

The complete Medtner Society and Edna Iles

The Russian composer Nikolai Medtner (1880–1951) remains one of the most enigmatic of composer/performers, who might remain a footnote in the history of music were it not for the fact that, after hearing his music on short-wave radio, the Maharajah of Mysore funded an

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edition of his music on gramophone records. This was done through Walter Legge and EMI with the tried and trusted method of “Society” marketing, which Legge had introduced before the second world war. In addition to creating a rich archive of recordings, most of which featured the composer himself, the timing of the Maharajah’s intervention, immediately after the war, also provided valuable funding for Legge’s Philharmonia Orchestra. The combination of excellent production and recording, and self-evidently authoritative recordings created a legacy of enormous value. Intermittently available until now, the complete Medtner Society recordings have recently been transferred to CD in excellent sound by the specialist French-Canadian enterprise St Laurent Studio on five CDs (Ⓢ YSL78-004 to 78-006, 78-024 and 78-027). In addition, St Laurent Studio have issued recordings of solo piano pieces and songs made by Medtner (with the soprano **Tatiana Makushina**) in 1930, 1931 and 1936 (Ⓢ YSL78-007 and YSL78-023). A further important adjunct is a set of four CDs, again issued by St Laurent Studio, featuring the playing of one of Medtner’s most significant pupils, the English pianist **Edna Iles** (Ⓢ YSL 78-210 to 78-212, 78-215), the repertoire of which includes music by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Liszt and Chopin, as well as by Medtner himself. So it is now possible to hear a considerable volume of Medtner’s music performed by the composer himself and by one of his most outstanding pupils.

Born in Moscow on Christmas Eve, 1879, Medtner studied the piano with his mother until he was ten, as well as receiving lessons from his mother’s brother Fyodor Goedicke, after which he entered the Moscow Conservatoire, where he studied with Paul Pabst, Vassili Sapellnikov, Vassili Safonov and Sergey Taneyev. He graduated when he was 20, but soon afterwards decided to devote himself to composition instead of adopting the life of a virtuoso pianist as might have been expected. Until the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917 he lived at home with his parents. In 1918 he married Anna Bratenskaya, the former wife of his brother Emil, who relinquished her to Nikolai after he was interned in Germany (where he was studying) at the outbreak of the first world war.

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Medtner was greatly admired by another virtuoso pianist/composer, Sergey Rachmaninov, who secured for him a tour of America and Canada in 1924. However, Medtner did not take naturally to the world of performing, and recitals that he gave of his piano music and songs gradually became more and more infrequent. Admired in England, he settled there in 1936, living in London with his wife and adopting a regular routine of teaching, playing and composing. With the outbreak of the war in 1939, one of his principal sources of income – royalties from his German publishers – ceased, and genteel poverty gradually led to ill health. His pupil Edna Iles took him in during this period, providing shelter at her home in Warwickshire.

The intervention of the Maharajah of Mysore and the formation of the Medtner Society after the war came just in time, and enabled the composer to record many of his key works, most notably his three piano concertos in exemplary recordings, not long before his death in London in 1951. His vocal partners in the Medtner Society edition of his songs included Legge’s future wife, **Elisabeth Schwarzkopf**, the English soprano **Margaret Ritchie** in one significant vocal work, the *Sonata-Vocalise*, Op. 41, the Russian soprano of great character, **Oda Slobodskaya**, and his pre-war vocal partner, **Tatiana Makushina**, while his instrumental colleagues included the pianist **Benno Moiseiwitsch**, the violinist **Cecilia Hansen** and the **Aeolian Quartet**. These names emphasise the musical quality of the Medtner Society’s productions under Legge’s guidance.

Medtner’s music is an acquired taste, but once experienced it stays with one indefinitely. His melodic writing tends to be rather short-breathed, in strong contrast to that of his colleague Rachmaninov, but it is sufficiently original for his music to stay in the mind. A distinctly Russian “tinta” is present throughout.

St Laurent’s production of these recordings cannot be faulted. The transfers are excellent, without any excessive filter, and an added bonus is the colour reproduction of many of the original 78rpm record labels. In the three piano concertos the excellent Philharmonia Orchestra is conducted by **George Weldon** (No. 1) and **Issay Dobrowen** (Nos. 2 and 3), but the solo piano

works are well worth exploring, as are the songs, instrumental pieces, and the Piano Quintet in C. The composition of this work stretched from 1903 until 1949, and Medtner considered it to be the summation of his musical life. The recording made by EMI with the composer at the piano has not hitherto been formally released, and so its appearance now (Ⓢ YSL78-027) marks a very valuable addition to the Medtner discography. The recordings from the 1930s are dominated by Medtner’s short *Fairy Tale* pieces, which again are highly characteristic.

Edna Iles, who was born in 1905, died as recently as 2003. Clearly a pianist of great capability, she enjoyed an international career during the interwar years when she could be heard in Amsterdam, Berlin, Budapest, Oslo, Paris, Stockholm and Vienna as well as throughout the British Isles, playing under conductors such as Beecham, Boult and Mengelberg. Medtner, whose three piano concertos she performed at the Royal Albert Hall in 1946 over three concerts with the London Symphony Orchestra, described her as “the bravest and ablest besieger of my musical fortresses”. She broadcast often, and Richard Butt, the producer of her final BBC recital in 1979 described her technique as “very big and beefy”. This quality can clearly be heard in these private and off-air recordings issued by St Laurent, though Iles plays with much sensitivity when this is required.

Of especial interest is a recording of the final movement of Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto, with Charles Groves conducting the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in a live concert from 1961. She performed Bloch’s Concerto symphonique with Groves at the Proms in the 1950s and the composer was extremely enthusiastic about her performance, writing to her: “I was profoundly shaken by your extraordinary comprehension and realisation, as a musician and as a great pianist!” Evidently a shy person, Iles never married and made few if any commercial recordings, so the publication of this non-commercial material is very valuable indeed. All these CDs richly repay investigation and St Laurent Studio are to be strongly congratulated for undertaking this project, which is a very fine achievement. **David Patmore**