cutting the short note short in energetic music, including the Second Violin Sonata, 'Tragoedie-Fragment', Op. 7 No. 2 and No. 22 of Brahms's Handel Variations.⁶⁶ In rounded, melodic music, short notes should not be too short. However, shortening short notes can add character to the performance by

⁶⁴ EIMC, 6.1.4.12, 6.1.4.15.

⁶⁵ EIMC, 6.1.4.23.

⁶⁶ EIMC, 6.1.2.3, 6.1.7.1.

injecting a bit of Scriabinesque neurosis, as for example in the first movement of the First Violin Sonata.⁶⁷



Example 74. First Violin Sonata, Op. 21, 'Canzona', opening bars

In Medtner's recorded performances, shortened short notes abound and examples in different works are numerous. In this regard I would draw particular attention to bar 4 and the final bar of the song 'Selbstbetrug', Op. 15 No. 3, bars 11 and 15-16 of 'Einsamkeit', Op. 18 No. 3, and the triplets in the opening of the 'Ne mogu ya slīshat' ètoy ptichki' [Serenade], Op. 28 No. 2. By shortening the notated relationship between the semiquavers and quavers in 'Vesenneye uspokoyeniye' [Spring Solace], Op. 28 No. 5, the melody assumes a more improvisatory character. This also applies to the main subject of the first movement of the Violin Sonata No. 1, *Sonate-Vocalise*, Op. 41 No. 1, and Tale, Op. 51 No. 2.

The practice of playing short notes shorter within a dotted rhythm pattern was advocated as early as 1756 by Leopold Mozart. In *A Treatise on the fundamental principles of violin playing* he cautions the player:

The dot must rather be held too long than too briefly. In this manner hurrying is avoided and good taste promoted; for that which is added to the dot will be subtracted imperceptibly from the following notes. That is, the latter are played more rapidly.⁶⁸

Elsewhere Mozart writes that 'the longer notes must not be made too short but rather

⁶⁷ The 'neurotic aspect' of Medtner's music was first noted by Dmitri Alexeev in a BBC talk, '*A Portrait of Medtner*' (4 October 1994). According to Alexeev, the 'psychologically intense atmosphere of the beginning of the century' bound Medtner and Scriabin.

⁶⁸ Leopold Mozart. *A Treatise on the fundamental principles of violin playing*. Editha Knoch, trans. (Oxford: OUP, 1985), p.130.

sustained a little over-long'. Similarly, Johann Joachim Quantz speaks of executing short notes rapidly 'because of the animation that these notes must express' in his treatise *On Playing the Flute* (1752).⁶⁹ The possibility of shortening the short note in dotted rhythms for other reasons is also mentioned in Daniel Gottlob Türk in his *Klavierschule* (1789).⁷⁰ Türk's student Adolf Marx (1795–1866) was a teacher of Nikolay Zarembo, who in turn taught Safonov, so Medtner's preference for playing short notes shorter clearly had its roots in earlier Classical performance practice. He applied it to music of both *al rigore* and *flessibile* character, and to melodies as well as accompaniments (see Exx. 70–73). The degree of shortening will always depend on the context, tempo, character, and musical taste of the performer.

Medtner's advice on the phrasing of two-note motives is another of the important discoveries I made when transcribing Iles's 'Notes', especially as it had not been mentioned in the *Daily Work*. The basic principle to be gleaned is that '[if] two notes [are] phrased together , [the] last [one] should be shorter, as if written  ... [and] must also be played more quietly than the first'.⁷¹ Two-note phrasing characterises much of Medtner's music, so instead of attempting merely to catalogue examples, I shall focus on the different ways he devised to soften and thereby shorten the second note of these phrases.

Two-note phrasing is first mentioned with regard to a passage in the *Sonate-Ballade*:

⁶⁹ Edward R. Reilly, trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.67.

⁷⁰ Raymond H. Hagg, trans., *School of Clavier Playing* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) p.350.

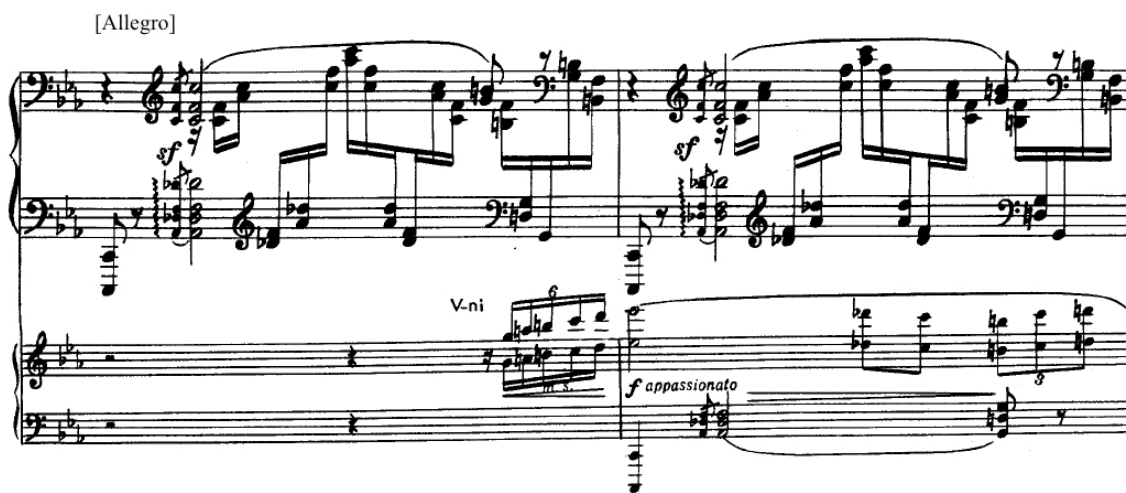
⁷¹ EIMC, 6.1.1.16, 6.1.6.6.



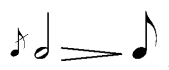
Example 75. *Sonate-Ballade*, Op. 27, 1st mvt, bars 11-14

In bars 11 and 13 of Iles's copy, Medtner crossed out the dot after the crotchet on the second beat and inserted a quaver rest.⁷²

In the First Concerto the two-note motive is the key to the main subject, appearing first in the piano part and accompanying the tune thereafter:



Example 76. *Concerto No. 1*, Op. 33, bars 3-4

Iles recorded Medtner's request that she soften the last note under the slur: 'Play B $\natural$ quaver in right hand more quietly, so that nuance is '.⁷³ It is, of course, unlikely that anybody would choose to accentuate the B $\natural$ at the end of the slur. However, this illustrates the two-note concept very accurately; the only indication absent from the piano part is the diminuendo. Played in this way, the motive becomes less awkward. Doubled by the horns and bassoons in the opening, the two-note phrase is

⁷² In bars 17 and 18 of the same movement, a similar phrase is notated with crochet and quaver rests at the end of the bar.

⁷³ EIMC, 6.1.3.18.

later taken up by the strings, making a preliminary discussion with the conductor vital as the manner of its interpretation affects the whole concerto.

Still another example of how a proper understanding of Medtner's intentions can alter the interpretation of a piece occurs in Tale, Op. 20 No. 1, where the right degree of tapering and shortening of the last note under the slur is essential. If misjudged or overlooked, the opening tune will not have the 'breathless' effect Medtner intended:



Example 77. Tale, Op. 20 No. 1, bars 1-6

On the other hand, if one takes the diminuendo too seriously, the phrase will lose its expressiveness. In his recording, Medtner deftly separates the phrases, achieving a coherent balance between them without distorting the overarching line. In any case, care must be given in determining the degree of softening and separation to be applied, even within a relatively short space of time. In bars 61-62 of the 'Sonata tragica', Medtner instructed Iles to make the diminuendo 'a lot first time [and] less second time'.⁷⁴

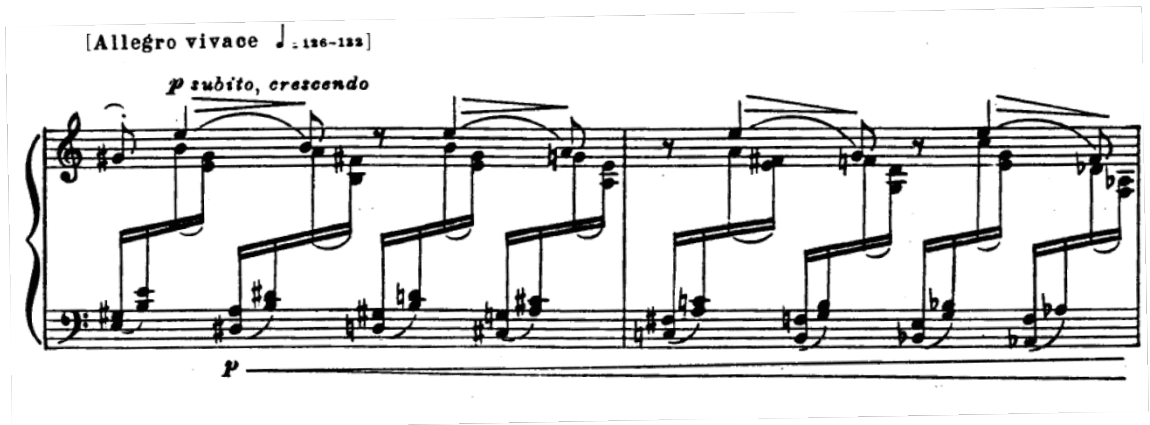
⁷⁴ EIMC, 6.1.4.18.



Example 78. 'Sonata tragica', bars 59-64

This technique can also be applied to the repeated slurs from G $\flat$ to E $\flat$ in bar 6 of Tale, Op. 20 No. 1 (see Ex. 76 above).

There are also many instances of two-note phrasing where Medtner provided diminuendo marks in the score to create the impression of sighing:



Example 79. 'Hymne Nach der Arbeit', Op. 49 No. 3, bars 76-77

In 'Hymne Am Amboss', two-note phrases are indicated with a slur and a dot on the second note in order to assist the phrasing and, paradoxically, not to make the second chord seem shorter: 'Although there is a dot on second note of two-quaver phrase, left hand is must not be staccato. It must be played with pedal.' 'There must be perfect

legato between bass note and following chord',⁷⁵ which are executed with the pedal. Medtner also suggested making a crescendo as one approaches the chord and then accenting it. This rather complicated effect was intended to evoke the sound of a blacksmith's hammer and may have been inspired by Wagner's *Das Rheingold* (Act I, Scene 3). Fortunately, Iles's 'Notes' provide the source for this unusual and startling technical effect.



Example 80. 'Hymne Am Amboss', Op. 49 No. 2, opening bars

At the other end of the interpretative spectrum, the concept of softening and shortening the last note of a phrase can equally be applied to lyrical motives and phrases of at least two notes. In 'Meeresstille', the smooth effect of waves is achieved in part by the presence of diminuendos within the bar-long phrases:

⁷⁵ EIMC, 6.1.3.15.



Example 81. 'Meeresstille', Op. 15 No. 7, bars 1-4

Although the diminuendo marks are missing in bars 3-4, the two-note principle is clearly implied. Furthermore, the instances in which Medtner did not want the second note under the slur to be softer are always clearly marked. For example, on each of the two-note motives in the left hand of 'Erdgeist' from the *Second Improvisation*, he notated a crescendo towards the second note:

Example 82. *Second Improvisation*, 'Erdgeist', opening

The *ostinato* figures in Tale, Op. 20 No. 2, and the opening figure of Tale, Op. 31 No. 3, offer still further examples.

Two-note phrasing can be used to heighten the musical experience of a phrase: in the following extract from *Novella* No. 3, a swell effect will be achieved when the mismatch of two-note phrasing is properly emphasized:

[Allegro, molto sostenuto $\text{♩} = 90$]

f appassionato

con Ped.

cantando

sempre

pp

Example 83. *Novella*, Op. 17 No. 3, bars 95-103

In this case, however, the two-note phrases in the accompanying voices should not be allowed to interrupt the soprano line.

The principle of two-note phrasing was first described in 1902 by one of Leschetizky's students, Malwine Brée, who wrote: 'When two notes of different value are found in succession, the longer note must be played with more force than the shorter, as it is to sound longer.'⁷⁶ This is precisely the approach Medtner applied in his compositions, although he was inconsistent in indicating the second note shorter when preparing the printed score. Medtner's teacher, Safonov, had been a student of Leschetizky, so although no evidence of Safonov's views on phrasing survives, we may conclude that Medtner first absorbed the two-note concept in his lessons.

⁷⁶ Brée, 511.

Once again, an understanding of two-note phrasing and its implications is central to a faithful interpretation of Medtner. What Iles did not record in her notes but surely knew was that the performer must avoid striking the first note of the motive or phrase too firmly when trying to produce the volume required to achieve a diminuendo on the second. The importance of the two-note phrases in Medtner has been noted before, but never discussed in detail.⁷⁷

Passages of ‘harmony’

Medtner used the terms ‘harmony’, ‘harmonic’ and ‘harmonious’ idiosyncratically, sometimes interchangeably, perhaps due to the limitations of his command of English, but nevertheless with specificity. Though at home in complex chromatic textures, as both composer and performer he sought to highlight instances where the harmony is intended to be sustained over relatively long periods, creating musical oases. Medtner uses the term ‘harmony’ is very often referring to a collection of notes forming a chord. Of Variation V from Op. 55 Medtner said: ‘Think of harmony. Make effect harmonic’,⁷⁸ and of bar 31 of ‘Romanza’ and bar 230 of ‘Scherzo’ (*Sonata Romantica*) ‘make very harmonious’.⁷⁹ Medtner aimed to achieve a musical equilibrium between passages of complex textures where harmonies change frequently (*see for example, the development section of the first movement of Sonate-Ballade*) and passages of ‘pure’ harmony. He successfully achieved this stasis in his recordings of the Third Concerto and ‘Meeresstille’, Op. 15 No. 7 (NB the openings in particular); in both cases the sound image is suggestive of the sea.

Much of Medtner’s passagework is, in fact, built on sustained harmonies and prolonged passages. A proper understanding of the harmonic framework of passages

⁷⁷ Jonathan Paul Tauscheck. *A Performance Guide to Two Fairy Tales of Nickolai [sic] Medtner*, University of Iowa DMA, 2012, p.28.

⁷⁸ EIMC, 6.1.3.6.

⁷⁹ EIMC 6.1.2.9

such the runs in the ‘Scherzo’ of the *Sonata romantica* (see Ex. 17) can facilitate both memorization and performance. Medtner categorically avoided drawing attention to individual notes in ‘harmonious’ passages. He asked Iles to ‘... show harmony and make other notes melt into it’,⁸⁰ as for example in the following passage of Tale, Op. 42 No. 2:



Example 84. Tale, Op. 42 No. 2, bars 23-24

On another occasion, he commented to her in French (initially, their common language) that, ‘il faut se plonger dans l’harmonie’ [we must immerse ourselves in harmony].⁸¹

Medtner valued rich harmony as an important support for the melody. In this context, bass notes assume greatest importance. Indeed, he advised Iles to ‘bring the bass out ... with a slight accent, even where it falls off the beat’.⁸² The second subject of the opening movement of the Second Concerto offers a clear example:

Example 85. Concerto No. 2, ‘Toccata’, bars 42-46

This approach may also be applied in the Tale, Op. 26 No. 3:

⁸⁰ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

⁸¹ EIMC, 6.1.2.2.

⁸² EIMC, 6.1.1.9.



Example 86. Tale, Op. 26 No. 3, opening

Medtner evidently wanted Iles to rely on his ‘insider’ knowledge of the harmonic scheme of the piece. Strict attention was to be paid to harmonic changes, however complex the texture. Creating harmonious sonorities was occasionally given priority over voicing. A case in point is the bridge passage leading to the second movement of the *Sonata-romantica*. Iles wrote in her notes: ‘Think of harmony. To bring out clearly right hand is not so important.’⁸³ Limiting careful voicing can assist in articulating the *fil rouge*, as in bars 3 and 4 of ‘Mechtatelyu’ [To a Dreamer], Op. 32 No. 6, where Iles noted: ‘Don’t drag and don’t make each quaver sound with a definite sound. Just make it harmonic.’⁸⁴ Here, the quavers should be played softer:



Example 87. ‘To a Dreamer’, Op. 32 No. 6, opening

⁸³ EIMC, 6.1.2.10 (emphasis original).

⁸⁴ EIMC, 6.1.3.20 (emphasis original).

In terms of voicing, this approach reflects the discussion of bass notes on page 146.

Playing similar passages differently

Medtner insisted that successive repeated bars never be played in the same manner: ‘where two bars are alike ... don’t play them the same’.⁸⁵ This concept was not, of course, new to Medtner, and likely to have been introduced by Leschetitzky, who as early as 1902 asserted that a ‘phrase occurring twice may be played strongly at first, then softly, as an echo; or softly at first and then more insistently to emphasize it’.⁸⁶ Medtner went one step further, however, by asking that ‘when the same passage is repeated twice ... play it the first time a shade more slowly’.⁸⁷ Indeed, in his recording of ‘Tragoedie-Fragment’, Op. 7 No. 2, he plays bars 27 and 28 slightly faster than bars 25 and 26:



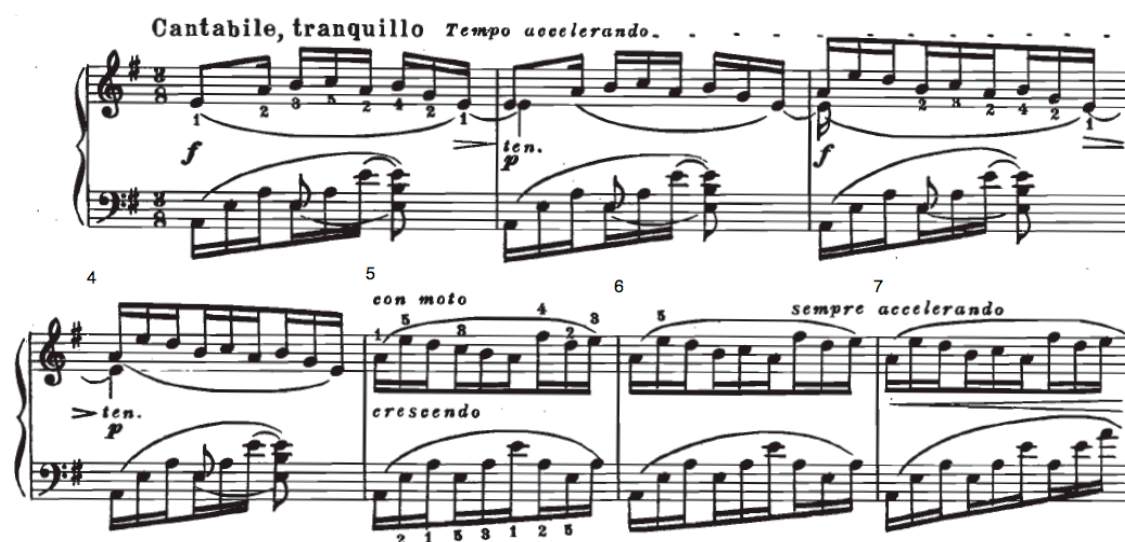
Example 88. *Drei Arabesken*, Op. 7, No. 2 – ‘Tragoedie-Fragment’, bars 24-29

Elsewhere, as for example in the opening of Tale, Op. 51, No. 2, Medtner played successive repetitions faster:

⁸⁵ EIMC, 6.1.4.25.

⁸⁶ Brée, p.52.

⁸⁷ EIMC, 6.1.4.25, 6.1.1.15.



Example 89. Tale, Op. 51 No. 2, opening

Bars 2 and 4 are differently marked, certainly in terms of dynamics, and Medtner clearly plays them slightly faster than bars 1 and 3. In a masterclass on the Chopin Ballade Op. 52, Igumnov advocated a similar strategy: ‘If, say, you play the phrase straight forwardly the first time and the second time make a slight *accelerando* followed by a *ritardando*, the effect will be to combine everything and make a complete whole.’⁸⁸

It is widely agreed that variety in identical passages is best achieved by changing the tone colour. In the second subject of the first movement of the *Sonata romantica*, Iles was told to ‘play lower half of melody *pp*, as though it is a different instrument from first four notes and third four notes’.⁸⁹ Voicing the repetition, and even making it sound less expressively are specifically recommended in Iles’s Book 3.⁹⁰

When the repetition is immediate, Medtner considered it imperative to interpret it afresh – ‘the nuances of tone or rhythm must be different’, but when the repetition occurs after a significant interval, the nuances remain unchanged.’⁹¹ Accordingly, the repeated A’s in Medtner’s Tale, Op. 51 No. 4, should be played differently at the beginning, and when the theme returns in bar 108 ‘the whole thing may be repeated in

⁸⁸ Konstantin Igumnov, ‘Chopin’s Fourth Ballade in F Minor’, 166 in Barnes, Christopher, ed. *The Russian Piano School* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2007).

⁸⁹ EIMC, 6.1.2.10.

⁹⁰ EIMC, 6.1.4.18.

⁹¹ EIMC, 6.1.2.8.

the same way'.⁹² Similarly, in 'Unwetter' from the *Second Improvisation*, Medtner suggests bringing out the left-hand crescendos for the first few times but, 'afterwards it does not matter so much, as this nuance is established'.⁹³ This, together with his advice on bringing out only the first two notes in fugal themes, underscores the importance Medtner placed on introducing new musical ideas within a piece.

We have seen how Iles's 'Notes' demonstrate not only how to perform Medtner's music, but also how to interpret his notation. How much of Medtner's advice should modern performers follow? Because Medtner was quite prescriptive about how his music should be played, it would be easy merely to follow his lead via his recordings and the evidence of his teaching, simply recreating *his* versions rather than developing our own. To ignore the evidence of the EIMC, however, leads genuinely to an incomplete interpretation of his music. Fortunately, it is now possible to form a historically informed performance that is thoughtful and respectful as well as fresh. Iles was able to strike a balance between adhering to Medtner's teaching and remaining free to make her performances her own. The evidence of recent recordings suggests that familiarity with Iles's 'Notes' could dramatically change the way pianists interpret Medtner in the future.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ EIMC 6.1.3.3.

CHAPTER 7

Case study: Medtner's *Sonate-Idylle*, Op. 56

I. Pastorale

II. Allegro moderato e cantabile

(sempre al rigore di tempo)

Medtner composed *Sonate-Idylle* in London in 1937 and published it the following year, presumably unaware that it would be his last essay in this genre. He departed from form to cast it in two contrasting, thematically unrelated G Major movements, styled 'round' and 'energetic' respectively. The *Sonate-Idylle* is rarely performed today.

While this case study relies on Edna Iles's 'Notes' and her annotated copy of the music for Medtner's views, it is important to acknowledge that the *Daily Work* also contains references to the *Sonate-Idylle*. Twice, Medtner reminded the pianist not to slow the tempo, especially in the first movement, and on a third occasion he warned of the need to reduce the sonority of the left hand in order to tame the 'ringing copper' so characteristic of Steinways,¹ and particularly applicable in the second movement.

¹ Nikolay Medtner, *Povsednevnyaya rabota pianista i kompozitora* [The Daily Work of the Pianist and Composer] (Moscow: State Music Publishers, 1963), pp.30, 38, 39.

See also pages 34-35 for Medtner's views on pianos.

General nuance -

This nuance must be very expressive, and repeated every time this figure occurs. Use less pedal, but think of long notes, and hold them.

SONATE-IDYLLE

I

N. Medtner
Op. 56

PASTORALE
Allegretto cantabile $\text{♩} = 50$

mf espressivo

dim.

mp cantabile

legatissimo

p

etc. Use this nuance wherever possible.

poco crescendo

dimin.

dim.

18644
Copyright, 1922, by Novello & Company, Limited

Plate 12. Iles's annotated copy of the *Sonate-Idylle* (first mvt)
(© The British Library Board)²

² See Appendix 5 for a colour version of the photograph.

I. Pastorale

The first movement is exceptional among Medtner's sonata movements in that it is only four pages long and characterised by remarkably transparent textures. Cast in binary form with a slow, eight-bar introduction,³ the 'Pastorale' is monothematic and maintains a single mood throughout that should be treated as *flessibile*.⁴ Medtner's advice to Iles on starting a piece of rounded character was to: '... put hands on keys, play first note very quietly, without any movement. Dream atmosphere will thus be established, and will not be rudely broken.'⁵ The opening of this movement offers just such an opportunity.

The hands enter in imitation:



Example 90. *Sonate-Idylle*, Op. 56, 1st mvt, bars 1-5

The hairpin in bar 1 (repeated through to bar 4, and oddly absent in the Soviet edition from whence the example is taken) serves as a reminder that only the first two notes of each entry should be brought out, as 'the rest can take care of themselves'.⁶ Later in the movement, bars 60-61 and 64-65 should be treated in the same way.

The first phrase of the main subject is 24 bars long, challenging the performer to maintain the *fil rouge* throughout, while being careful not to sacrifice the expressiveness of the smaller phrases within it.⁷ Iles's own copy of the Sonata is annotated, presumably by Medtner, with hairpins (bars 8-12) not present in any printed

³ Bobby Hughes Loftis, *The Piano Sonatas of Nikolay Medtner* (West Virginia University PhD, 1970). p.62.

⁴ See pages 108-110.

⁵ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

⁶ EIMC, 6.1.1.10, See page 131.

⁷ The comma mark between bars 18 and 19 is important in this regard.

edition.⁸ They point up the *flessibile* character of the music and serve as a guide to how to treat the crotchets:⁹



Example 91. Sonata-Idylle, 1st mvt, bars 6-13 with hairpins from Iles's copy

The 'short notes shorter' concept should be applied to passages of dotted rhythm in bars 22 and 24, and by adjusting the left-hand quavers the pianist can reinforce their overriding vocal qualities.



Example 92. Sonata-Idylle, 1st mvt, bars 19-24

In bars 31-32, the principle of incomplete changes of pedal should be applied. Although the notes B and D are non-harmonic in C Major harmony, the need for an incomplete change is clear from a simple analysis of the passage. The echoing phrase is undoubtedly marked *pp* for that purpose:

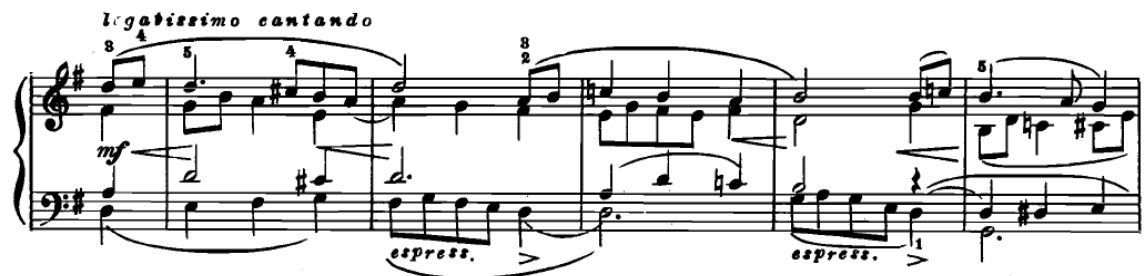


Example 93. Sonate-Idylle, 1st mvt, bars 29-32

⁸ The following Medtner editions were used when writing the present chapter: Nikolay Medtner, *Sonata-Idylle* (London: Novello, 1938); *Complete Edition*, IV (Moscow: State Music Publishers, 1960) and *Nikolay Medtner. The Complete Sonatas*, II (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2012).

⁹ See 'Melodic phrasing' on page 133.

The upbeat to bar 53 and sudden change of dynamics signal the beginning of a new phrase in D Major, and the need for a different tone colour, while the musical character remains ‘rounded’. In an analogous place in ‘Meditazione’ from the *Sonata romantica* (bar 15), Medtner told Iles to ‘bring out very much first note of melody, as if someone had entered a room’.¹⁰



Example 94. *Sonate-Idyll*, 1st mvt bars 53-57.

At bars 69-92 the only modulation to a minor key in the movement occurs, again suggesting the need to change tone colour. The markings *pp* and *una corda* imply a lightness of touch. The right pedal may be held through the ‘legatissimo’ section with half- and quarter-changes towards the end.



Example 95. *Sonate-Idylle*, 1st mvt, bars 68-75

The commas above the stave from the printed score excerpted in Example 95 suggest a gasping effect, implying that phrases should be clearly separated, preferably without perfectly synchronising the right hand with the left. The brief passage of triplets in bar

¹⁰ EIMC, 6.1.2.10.

74 should be clearly directed towards the succeeding bar; the same would apply to bars 86-92 where E minor returns.



Example 96. *Sonate-Idylle*, 1st mvt, bars 86-92

The brief return of the main theme in bars 93-110 benefits from the application of hairpins, as inscribed in Iles's copy. The main theme should be performed much the same as it was played at the beginning since the repetition occurs after a long interval.¹¹ Vibrating pedalling – not complete changes of pedal – is appropriate in bars 111-112.

Subtle variations of tempo are appropriate in the sequence found in bars 113-117. In a lesson on the first movement of the *Sonata romantica*, Medtner told Iles that, 'each phrase of a sequence must never be the same rhythmically'. This advice can likewise be applied to the passage signposted by '*poco vivo*' in bar 111:



Example 97. *Sonate-Idylle*, 1st mvt, bars 108-117

The fingering in bars 113-117 clearly suggests a rotary movement of the hands that is essential if the passage is to be performed up to speed. Finally, the beginning of the coda (bar 127) should be taken a little under the tempo.

¹¹ EIMC 6.1.2.8.

Apart from the pedalling effects discussed above, little further pedalling is needed in this movement. Medtner provided detailed fingering that suggests close finger legato, as seen in the left-hand part in bars 22-28:

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of two systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system (bars 21-28) is marked 'poco crescendo' and 'dimin.'. The second system (bars 29-30) is marked 'dim.' and 'tr'. The left hand features intricate fingering and pedalling. The right hand has a more melodic line with some trills and ornaments. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

Example 98. *Sonate-Idylle*, 1st mvt, bars 21-30



Plate 13. Iles's annotated copy of the *Sonate-Idylle* (second mvt)
(© The British Library Board)¹²

¹² See Appendix 5 for a colour version of the photograph.

II. Allegro moderato e cantabile
(*sempre al rigore di tempo*)

Medtner composed the second movement of the *Sonate-Idylle* in free sonata-allegro form.¹³ At the top of the opening page of Iles's copy, he wrote in pencil: '*sempre al rigore di tempo*', presumably in the course of a lesson.¹⁴ Indeed, most of the second movement is of energetic character, although the second subject is marked '*cantando*' on its first appearance in bar 65,¹⁵ requiring more flexible phrasing, especially in the subsequent passages marked '*cantabile*', '*dolcissimo*' and '*tranquillo*'. The triumphal return of the first subject in bar 210, marked '*molto sostenuto maestoso*' reinforces the impression of *sempre al rigore*.

It is extremely important to maintain the sense of a *fil rouge* in this movement, for without it, the constant flow of melodic semiquavers in the background, infrequent modulations and absence of long melodic notes would create a fragmented effect. Iles does not mention how to achieve this impression of wholeness, but because the concept of *fil rouge* assumes the pianist has a destination in mind towards which everything moves,¹⁶ the performer is also expected to choose a few minor destinations along the way that help to articulate the overall structure of the movement.

The first such destination occurs in bar 34, just before the arrival of the second subject. Special attention should be given to Medtner's carefully notated phrasing, ensuring that individual phrases are clearly separated:¹⁷

¹³ Loftis, p.62.

¹⁴ See Plate 13.

¹⁵ See Ex. 104.

¹⁶ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

¹⁷ See 'Phrasing' on page 100.



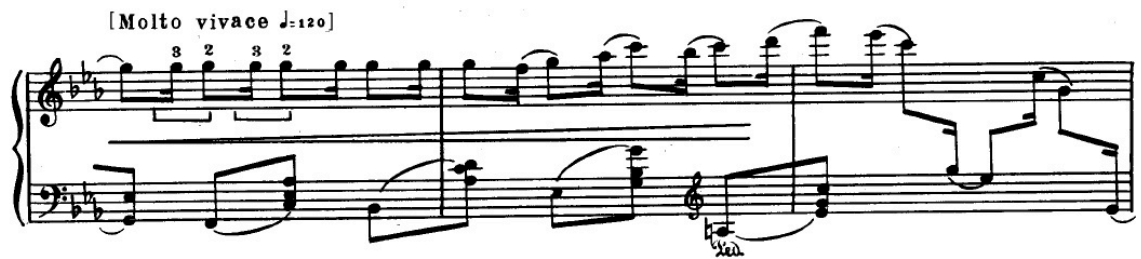
Example 99. *Sonate-Idylle*, 2nd mvt, bars 32-38

At the same time, careful attention should be given to the inner voices in bar 20¹⁸ and precision in Medtner's beloved double sixths in bars 25-28. Most important of all is the need for perfect finger legato, both here and in all similar places in the movement.

As in the first movement, Medtner's detailed fingering for the runs suggests minimal pedalling and a high degree of finger control.¹⁹ In the contrasting first theme of the second subject (bar 35), slurs indicate precisely where the hand is to be taken off the keys. In bar 36 it would have been natural to end the left-hand slur on the b' of the second beat and begin a new phrase on the d'' in the right hand, but Medtner instead connects the two notes. Playing the passage without *rubato* produces the rhythmic equivalent of riding on horseback; to round the phrase, the pianist should make a slight 'expressive hold up' on the d'' before resuming a steady tempo. The 'short notes shorter' concept discussed in Chapter 6 is applicable to this lively, dance-like theme, which bears a striking similarity to a theme from Tale, Op. 26 No. 2:

¹⁸ See 'Voicing' on page 120.

¹⁹ The extreme example of legato fingering, also involving double-note technique, occurs in the left-hand downward G Major scale in bar 266 of the second movement. This could well be the only example in piano literature of such fingering.



Example 100. Tale, Op. 26 No. 2, bars 13-15

Playing semiquavers shorter enhances the playful character of both the Tale and the second movement of the *Sonate-Idylle*. The following excerpt from the development section, where the theme returns in diminution, demonstrates the need for shortening. Here, the dotted rhythm is notated in demisemiquavers and followed by sequence of quickly ascending double thirds:



Example 101. *Sonate-Idylle*, 2nd mvt, bars 133-134

The legato chords marked '*forte cantando*' in bars 43-44 present a particular challenge for the pianist.



Example 102a. *Sonate-Idylle*, 2nd mvt, bars 43-45

One of the most natural ways of interpreting the slur in the right hand would be to play the chords non legato and equally forte. This, however, would destroy the sense of *fil rouge* within the phrase. The right-hand chords must be played with a little diminuendo towards the second beat, using the pedal to connect them. It would then be possible to

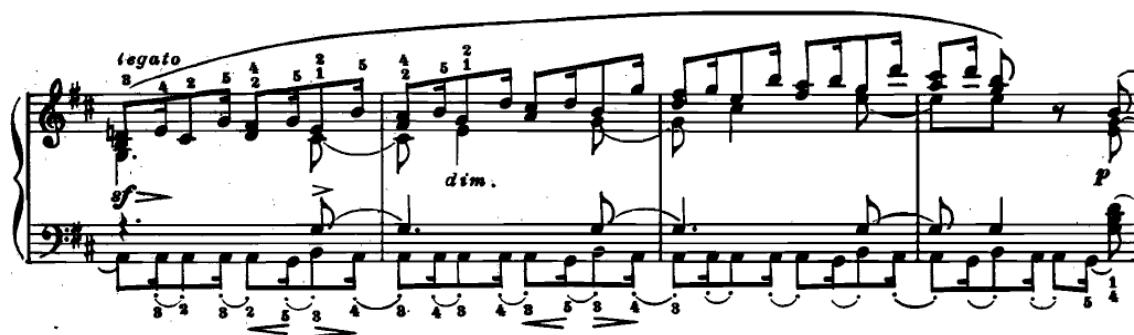
crescendo towards the downbeat of bar 45, executing the G Major chord with the follow-through movement. Two-note phrasing may be applied to the left-hand part in the following manner:



Example 102b. *Sonate-Idylle*, 2nd mvt, bars 43-45 with my interpretative annotations.

This passage recurs five times in the course of the movement (bars 49, 156 and 161) and each time should be treated in the same way.

Another technically awkward passage for the left-hand part occurs in bars 51-54:



Example 103. *Sonate-Idylle*, 2nd mvt, bars 51-54

While repeated A's are much easier to play when the hand is in a compact position, it would make the syncopated g's impossible to play, hence the pianist is obliged to extend the hand. A useful technique described by Iles with respect to such passages should be applied here: the performer must turn the left hand over sideways with the

wrist angled towards the right hand; the thumb should be so firmly rooted on g that it would possible the strike left wrist without affecting the hand position.²⁰

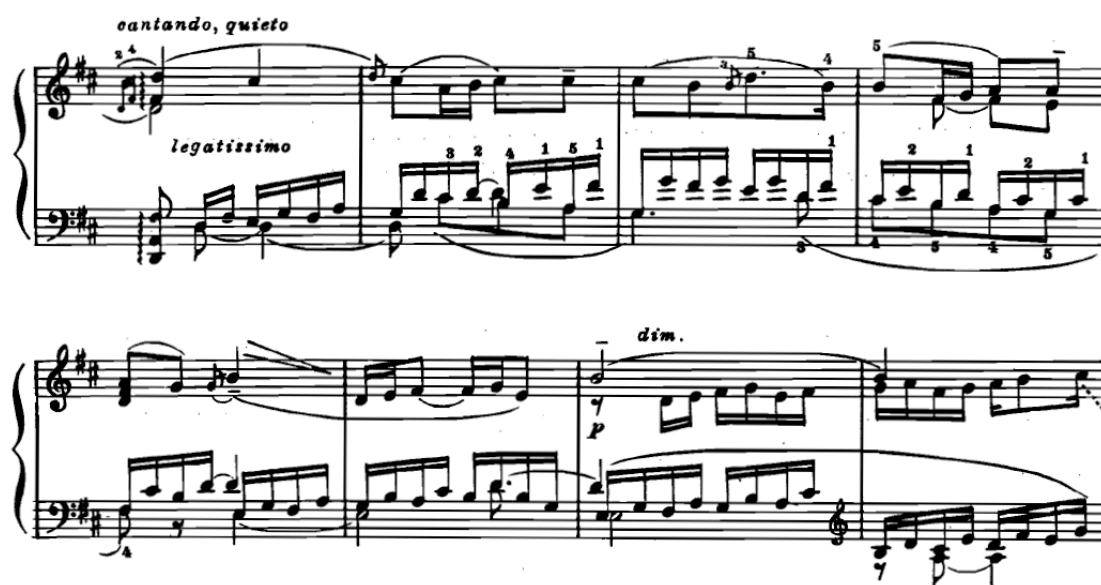
The thematic material in bar 55 requires extremely sensitive voicing.



Example 104. *Sonate-Idylle*, 2nd mvt, bars 55-58

The only way to isolate the right-hand melody from its accompaniment is to separate the notes of the underlying voice.²¹ This in no way contradicts the slurs in the printed score, as they pertain to phrasing. Similarly, playing the tenor notes staccato can help to isolate the bass line in the left hand, though is not explicitly indicated in the score.

Medtner's fondness for sequences of thirds resulted in textures such as that found in the left-hand part in bars 65-72:



Example 105. *Sonate-Idylle*, 2nd mvt, bars 65-72

Although the double thirds are broken in this passage, the 'legatissimo' indication reminds us of the need to practise scales in double thirds when preparing such

²⁰ EIMC, 6.1.4.6.

²¹ See 'Voicing' on page 120.

passages.²² Only a composer with a prodigious double-note technique would have incorporated a passage like this for the left hand. His unusual but surprisingly idiomatic fingering for the descending D Major scale in bar 68 allows a longer line to emerge, although it almost goes without saying that the right-hand melody should project above the accompanying figurations.²³ The change of character suggests a slight relaxation of tempo.²⁴

If one accepts Medtner's principle of usually playing two alike passages differently,²⁵ then bars 89-92 must evolve from bars 85-88. This would explain why there is a *mezzo-forte* indication in bar 89, which contrasts the *forte* in bar 85. It may be helpful to play bars 89-92 slightly faster in order to avoid a static impression.²⁶

In bars 93-96, attention should be given to the moaning two-note motives in the right hand. Gently softening of the last notes under the slurs and clearly separating the pairs here will produce the desired agitated effect. The diminuendo in bar 93 applies to the overall volume rather than specifically to the two-notes phrases. I inserted commas and hairpins in the following example to illustrate my interpretation:

Example 106. *Sonate-Idylle*, 2nd mvt, bars 93-96 with my interpretive annotations

The beginning of the development section in bar 97 offers an example of how Medtner indicated melodic isolation. The printed score reveals that the melody in the left hand is *piano* while the accompanying figurations in the right hand are marked *pp*,

²² EIMC, 6.1.3.20, Early Book and exercise book from Box 2 of the Archive.

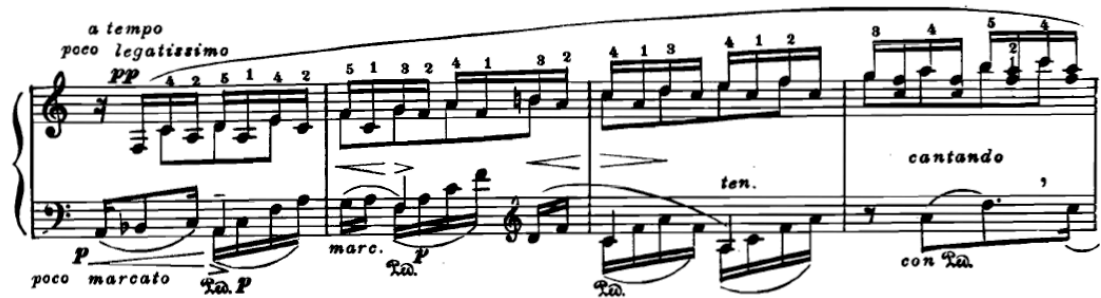
²³ See 'Voicing' on page 120.

²⁴ EIMC, 6.1.4.25

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ EIMC, 6.1.29.

implying the use of left pedal.²⁷ As in the *cantando* episode in bar 44, the right-hand part in bars 97-100 presents a formidable technical challenge to the performer: how to draw attention to the polyphony while restraining the volume.



Example 107. *Sonate-Idylle*, 2nd mvt, bars 97-100

The accompaniment in the right hand is what Medtner would have termed as ‘*egualmente*’,²⁸ and calls for evenness of tone; it should never be allowed to impede the voicing of the left-hand part. I have practised this passage playing the right-hand double notes as sustained chords, accenting the upper, melodic notes occurring on strong beats while playing the lower notes staccato. The following exercise is intended to assist the pianist in mastering the isolation of the upper notes in passages of broken double notes, in this case played ‘*poco legatissimo*’:



Example 108. Exercise for the right hand pertaining to bars 97-99 of the 2nd mvt of *Sonata-Idylle*,
devised by Alexander Karpeyev.

Equipped with knowledge of Medtner’s techniques as recorded by Iles, and a little imagination, the pianist can explore further ways of interpreting and practising *Sonate-Idylle*. Reflecting on Medtner’s distinction between the piano techniques of Czerny and

²⁷ See Principle 10 on page 81.

²⁸ See ‘Rotary and “motor” movements’ on page 50.

Chopin²⁹ may suggest further ways of executing the passage. The fingering of the top line (4-5-4-5-3-4-5) is reminiscent of that in Chopin's Etude Op. 10 No. 2, as both require a slight inclination of the right-hand wrist away from the left.

A number of Medtnerian principles proved relevant to my discussion of the *Sonate-Idylle*: *flessibile* and 'rounded' character in the first movement, *al rigore di tempo*, 'energetic' character, playing repeated material differently and *fil rouge* in the second movement. I have also demonstrated the degree to which the following interpretative techniques may be used:

1. beginning a piece from the keyboard (1st mvt)³⁰
2. incomplete changes of pedal or using less pedal with sustained notes³¹
3. highlighting only the first two notes of fugal themes³²
4. separation of phrases³³
5. playing short notes shorter for expressiveness³⁴
6. isolating the melody by playing supporting voices staccato³⁵
7. use of thumb in rotary and 'motor' movement³⁶
8. double-note technique³⁷

None of these is specified in the printed score, emphasising once again the unique contribution of Edna Iles.

²⁹ See pages 94-95.

³⁰ EIMC, 6.1.4.24.

³¹ See Principle 5 on page 70.

³² See 'Playing fugal themes' on pages 131.

³³ See 'Melodic Phrasing' on page 133.

³⁴ See 'Melodic Phrasing' on page 133.

³⁵ See 'Voicing' in page 120.

³⁶ See 'Use of thumb' on page 53.

³⁷ See 'The importance of technical exercises' on page 92.

CONCLUSIONS

In terms of the interpretation of Medtner's music and piano pedagogy more generally, the value of Edna Iles's 'Notes' and the EIMC cannot be overestimated. Her 'Notes' represent both a uniquely detailed primary source and his final thoughts on how to perform his music; the EIMC, of which the 'Notes' form a major part, offers further unique, corroborating evidence. Students of Chopin left precious written evidence of his teaching, but the EIMC tell us much more about Medtner – how he played, taught and even composed.¹

Until 1947 the only source of information on Medtnerian performance practice worldwide were his printed scores. In Soviet Russia the appearance of Medtner's recordings and publication of the *Daily Work* (in Russian) in the 1960s broke the nearly three decades of silence surrounding his name. His former Russian students and colleagues were nevertheless still able to bring unique insights to his music of the Russian period and more easily interpret his post-1927 works. Medtner's Russian pupil and admirer Abram Shatskes recorded some of his works in 1958-59, four decades after his last lesson with the composer. Although depicting the epic side of Medtner's music well, his recordings lack the authority of those of Edna Iles.²

Iles became known in Soviet Russia thanks to Anna Medtner and through her recording of the *Second Improvisation*, which was broadcast by the Vsesoyuznoye Radio in 1958, but her 'Notes' are still almost unknown among Russian pianists today.

¹ See Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger. *Chopin: pianist and teacher as seen by his pupils*. Cambridge: CUP, 1986.

² His recordings are available at <<http://classic-online.ru/ru/performer/920>> (date last accessed: 18 February 2015).

By contrast, between 1928 and his death, people in the England were able to hear Medtner's own live performances and broadcasts, and thereafter Iles's.³

The EIMC ensures that unique aspect of his performance tradition will be preserved for future generations of pianists. In an interview with her in 1984, Lyndon Jenkins asked Iles whether by writing her notes she had been trying to achieve 'a kind of Medtner performing style'; she answered:

Oh yes, because he was so very anxious that his music should be played as he wished. He believed, you see – a lot of people think there are a lot of ways of playing a work, but he did not believe that. He said 'there might be many different ways of playing the work but there is always one way that is the best. And he thought the way he wanted his music was the best!'⁴

Her response confirms that Medtner had definite views on how he wanted his music to be performed. Certain 'ideal' interpretations existed for him. Numerous sophisticated indications of character and pedal markings, rarely used by other composers, illustrate his zeal for indicating minute details in his scores regarding the performance of his music, thereby directing the performer toward an 'ideal' interpretation.

The topics discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 (voicing, phrasing, importance of the *fil rouge* and the interplay of Medtnerian polarities) exceed the scope of the *Daily Work*, a primary Russian source that still awaits a critical edition in English. Iles's 'Notes' embody an understanding of Medtner's intellectual constructs, impossible to divine from the printed scores or the recordings alone; they can only be understood with knowledge of Iles 'Notes'. Consequently, the EIMC provides a clearer picture of Medtner as pianist and teacher, fills the hiatus left between Medtner's short-lived teaching career in Moscow and the performance tradition he set down in his recordings, and reveals the depth of his pedagogical talent. The following comments by Hamish Milne further highlight the importance of Iles's 'Notes':

³ See 'Iles's biography' in Chapter 1 for the full discussion of Iles's role in preserving Medtner's legacy in the West.

⁴ 'Music I remember' [a radio documentary about Edna Iles and her studies with Medtner, Lyndon Jenkins, presenter]. BRMB Radio, 1984.

So devoted and scrupulous are her annotations that they throw light not only on the smallest nuances and interpretive refinements demanded by Medtner but also (especially in his recommendations for practise of specific passages) they give extraordinary insights into the methods and practicalities of a Golden Age of pianism.⁵

Working in the EIMC over many months, hand in hand with studying and performing Medtner's music, has yielded many useful personal insights relating to performance and teaching. I have been able to achieve greater freedom at the keyboard through a better understanding of Medtner's technique of keeping the elbows out, and have found his concept of the follow-through movement indispensable when executing some of his chordal passagework. A deeper acquaintance with Medtner's concepts of *articolando* and motor movements, in particular, has brought fresh perspectives on the idiomatic qualities of his music. Mastering staccato with fingers drawn into the palm of hand (finger staccato) and playing groups of notes legato with the lateral movement of a flat hand have further enriched my store of Medtnerian technical devices, and clearly could be of enormous assistance to other pianists embarking on playing Medtner and even the music of other composers. I have benefitted from mastering his 'bespoke' pedalling techniques, as described in Iles's 'Notes' and amplified in annotations in her copies of his scores; many are unique in piano pedagogical literature and can be usefully applied to the music of other pianist-composers. Likewise, his idiosyncratic practising regimes prove equally practical when applied to the works of other composers. My perspectives on how to project musical form in performance have been enormously enhanced by absorbing the implications of Medtner's *fil rouge*, and I now understand why he thought of himself as 'a pupil of Beethoven'. The *fil rouge* is perhaps the most important of all the Medtnerian concepts – Iles called it 'the principal

⁵ Personal correspondence with Hamish Milne.

requirement in the interpretation of his music’, essential to keeping a work ‘held together as a whole’.⁶

Iles’s ‘Notes’ admirably attempt to encapsulate Medtner’s sensitive perception of time in music. His division of music into those with *al rigore* and *flessibile* tempos,⁷ and round and energetic styles, offers performers the bases on which to assemble an interpretation. Medtner provided Iles with further invaluable interpretative techniques, including highlighting only the first two notes in fugal themes and isolating voices by means of staccato, which help to lighten his textures and facilitate their execution. The concept of two-note phrasing, although an innovation, he could claim, must surely be considered a cornerstone of his interpretive style.

Thanks to Iles, we can talk with authority about a Medtner performance style. This was something that she discussed with Lyndon Jenkins in a 1984 BRMB Radio interview. Her role as a guardian of Medtnerian authenticity is clear – not only from the evidence of her ‘Notes’, but her recordings, in which we can hear her implementing everything she had learned from Medtner. As ‘Medtner’s disciple’, she devoted the rest of her life to the promotion of his music. Bryce Morrison later perceptively observed that, ‘Medtner’s intricacies require a reflex and elegance beyond mere physical preparation, a capacity to absorb, away from the keyboard, a plethora of ideas and resolve them into a matchless and unfaltering lucidity’.⁸ Without Iles’s efforts to preserve Medtner’s legacy, and make it available to future generations of pianists, we would not be where we are today.

Iles’s ‘Notes’ reflect years – nay, more than a decade – of one-to-one instruction with Medtner and cover numerous concepts and techniques that would not otherwise be gleaned from his recordings, the reminiscences of his Russian students or

⁶ E. Iles. ‘Medtner, friend and master’, *Recorded Sound*, 70-71 (1978), p.793.

⁷ See Chart 3 at the end of Chapter 5.

⁸ B. Morrison, ‘Blazing a trail for Medtner’, *International Piano Quarterly* (Autumn 1998), p.14.

the *Daily Work*. Her ‘Notes’ take us into his studio and directly to the piano – almost involve us in the lessons themselves. With the exception of Abram Shatskes, none of Medtner’s students embarked on a major teaching career; Iles had only one student, Michael Jones, who continues to teach in Birmingham, though not at university level.⁹ A continuous performing tradition stemming from Medtner was in danger of being broken. Thanks to Iles it is a tradition that is now susceptible of revival. My work on the EIMC has inspired in me a sense of mission, and I hope that this dissertation will lead to a wider knowledge, appreciation and implementation of the evidence found in the EIMC of Medtner performance practice.

Following his death, Medtner’s music continued to be performed in the Soviet Union but fell out of fashion in the West, in part because of lack of champions, with the notable exception of Edna Iles and, latterly, Hamish Milne. Today, Medtner’s music is undergoing a revival. International Medtner festivals and conferences are taking place, the *Daily Work* has been reprinted (in Russian), a new monograph by Yelena Dolinskaya recently appeared, his music is increasingly heard in recital halls, and the new recordings are appearing with greater frequency. Though as yet unpublished, Iles’s ‘Notes’ are the link that will impart greater authority to modern-day interpretations of his music. Without her testament to his style of playing, the revival runs the risk of relying too much on personal response to guide the act of interpretation.

The task at hand is to promote wider acknowledgement of the value of the EIMC as a primary source for Medtnerian performance practice. Many of the indications absent in first editions but added to the *Complete Edition* were based on Medtner’s autographs; Iles’s annotated copies and ‘Notes’ provide essential concordances and elaborations. Unlike the *Daily Work*, which is based on manuscript notes Medtner prepared for his own use, Iles’s ‘Notes’ reproduce the live word of a

⁹ Michael Jones’s biography can be found online at
<http://www.espressivo.org.uk/michael_jones.php> (date last accessed: 24 July 2014).

teacher to all who are interested in learning and performing his music. Throughout the research and writing of this dissertation, I have rigorously applied his advice to Iles to my interpretations of his music and have been impressed by the consistency of the approach presented in her 'Notes'. I therefore consider her to be an unparalleled source of Medtnerian performance practice.

In spite of all we know about Medtner performing practices, questions will always remain. There is no recorded discussion between Medtner and Iles about musical content *per se*. Perhaps this was due to something that researcher Duncan Honeybourne described as the perfect compatibility of two musical minds.¹⁰ In addition, Anna Medtner said that the composer was 'afraid of an imposed programme'.¹¹ Medtner had his own view of what constitutes programmatic music. In *The Muse and the Fashion*, he wrote:

Many are inclined to assign to the realm of program music just about every piece that has not a purely musical title (sonata, rondo, prelude), but one describing its character or mood (berceuse, reverie), or one which may even have been borrowed, for greater clarity, from some well-known literary work. In reality, however, program music is only music in which the form itself and contents are dictated and justified by a certain program or subject matter.¹²

Although non-musical references in Medtner's works are frequent,¹³ articulating the inspirational content of his works was an extremely personal matter for him, even in the welcoming surroundings of a private lesson. The fact that Medtner's didn't recite fully the Russian Orthodox hymn *Khristos Voskrese* [Christ is risen] in his Violin Sonata, Op. 57, unlike Tchaikovsky, who quoted *So svyatimi upokoy* [With the Saints give rest] in full in his Symphony No. 6, but only gives hints at it reflects a certain degree of

¹⁰ Honeybourne, Duncan. 'Russian Piano Music in Deepest Warwickshire'. *BMI Insight*, 4 (2001) 791-793.

¹¹ Anna Medtner, p.45.

¹² Nikolay Medtner. *The Muse and The Fashion. Being a Defence of the Foundations of the Art of Music*, trans. Alfred J. Swan. Haverford, PA: Haverford College Bookstore, 1951, p. 124

¹³ Sonata Op. 11 No. 1 and Nachtgesäng Op. 16 No. 1 have poetic epigrammes from Goethe; Sonata Op. 25 No. 2 and Tale Op. 34 No. 2 from Tyutchev, Tale Op. 34 No. 4 from Pushkin, Tale, Op. 35 No. 4 from Shakespeare. Tragoedie-Fragment, Op. 7 No. 3 bears the subtitle 'Predchuvstviye revolyutsii' [Premonition of revolution] and the Tale, Op. 34 No. 3 – 'Leshiy' [Wood Goblin].

reticence on the composer's part. Seen in this light, the way Medtner inserts references to the Beatitudes and David's Psalm in the score of the Quintet is remarkable. It is possible that his intention was to create a sense of mystery around his music. An interpreter of Medtner must take the titles and epigrammes he gave to his compositions as starting points for building an interpretation.

Inevitably a performer will wonder just how many and how much of Medtner's interpretative techniques and concepts, as described by Iles, did he expect listeners to hear? Were they intended solely to inform the learning process? Having informed him or herself about Medtner's style and approach, the next stage is to determine the extent he or she wishes to implement his techniques.

Although Iles's 'Notes' are extremely informative, if taken too literally they could unnecessarily fetter a performer with limitations arising from Medtner's admittedly rigid approach (he was always 'very anxious that ... you play his music as he wished'), which was an unfortunate legacy of his time, experience and personality. All music should be open to new interpretation, but familiarity with Iles's 'Notes' can at least help to ensure that Medtner's is performed thoughtfully, respectfully, and even affectionately.

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¹ For other composer’s music see ‘Indexed List of music Cited’, p.vi.

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² This and subsequent recordings were acquired online.

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³ These are the copies of the recordings from private collections.

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