CHAMPS HILL RECORDS

SOFYA GULYAK *piano*

MEDTNER RACHMANINOFF PROKOFIEV

TRACK LISTING

	NIKOLAI MEDTNER *(1880–1951)* **4 FOLK TALES** Op.26	
1	Allegretto frescamente – Giocoso – Tempo primo	*10'46*
2	Molto vivace	*02'38*
3	Narrante a piacere – Più mosso – Tempo primo	*01'28*
4	Sostenuto	*02'45*
5	**TRAGIC SONATA** Op.39 No.5	*03'34*
	SERGEI RACHMANINOFF *(1873–1943)*	
6	**VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF CORELLI** Op.42	*19'21*
	SERGEI PROKOFIEV *(1891–1953)* **SONATA NO.6 IN A MAJOR** OP.82	
7	Allegro moderato	*08'25*
8	Allegretto	*04'47*
9	Tempo di valzer lentissimo	*08'35*
10	Vivace	*06'56*
		69'18

Produced & Engineered by Matthew Dilley
Edited & Mastered by Matthew Dilley

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Label Manager for Champs Hill Records: John Dickinson

PROGRAMME NOTE

Of the Russian composer-pianists represented on this disc, the least familiar name remains that of Nikolai Medtner, even though his gifts equalled those of his close friend and contemporary, Rachmaninoff. As his name suggests, Medtner came from Germanic stock, though his family had been domiciled in Russia for several generations, and he inherited a pan-European culture. He responded to Goethe, to Beethoven, Brahms and Wagner as well as the Russian masters, and he pursued painstaking ideals of organic structure and exhaustive thematic development, to a degree almost unknown elsewhere in Russian music. As a result he has often been described as 'the Russian Brahms', with the adverse implication that Brahms, from the Russian viewpoint, was a tedious structuralist (or, as Tchaikovsky once memorably and unfairly put it, 'a giftless bastard'). Yet if one actually listens to Medtner with any attention one hears a tremendous community of expression with Rachmaninoff in phraseology, in harmony, in passionate lyricism, in piano writing of amazing dexterity and bravura. Another disparaging phrase about Medtner that one used to hear was that he was 'Rachmaninoff without the tunes'. The British composer and broadcaster Robert Simpson maliciously turned this round, saying Rachmaninoff was 'Medtner without the brains'. Each quip, of course, is as monstrous a calumny as the other: just as Rachmaninoff was self-evidently a composer who handled his highly charged melodies with a brain as cool as ice, Medtner could and did write melodies as beguiling as Rachmaninoff's, but shaped them more for a process of continuous development, out of which they might emerge as the result, rather than the starting-point, of the music. He is, perhaps, especially distinguished in fast music, with rapidly moving, toccata-style writing.

Almost all Medtner's works involve the piano, though they include three concertos, many songs, and a significant group of works for violin and piano. But mainly he concentrated on piano solo – and though he wrote in almost all the lyric genres, there was one genre that he practically originated and made peculiarly his own: the *Skazka*. This Russian word is often mis-translated 'fairy-tale', but it really signifies something more like 'fantastic tale' or 'folk tale'. Like the Ballades of Chopin,

Medtner's many *Skazki* are music with a vein of fantasy and an implied sense of narrative. Some of these pieces are mere miniatures, whereas others grow to considerable dimensions.

The set of ***Four Skazki***, *Op.26,* was composed in 1912 and Medtner considered its constituent movements to be among his lightest works, simple in form and immediately appealing in ideas. The first of them, in E flat major, bears the marking *allegretto frescamente* and has the kind of freshness for which Medtner always strove in his piano-writing. A certain serene happiness runs through it, with a typically Medtnerian central section where the interest is in light-fingered *staccato* and crisp repeated notes – a toccata-like style. More obstreperous high spirits break out in the second piece, also in E flat, whose occasional rhythmic and tonal disruptions are eventually subsumed into a triumphant coda.

The third piece of the set, in F minor, used to be among Medtner's best-known works. The marking *narrante a piacere* points up the story-telling aspect of the music. It is based on a haunting melody, like a folk song, and in the middle section strays into some sombre tonal regions. When Medtner brings back the main tune it has shifted key, unexpectedly, to F sharp minor, which continues until the shimmering coda in which the melody disappears altogether amid beguiling figuration. F sharp minor then turns out to be the main key of the fourth and most extended of these *Skazki*, a dramatic and sometimes angry affair that puts two terse ideas, one plaintive, the other sardonic, into immediate opposition. Though the middle section introduces a charming lyric melody, it is the contest of the opening ideas that soon holds the stage again and drives to a climax in the furious final bars.

Apart from the *Skazka*, Medtner was passionately attached to the sonata principle: though he did not number his piano sonatas there are 17 in all, as well as three large-scale sonatas for violin and piano and a sonata for wordless voice and piano. Some of the piano sonatas are large-scale, multi-movement works, but most are in concise one-movement forms, in the tradition of Liszt's B minor Sonata and *Après une lecture de Dante* (and indeed of Russian contemporaries like Skryabin and Feinberg). Some of them are distinguished by key, but mostly they are singled out by title. Several were published in groups, or as members of larger cycles of pieces. The latter case was the origin of the ***Tragic Sonata***, *Op.39 No.5*, one of his best-known and most widely admired works. In 1919-20 Medtner composed three books of *Forgotten Melodies*, his opp. 38-40. Books I and II (Book III is slightly different) each contain several lyric pieces – and a one-movement sonata. The *Tragic Sonata*, chronologically speaking his eleventh piano sonata, is the culminating piece of the second book, a work of extraordinary concision and force, and a terrific, sombre utterance surely reflecting the troubled times that had come upon Russia in the wake of the 1917 Revolution. (Medtner would shortly go into exile for the remainder of his career.)

Seven brusque, irregularly spaced chords, like hammerblows, constitute a kind of 'Fate-motif' that gets the music underway in a passionate exposition. The key is an oppressive C minor, and there is an irresistible forward momentum, full of a feeling of *Sturm und Drang*. The second subject, when it arrives, is actually a major-key transformation of the opening idea, yet unexpectedly serene and reflective; and into this Medtner weaves a melancholy expressive song. This new theme is in fact a reference to one of the other pieces from *Forgotten Melodies Book II,* the *Canzona matinata*: Medtner regarded the Sonata and *Canzona* as two complementary pieces, the latter representing 'the hope of life' but the Sonata 'the reality of life'. The development section is almost drastically terse, beginning with a left-hand recitative in the bass and then combining fragments of the first subject with the *Canzona* theme. Before long it triggers the recapitulation, which incorporates a cadenza but moves with fateful inevitability to a tragic climax. The tempestuous coda out-does all that has gone before for virtuosity, and the sonata ends with the same uncompromising 'Fate-motif' which began it.

Medtner and Rachmaninoff were lifelong friends. Although Rachmaninoff is associated with a more opulent, romantic style than Medtner's, the music of his later years, after

he too had left Russia and was living abroad, has a new leanness and rhythmic concentration that in some ways parallels that of Medtner. The ***Variations on a Theme of Corelli***, *Op.42*, composed in 1931, was his last major solo piano work; and its leaner, crisper harmonic and contrapuntal idiom ushered in his final compositional phase, most famously showcased in the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* for piano and orchestra. Indeed the *Corelli Variations* seems in some respects a study for that later variation masterwork, foreshadowing many of its textures and cadential formulae. The theme comes from Corelli's Violin Sonata Op.5 No.1 – but the tune (on which Corelli himself provides variations) is in fact not his: it is the slow dance 'La Folia', ultimately of 16th-century Portuguese origin but traditionally associated with Spain and thus sometimes called *Les Folies d'Espagne*. (Liszt uses it in his *Rhapsodic Espagnole*, though he too perhaps derived it via Corelli.) Rachmaninoff wrote the work at a period when he was especially distressed at reports of conditions in Stalinist Russia, and his music was proscribed from performance there about the same time. Completed on 19 June 1931 and dedicated to Fritz Kreisler – who knew the Corelli theme well – the *Corelli Variations* was premiered by Rachmaninoff in Montreal on 12 October that year. He sent a copy of the work to Medtner, declaring flippantly that he was guided by the coughing of the audience in deciding how many of the variations actually to play in performance – but hoping that Medtner would play them all.

Rachmaninoff's work consists of 20 variations, with an Intermezzo placed between Nos. XIII and XIV, plus a coda. Individually quite short, the variations tend to group themselves into larger compositional units, extending and developing moods and features, and building up a coherent and concentrated structure (with plenty of distinctively Russian echoes, not least the chattering repeated notes of Variation X and the striding Mussorgskian bass of XII). Broadly speaking, most of the slow variations are grouped in the first half of the work and the faster ones in the second, though exceptions to these rules form highly effective contrasts, such as the incisive Variation V and the romantically melodious Variation XV – which creates much the same gorgeous effect (without aiming at the same kind of emotional climax) as the perennially popular 18th Variation of the *Paganini Rhapsody*. Tonally the work is anchored to Corelli's key of D minor, but there is a sumptuous effect of expansion after the Intermezzo, when the key shifts to D flat for two variations. The Intermezzo itself creates a kind of ruminative cadenza. After the dramatic and exciting build-up of the last few variations, the coda has the character of a regretful epilogue, dissolving the theme back into the mists of time whence it had emerged.

Like Medtner and Rachmaninoff, Sergei Prokofiev left Russia after the Revolution and spent years in self-imposed exile as a travelling virtuoso. But he never wholly lost touch with his friends in Moscow and Leningrad, and eventually returned in the early 1930s to live permanently in the USSR, where he brought perhaps his finest music to fruition despite the difficulties and frustrations imposed by state censorship and ideological criticism. His nine piano sonatas (two more were sketched but never completed) constitute the backbone of his copious output for piano. In 1939 he conceived a trilogy of sonatas, Nos. 6-8, with the consecutive opus numbers 82-84, which he worked on over the next few years: collectively they have come to be known as his 'war sonatas' and they constitute the peak of his output as a piano composer. **Piano Sonata No.6** in A major, Op.82, was the first to be completed, and was premiered by the composer on 8 April 1940 in a Moscow Radio broadcast; the public premiere occurred on 26 November at the hands of Sviatoslav Richter, who had previously attended a private performance by Prokofiev and come away dumbfounded by the work's 'barbaric audacity', as he confided to his diary.

The Sonata drew criticism from Party officials for its supposed 'brutality'. In some ways it harks back to the spiky, dissonant, mechanistic piano music of Prokofiev's youth, but it is in fact the most expansive and even Romantic in orientation of his piano sonatas, in this at least suggesting parallels with Rachmaninoff and Medtner. Although it was completed well before the USSR entered the war, the music surely reflects the tensions of the times, just as Medtner's *Tragic Sonata* reflects the post-Revolutionary foreboding at the time that it was composed. It opens with a motto-theme that is played with great force, based on a four-note descending pattern in

thirds that outlines the triads of both A major and A minor. This major-minor ambiguity, with the constant equivocation between C sharp and C natural, infuses the entire work. The first movement – one of the most turbulent utterances in Prokofiev's piano output – is especially, almost obsessively concerned with exploring this fundamental idea, with the motto-theme volleying back and forth in the highest and deepest resisters of the keyboard. Prokofiev seems to glory in extracting the most violent sounds that he can from the piano, including cluster-chords played with the fist: the grinding dissonances approach atonality. The general impression is of a mechanized march – perhaps an advance by a battalion of tanks, accompanied by gunfire and bombs – though in the later stages the mood calms somewhat and a much compressed recapitulation leads to a coda dominated by bell-like sonorities.

The ensuing *Allegretto* is a moderately paced scherzo with something of Prokofiev's characteristic mood of playful irony, though the playfulness is continually being undermined by darker elements. The main idea is again march-like, over *staccato* chords, though there is a more melodic central section. Nothing is more ironic than the ending on a pure unsullied triad of E major. There follows a melancholic waltz – Prokofiev's marking, *Tempo di valzer lentissimo*, suggests that it may be a Viennese waltz – worthy of his great ballet scores such as *Romeo and Juliet* in its kaleidoscopic harmonic colouring. It has an eerie, frozen sense of elegance. The finale, a rondo, returns to the harried, storm-tossed mood of the opening movement, with a frenetic interplay between wide-spanned themes and others that circle obsessively around a few close-knit notes. Eventually the major-minor motto theme reappears, after which the music drives at last to a violent, cathartic climax, with the motto-theme repeated over and over again until its final collapse. The barbaric march from the work's opening crowns the piece with a wrathful end.

Malcolm MacDonald

SOFYA GULYAK

Born in Kazan in 1979, Sofya Gulyak studied in a Special Music College, and then at the Kazan State Conservatoire under professor Elfiya Burnasheva. She went on to further study in Italy with Boris Petrushansky, and at the Royal College of Music in London with Vanessa Latarche.

In September 2009 Sofya became the first female winner of the prestigious Leeds International Piano Competition, also winning the Princess Mary Gold Medal. Sofya was also a prizewinner at the William Kapell International Piano Competition in the USA, the Maj Lind Helsinki International Piano Competition and the Tivoli Piano Competition in Copenhagen.

Sofya made her debut with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in 2010, and has performed with major orchestras and renowned conductors around the world, making regular appearances at International music festivals.

Honoured with the support of the Rostropovich Foundation and the Russian President Foundation, Sofya has also been on the jury panel at several International piano competitions; and her playing has been broadcast on radio and television in several countries.

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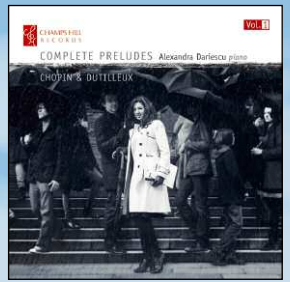

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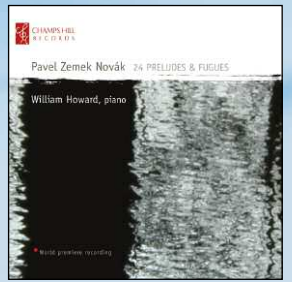

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