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Russian Music in Marc-André Hamelin's Performing Practice (Part 2): Nikolai Medtner's Sonatas

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Abstract. This article, which considers the performance art of Canadian pianist Marc-André Hamelin, continues the study of his interpretive approach to 20th-century Russian music that began in the previous issue of this journal. In this section, the author turns to the interpretation of sonatas by Nikolai Medtner, a composer whose work occupies a central place in Hamelin's performing repertoire. The pianist played and recorded all of Medtner's sonatas and two volumes of *Forgotten Motifs*, op. 38 and op. 39. Highlighting both similarities and differences in the musical preferences of both masters, the article notes in particular their commitment to polyphony and large-scale form. Special attention is paid to the polymelodism of Medtner's texture and its reflection in Hamelin's interpretation. The pianist builds his sound canvas according to the equality of voices, although often the accompaniment becomes a more striking element of the texture. Hamelin's timbre palette absorbs all the richness of the piano sound — from light *perlé* to deep *legatissimo*. The article also examines approaches to constructing performance form in sonatas. The logic of the construction of the cycle in Hamelin's interpretation is subject to the natural course of development, in which the dynamics depend on the transformation of the texture and the frequency of the change of harmonic events; at the end of the sonatas, an increase in the tempo is frequently encountered. The primary means of unifying form during performance becomes the revelation of recurring thematic intonations, as confirmed by a number of examples. In conclusion, it is noted that a lyrical element predominates in Hamelin's interpretation of the cycle of Medtner sonatas.

Keywords: Marc-André Hamelin, Nikolai Medtner, piano performance, piano style, interpretation of Nikolai Medtner's piano sonatas, performing individuality

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Русская музыка в исполнительском творчестве Марка-Андре Амлена (Часть II): Сонаты Николая Метнера

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена исполнительскому искусству канадского пианиста Марка-Андре Амлена и продолжает исследование его интерпретационного подхода к русской музыке XX века, начатое в предыдущем выпуске журнала. В данной части автор обращается к трактовке сонат Николая Метнера, композитора, чьё творчество занимает одно из центральных мест в исполнительском репертуаре Амлена. Пианист сыграл и записал все сонаты Метнера и две тетради «Забытых мотивов» ор. 38 и ор. 39. В статье обозначаются точки сходства и различия в музыкальных пристрастиях обоих мастеров, в частности отмечается их приверженность к полифонии и крупной форме. Особое внимание уделяется полимелодизму метнеровской фактуры и его отражению в интерпретации Амлена. Пианист выстраивает звуковое полотно на равноправии голосов, хотя нередко сопровождение становится у него более ярким элементом фактуры. Тембровая палитра Амлена вбирает всё богатство фортепианного звучания — от лёгкого *perle* до глубокого *legatissimo*. В статье рассматриваются также подходы к созданию исполнительской формы сонат. Логика построения цикла в интерпретации Амлена подчиняется естественному ходу развития, в котором динамика зависит от преобразования фактуры и частоты смены гармонических событий, в завершении сонат нередко происходит увеличение скорости темпа. Главным средством объединения формы в процессе исполнения сочинений становится выявление сквозных тематических интонаций, что подтверждено рядом примеров. В заключение отмечается, что в трактовке цикла метнеровских сонат у Амлена преобладает лирическое начало.

Ключевые слова: Марк-Андре Амлен, Николай Метнер, фортепианное исполнительство, фортепианная стилистика, интерпретация фортепианных сонат Николая Метнера, исполнительская индивидуальность

I don't see many real and sincere musicians around me.
It seems as if you are the only one left...

*From a letter from S.V. Rachmaninoff to N.K. Medtner,
December 28, 1921, New York¹*

Introduction

The popularity of Nikolai Medtner's piano music has grown significantly in the last two decades: dissertation research by Ekaterina

Predvechnova [1] and Vladimir Budnikov [2] have appeared, as well as a collection of articles entitled *Unforgotten Motives* edited by Elena Dolinskaya [3]; major festivals and competitions

¹ Letters from Sergei Rachmaninoff to Nikolai Medtner. 28.12.1921, New York.
URL: <https://senar.ru/letters/577?ysclid=mli3vrnphm318577381> (accessed: 20.02.2026).

have been held, such as the Medtner Marathon festival at the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music and the International Competition in Memory of N.K. Medtner in St. Petersburg. It thus seems as if the long-term lack of interest in the composer's work has started to be properly addressed by musicologists. Vladimir Tropp, an ardent admirer of Medtner, in his article "Towards Medtner" reveals the troubled performance legacy of his works. [Ibid., pp. 269–287] Researchers have identified certain objective facts that explain the longstanding undervaluation of Medtner's stature in Russia, including his lengthy emigration and the far greater popularity of his contemporaries, primarily Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. While it is well known that Rachmaninoff actively patronised Medtner, using his authority to promote both the latter's performing career and his compositions, he was unable to help his friend achieve the status of a famous musician. Moreover, Nikolai Karlovich himself did not contribute to this. A brilliant pianist, he gave preference in concert programmes in most cases only to his own compositions.² His position on new music, as set out in his book, *The Muse and the Fashion*, was in a sense a challenge to reality. His quixotic and reverent service to the ideals of beauty, the pursuit of artistic and professional perfection — these unpopular and unfashionable (at all times) qualities of the composer became the main reason for his work being alienated from a wider audience, but paradoxically have also turned out to be a point of attraction for many. "Medtner's music doesn't captivate you with its immediate emotionality,

but rather is perceived as if 'from within'," notes Tatyana Malikova. "It can be compared to an intelligent, deep, but not entirely easy to understand book, to which one must sometimes return to reread in order to fully comprehend the thoughts hidden in it." [5, p. 280] Indeed, its inner beauty and sincerity, organisation and naturalness, its intelligence and simplicity are not attainable by every performer, as confirmed by the rather modest (even today) discography of Medtner's works.

The Canadian pianist and composer Marc-André Hamelin is one of the few performers to have recorded all of the composer's sonatas and two opuses of *Forgotten Motifs* (op. 38 and op. 39), as well as his Second Piano Concerto. His perception of Medtner's music appears to be devoid of any external influences; rather, it is completely direct and subject to artistic intuition.³ At the same time, his performance contains everything that is characteristic of Medtner's music: melodiousness, breadth and simplicity of the "horizon" of the phrase, restrained intonation culture, as well as its distinct national Russian flavour, which is expressed in improvisation, in simple dance movements, in the heartfelt, direct conversation of melodic lines, and in the emotional power of harmonic conjugations. However, what is most important is that the lightness, spontaneity and liveliness of the performance give his interpretations a natural flow of music and accessibility to perception. Hamelin's statements about Medtner are similar to the views of many Russian musicologists: "...But the problem is that with most performances he

² The following lines from Medtner's letter to Alfred Swann (August 1929, Montmorency) are indicative: "But to prepare a whole programme of other people's compositions plus some skazkas ["fairy tales"] of the undersigned, without intending to use this programme for other concerts, would probably be too much... and in this case I would have to refuse the concert." [4, p. 42]

³ Medtner himself refers to the expression "artistic intuition" when he discusses performance: "And isn't the historical era (with which, by the way, most great artists are not on good terms) comprehended by us, artists, primarily through artistic intuition and precisely through a work of art." [3, p. 204]

will not generally reveal himself to the listener at the first hearing. He really demands and repays repeated hearings.” [6, p. 139] It is obvious that Hamelin is close to the composer’s musical world, as well as understanding his language and compositional solutions, while at the same time he is fascinated by new images and a new sense of the instrumentality of the piano.

Medtner and Hamelin: the Unity of Opposites

As well as the two musicians having many things in common, there are also many aspects that separate Hamelin and Medtner’s artistry. For example, the pianist notes that Medtner’s religiosity is completely alien to him, thus hinting that their spiritual and vital interests are hardly related. [Ibid., p. 170] However, the artists’ musical preferences largely coincide. For example, a love for “counterpoint,” for polyphony in the broadest sense, which manifests itself both in the choice of repertoire and in one’s own compositional technique. Hamelin’s concert programmes include some of the most complex works created in polyphonic genres: Leopold Godowsky’s *Passacaglia*, Ferruccio Busoni’s *Canonical Variations and Fugue*, and Max Reger’s *Preludes and Fugues*. Here, it should be noted that this approach to polyphony was nurtured in the artistic soil of Romanticism. The same applies to Hamelin’s own *Prelude and Fugue*, which was written, by his own admission, under the influence of Sergei Taneyev’s *Prelude and Fugue*, Samuel Barber’s *Sonata for Piano*, and Ferruccio Busoni’s *Fourth Piano Concerto*. The pianist himself admits that his pieces are extremely difficult to perform. The interest in textural density, of course, reveals Hamelin’s virtuosity gene, a craving for unusual complexities, but here they

are by no means technical in nature, but rather auditory. In one interview, the musician said that he has a record on which all 15 symphonies of Dmitry Shostakovich are combined in parallel.⁴ This seems an absurd undertaking, at least to the average ear. While for a professional, finding familiar meanings in such a “terrifying” cacophony seems like an interesting challenge, it seems unlikely that such a record could ever have ended up in Medtner’s possession.

Elements of Hamelin’s repertoire would also not have received the approbation of the Russian composer. For example, as is well known, Medtner was not a big fan of French music. Conversely, the works of Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Gabriel Fauré have been a constant feature of Hamelin’s concert career. Their echoes are easy to “hear” in his interpretations of Medtner’s works — in the flying passages and fluttering arpeggiations. This light, airy manner raises no doubts, but neither does it provoke rejection. In general, Hamelin’s performing style is characterised by not overloading the texture, but, on the contrary, making it as clear and understandable as possible. This is consistent with Medtner’s recommendations for the *Idyllic Sonata*: “Play everything more *easily*, without pressure, *without excessive expression*, emphasis, temperament, and so on <...> Let the music *sound itself*! Do not interfere! (author’s emphasis. — *I.S.*)” [7, p. 27]

American and Austrian music, which is similarly alien to Medtner, is represented in Hamelin’s repertoire by its most striking examples: a sonata by Charles Ives, a sonata by Pierre Boulez, a sonata by Alban Berg, works by Kaikhosru Sorabji,⁵ various pieces by Stefan Wolpe, and etudes by William Bolcom.

⁴ Ethan Iverson. Interview with Marc-André Hamelin. URL: <https://ethaniverson.com/interviews/interview-with-marc-andre-hamelin/> (accessed: 20.02.2026).

⁵ It is clear from his own compositional oeuvre that Hamelin was a great admirer of Nikolai Medtner.

This factor might suggest that his contact with the complex rhythms of the 20th century allows the pianist to feel more at ease with traditional material, as well as applying to Medtner's very specific approach to metrical organisation. The naturalness with which Hamelin constructs Medtner's large periods, which are variable in metre and internal pulse, is, in the view of the present author, a result of his engagement not with Romantic music, but with the most recent compositions requiring special rhythmic discipline combined with inner freedom. Irina Skvortsova defines Medtner's rhythm as "an interwoven, refined modern material <...>, which is characterised by the use of 'sharp' rhythmic combinations, polyrhythm, complex metres, and free handling of the bar line." [3, p. 161] Indeed, in most of the performances of the main parts in Hamelin's interpretation, it is impossible to "hear" the bar line. What is of key importance to the pianist is "expression of the motive." This is especially clearly manifested in the chord presentation, for example, in all the main parts of the sonata triad, and in the third part of the Sonata-Tale. This approach is consistent with Metner's ideas. In his methodological recommendations, the composer often advised playing more as a whole, in a single line of movement, developing the absence of accents and increased levelling. [7, p. 13, 21, 29] Playing the whole piece over and over again, measuring the details and tempo shifts — for Hamelin, this is a typical way of working, often without an instrument.

But perhaps most of all, the musicians are united by their passion for sonata form. Although Hamelin the composer did not write a single work in the sonata genre,⁶ the sonata

"giants" occupy a prominent place in his performing repertoire: Symphony for Solo Piano by Charles Alkan, Sonata in *B major* by Franz Schubert, as well as piano concertos by Dmitry Shostakovich, Rodion Shchedrin, Johannes Brahms, Ferruccio Busoni, and many others. The pianist can confidently be counted among the masters of this major form, but with his own understanding and approach. For Hamelin, the form of writing is, first and foremost, a path, a way, a fascinating journey. He does not strive to base his interpretation on a particular dramatic plan; rather, he is a pianist-storyteller, a narrator, and how the story will end should be a mystery to the listener. This position is close to Metner's views. "For fruitful artistic work, a sense of pleasure and savour is essential!" wrote the Russian composer. "<...> It is necessary to *constantly change the sound*, touch, technique, and methods!! Never *become stagnant* in anything! (author's emphasis. — *I.S.*)." [Ibid., p. 19] "If we approach a tree to select a suitable plank or go out into a field only to find medicinal herbs, then we will not see the beauty of either the tree itself or the fields themselves." [8, p. 148]

In 1998, Hamelin released all of Nikolai Medtner's sonatas on the Hyperion label; in 2006, opp. 38 and 39 appeared on the same label. He also participated in proofreading the text for the American publisher Dover's reissue of the sonatas and tales, and wrote a brief preface for them.

It should be noted that such a serious passion for Medtner became part of a larger interest in Russian music;⁷ it was perhaps in this wider sense that Hamelin more clearly discovered the facets of Medtner's pianism.

⁶ The large form in his compositional work is represented by two cycles of variations and two suite cycles.

⁷ In this sense, he is distinguished for example, from pianists Hamish Milne and Geoffrey Tozer, who specialise exclusively in the works of Nikolai Medtner.

Colouristics and Textural Discoveries of Marc-André Hamelin

In his essay on Medtner's compositional technique, Nikolai Myaskovsky characterises the composer's music as "colourless, unpicturesque," identifying this very "colourlessness" as a "bright feature" of all his work. [3, p. 40, 44] Boris Asafiev expresses a similar point of view. More than a century later, Anna Shtrom entered into polemics with Myaskovsky and Asafiev. In her study of Medtner's vocal works, she drew attention to the richness of his sound-painting elements and the role of the performer in revealing them. [9, p. 14] However, perhaps the authoritative musicians were not so wrong in their characterisations of colourlessness. Medtner, a brilliant pianist himself, placed very high demands on future performers of his compositions, understanding that they would become co-authors of his music. "Colouring" the musical fabric of his works is not an easy task. To use Medtner's expressions, one will need "the rail of imagination" and its corresponding "technical device," "more subtle artistic work," [and] one will have to "work more with shadings. Exercise in aural immersion. Search for the finest nuances." [7, p. 20]

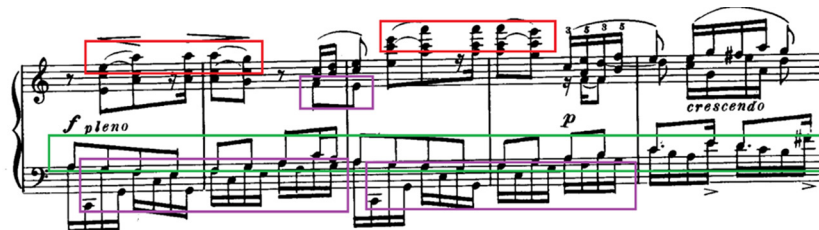
Anyone who writes about Medtner's piano writing draws attention to the exceptional density of its texture, its characteristic "contrapuntalism," as Nikolai Myaskovsky and Alexander Goldenweiser put it. Zhitomirsky notes that Medtner tends to thicken the musical,

often dissonant, fabric with all sorts of non-chord notes, intertwining voices. [10, p. 325–326] The composer places the voices close together, weaving meaningful melodic elements into the middle of the textural layer. In this regard, one might say that he perceives the instrument as a Baroque composer would, ensuring fluidity in the development of material through all manner of imitations and strettos within a single register, whilst dynamics naturally depend upon the density of the texture itself and the number of voices.

In most such episodes, Hamelin is in no hurry to bring out one of the voices or make the entry of a motif in another voice more prominent; what matters to him is preserving the overall movement and transparency as such — that is, the decisive factor for him is creating conditions under which the listener will have time to perceive this musical fabric as polymelodic, to sense the beauty of the interweaving rather than the density of the sonic space. Of course, depending on the material, the technical solution may vary, but all such episodes share one thing in common — Hamelin does not give preference to any single voice; on the contrary, he may even allow one of them to be slightly "lost," merely hinting at it in the sonic space, whereby such episodes acquire a shimmering, mobile character. An illustration is provided in the main part of the Piano Sonata in *C major* op. 11 No. 3 (Example No. 1). The fact that none of the lines prevails over the others is justified by the logic of the first presentation

Example No. 1

Nikolai Medtner. Piano Sonata in *C Major* op. 11 No. 3.
First movement, mm. 7–11



of the theme. Hamelin makes the listener “work”: to catch the internal movement of the fabric or, perhaps, to hear his or her own version. From the point of view of interaction with the listener, this is a striking technique.

Polymelodism is natural for Hamelin; the pianist cannot choose his voice, but is rather “enchanted” by their interweaving. The theme of the introduction to the Sonata-Memories immediately comes to mind: the sounds float freely, immersing the listener in a meditative state.

Another approach is observed in the development of the Piano Sonata in *G minor* op. 22. Here, Hamelin, throughout a large construction of a fluid polymelodic canvas (Example No. 2a), first emphasises the linearity in the two-part voice, which is reinforced by polyrhythm (Example No. 2b); however, at the culmination, he moves away from the melodic mode to emphasise the colourful harmonic space. By drawing attention to each chord, the melody fulfils the function of a link between the chords, a kind of “pedal” (Example No. 2c).

The very same “graphicity” of texture noted by many researchers, including Myaskovsky, is not always interpreted by Hamelin as an attempt to isolate each voice. In places where one might choose between melody and harmony, Hamelin accords preference to the latter; his responsive attention to timbral colour changes even enlarges the movement and pace of certain episodes, as exemplified by the main theme of Piano Sonata in *E minor* op. 25 No. 2.

The question presents itself: what becomes of the “unifying thread of melody-as-theme”? [7, p. 25] Here we can turn to the words of Medtner himself: “The theme is not always and

Example No. 2 Nikolai Medtner. Piano Sonata in *G minor* op. 22

a) mm. 101–102



b) mm. 110–112



c) mm. 119–120



only a melody. It is more than a melody, for, as Bach proved in his fugues and Beethoven in his symphonies, it has the ability to transform, as it were, the most complex construction of form into a continuous melody.” [8, p. 48]

Indicative in this regard is the Piano Sonata in *D minor* op. 11 No. 2, which is titled *Elegy*. Here Hamelin strives for a complete fusion of melody and accompanying voices, for the primacy of harmony — and this becomes the basis according to which he builds the line. This is facilitated by its special pianistic characteristic — the complete symmetry of the apparatus, when the pianist feels both hands as one.⁸ It is precisely the precision of the simultaneous playing and legato of chords that gives the music depth, fullness, and penetration.⁹

⁸ It is known that Hamelin paid a lot of attention to the left-handed repertoire, which contributed to this symmetrical feeling.

⁹ A completely different feeling of this space is presented in the recording by Maria Yudina. The pianist interprets this sonata in a multi-voice manner, clearly revealing each element.

In this case, we are talking about a two-by-three arrangement, where only the first chord coincides and the pedal plays a major role. At the climax, where all the consonances do not coincide due to the tied notes, the effect of the “break” of the hands makes a strong impression (Example No. 3).

In Marc-André Hamelin’s playing, Medtner’s piano texture often appears in a form where the melody and accompaniment

form a single line, where the theme resembles a hidden voice — sometimes more clearly revealing itself, sometimes disappearing in a stream of small durations.¹⁰ In the notes this is not obvious, instead often appearing as melody and accompaniment. One of the many examples is the first movement of the Sonata-Tale in *C minor* op. 25 No. 1 (Examples Nos. 4, a, b and c). Hamelin strives to position the two voices as closely as possible in terms of dynamics

Example No. 3

Nikolai Medtner. Sonata-Elegy op. 11 No. 2, mm. 70–71



Example No. 4

Nikolai Medtner. Sonata-Tale in *C minor* op. 25 No. 1

a) Exposition, primary theme group, mm. 8–9



b) Exposition, transition, mm. 22–24



c) Recapitulation, subsidiary theme, mm. 79–80



¹⁰ We may call it antiphonal by analogy with antiphony in choral music, which implies singing that is performed by two choirs not for the purpose of creating polyphony, but rather to carry long notes from one voice to another.

and articulation, which adds fluidity to the flow of durations. The melody is passed from hand to hand, from register to register, giving the music an elemental, shimmering, magical quality.

But perhaps one of Hamelin's most striking discoveries in the field of colouristics is his special approach to the accompanying material. Often it is this element that provides the theme with the necessary character and tone. The accompanying voices do not create a background, a second plan, a perspective; rather, they become fully-fledged participants in the main action. Strictly speaking, it is difficult to find exclusively accompanying voices in Medtner. The musical texture of his compositions is filled with characteristic lines of equal duration and movement along chord tones or scale tones. In addition, there are episodes where the accompaniment is clearly separated from the main theme due to a register gap (in the later sonatas, the "specific weight" of the accompaniment increases).

Hamelin never "hides" the accompaniment, instead making its sound as expressive as possible, especially in terms of articulation (rather than dynamics). This is facilitated by the diversity in the presentation of the accompanying voices, which creates many difficulties for the performers. For example, in the *Introduzione* from the first movement of the Piano Sonata in *E minor* op. 25 No. 2, the accompanying part initially develops independently.¹¹ Gradually, its descending intonation (Example No. 5a) is and expansively transformed into longer constructions. Hamelin plays the accompanying voices with great difficulty, with an overpowering effort, as if afraid of losing every harmonic vertical, so that at some point the accompaniment comes to the fore without melody (Example No. 5b).

Example No. 5

Nikolai Medtner. Piano Sonata in *E minor*
op. 25 No. 2. First movement

a) *Introduzione*, m. 10b) *Introduzione*, m. 16

In the main theme, the accompaniment — whilst preserving the note values and, in part, the melodic contour — transforms the character of the music into something light and scherzo-like through the change of articulation to staccato (Example No. 6a). Hamelin plays the accompanying voices at first *portamento*, then more sharply, thus drawing attention to the change taking place. The transition is built on sixteenth notes, the melody and accompaniment in it begin to converge, forming at a certain moment a single line (Example No. 6b). After this, the accompanying voices are plunged into chaotic movement due to the uneven metrics; this "vortex" comes to the fore here as the most striking element (Example No. 6c). The subsidiary theme is presented with the chords played *legato*, which seems a logical conclusion.

¹¹ This sonata has become rather popular lately; while all its performers try to play the accompaniment in relation to the melody as an equal textural layer, none of its interpreters has achieved the parity achieved by Hamelin.

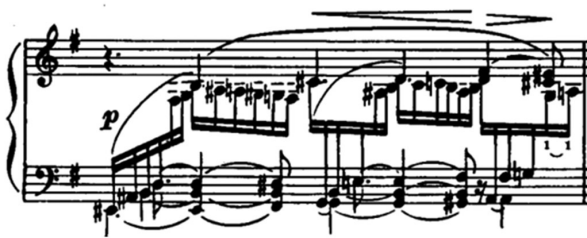
Example No. 6

Nikolai Medtner. Piano Sonata in *E minor*
op. 25 No. 2. First movement

a) Exposition, Primary theme group, mm. 28–29



b) Transition, m. 58



c) Transition, m. 64



Let us stipulate that the melodic material, as a whole, does not lose its primacy, but at the same time the surrounding voices are by no means secondary. While in the no less interesting interpretations by Evgeny Svetlanov (the “pedagogical grandson” of Nikolai Medtner), Evgeny Kissin and Emil Gilels, the melody occupies a much larger place, Hamelin seems to encourage the listener to return to this music in the future in order to better “examine” all the “projections.”

Hamelin’s timbral playing highlights the variety of textural patterns within each sonata. Of course, such finishing is a characteristic of the pianist’s virtuoso thinking. Vladimir Budnikov, in his dissertation research dedicated to the timbrality of the piano texture of Medtner’s works, characterises the composer’s musical fabric as a projection of four elements — aqua-texture, terra-texture, aero-texture and ignis-texture — and linking them with the figurative content of the works. [2] In the context of Hamelin’s performance art, a connection could be made with each of the types mentioned above; however, the pianist follows a different trajectory: he is interested in the dynamics of change and transformation of the material, not only as a performer, but also as a composer. In an interview with *Steinway* magazine, he notes: “Take the *Night Wind* Sonata: It’s thirty-three minutes long, and there are tons of little things in there that the listener may not catch — but they add up to something truly great. It’s not usually the thematic material in Medtner that is arresting; it’s what he does with it. The transformational resource is endlessly fascinating to me.”¹²

In Hamelin’s interpretation, the phonic effects become particularly distinct, while the pianist is not “held back” within the framework outlined by the composer himself. Thus, he strives for a vivid juxtaposition of registers, which for the most part is not between the lower and upper registers, but rather between the middle and the edges. An example of this appears in the primary theme group of the Piano Sonata in *F minor* op. 5. In the Sonata *Minacciosa* op. 53 No. 2, the register juxtaposition takes on a sound-pictorial effect, associating it with the booming rumbles of thunder and lightning (Example No. 7a). When moving passages

¹² Bambarger B. Marc-André Hamelin reveals the unexpected.

URL: <https://www.steinway.com/news/features/marc-andre-hamelin> (accessed: 17.02.2026).

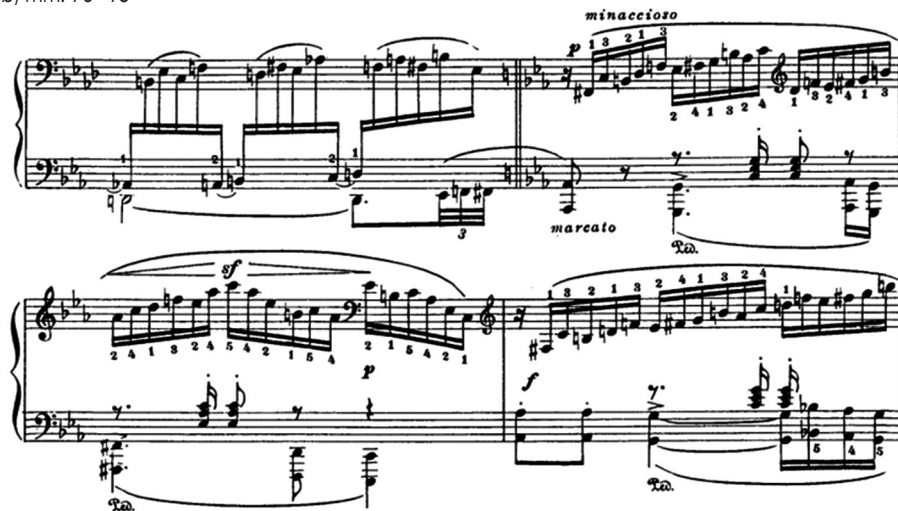
Example No. 7

Nikolai Medtner. *Sonata Minacciosa* op. 53 No. 2

a) mm. 18–20



b) mm. 90–93



quickly from one end of the keyboard to the other (Example No. 7b), Hamelin does not strive to articulate every note.

In one of the fragments of the Sonata-Idyll (mm. 71–74) an association with birdsong is created, which corresponds to the title of the movement — *Pastoral*. In the Sonata in *E minor* *Night Wind* op. 25 No. 2 (Medtner) invokes the sound of bells in a reference to Rachmaninoff, to whom this work is dedicated.

And yet, for the most part, Medtner — and after him Hamelin — gravitate towards the so-called “pianoforte” expression. This is expressed in the predominant *legato* stroke in all its gradations from *perlé* to deep — “like in swamp boots” [7, p. 18] — immersion into the instrument. Medtner’s most intimate themes sound monophonic in the left hand *legato* against the background of an accompaniment

of sixteenth notes in the right (the coda of the first part of the Sonata-Tale; the episode “Stentando” in the Piano Sonata in *E minor* op. 25 No. 2) and are perceived as exceptions in a diverse series of contrapuntal episodes. Often these are quiet, meaningful culminations, beauty in all its naturalness and simplicity (such as, for example, the second subsidiary theme in the Sonata *Reminiscenza* op. 38 No. 1, Example No. 8).

Example No. 8

Nikolai Medtner. Sonata *Reminiscenza*
op. 38 No. 1.
Second subsidiary theme, mm. 61–64



The Sonata-Elegy, the Sonata Reminiscenza, and the Sonata-Idyll are played by the pianist with a predominance of the *legato* stroke, with small digressions in the dance episodes of the second subsidiary themes. The German researcher of Medtner's work, Christoph Flamm, draws attention to the fact that cantabile in Medtner's sonatas has a specific, non-song-like, but rather philosophical-dialectical or narrative character. According to him, in Medtner's music "true simplicity is not afraid of being banal." [11, p. 136] Hamelin is also not afraid to be simple or banal, using a small arsenal of performing tools in these works, but revealing them to the fullest.

Hamelin's Virtuosity as the Key to Medtner's Form

In the context of "performance form-building,"¹³ Medtner's thematicism can scarcely be overestimated. "Medtner considered thematic development to be a 'unifying thread' that subordinates the composer's work," noted Isaac Zetel. "In his works one will not find any 'commonplaces' — the main attention here is concentrated on the substantive and organic development of musical ideas." [4, p. 68] It is impossible not to notice that his musical expressions are distinguished by emotional restraint, a musical "chasteness," which is expressed in a careful, refined attitude to the range of intonation symbols. Elena Dolinskaya believes that "the specific quality of Medtner's thematics is the laconism and completeness of each thought. The composer frequently employs compressed theme-calls, theme-chants, and theme-epigraphs, which become the initial melodic impulse of a composition.

<...> A typical feature of lyrical thematism is a certain pitch-lockedness of the theme-grain: the composer often limits the melody to either a fifth or an octave range." [13, p. 169, 171]

Hamelin is both sensitive to the transformations of thematic development and at the same time selective. In each composition he strives to discover a "skeletal" intonation that will stand out throughout large sections. In the interpretation of each sonata one can hear such an intonation, for example, the chant from the transition of the Sonata-Ballade op. 27 (Examples Nos. 9, a, b and c).

Example No. 9

Nikolai Medtner. Sonata-Ballade op. 27.
Transition

a) mm. 32–33



b) mm. 101



c) mm. 125



¹³ The term, which was introduced and developed in Olga Kiseleva's dissertation research "Principles of Piano Performance Formation," [12] implies the role of the performer in creating the form. The complex of tempo-rhythmic, dynamic, articulatory, and timbre means concretises the form of the composition, recreating the composer's intention.

Hamelin, in a Baroque style, slightly emphasises the first metrically weak note in this motif; it is this note that catches the listener's ear. By placing such intonational accents, the pianist achieves a cohesive development of the material. This formative technique was discussed in the previous article in the present series when analysing Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3. It seems that the choice of active intonation and the performance arrangement of its most noticeable manifestations is far from a spontaneous decision of the pianist. This intonation sounds especially convincing before fugue episodes, in which it takes on the thematic function; accordingly, the fugue becomes the logical culmination of the development. This happens, for example, in the Sonata-Ballade and the Sonata tragica in *C minor* op. 39 No. 5.

The enormous importance of thematic connections in the performance of Medtner's sonatas is primarily noted by piano teachers. Evgeniya Tarasova writes: "Observing the growth of a future theme from the seed of the previous one, their close interconnection..., determining the 'specific weight' of each theme and its role in the construction of the melodic 'tree' of the work — and therefore *in the construction of form* — is a process that can enrich creative searches. <...> Let us repeat: it is desirable that all these thematic twists and turns be noticed by the interpreter at the very beginning of the work... (mine italics. — *I.S.*)" [14, p. 13, 19] She is echoed by Evgeniya Vasyutinskaya: "The main task of the pianist ... is to 'pull' the main material to the surface of the oversaturated texture." [15, p. 104]

Often, the finales of the composer's sonatas contain the entire thematic content (Sonata tragica, Sonata in *G minor* op. 22). Hamelin strives in his performance to prepare the listener for the final section, drawing attention to the characteristic intonation turns of each theme throughout the sonata. In the Sonata

tragica, the dotted-rhythm intonation literally "permeates" the entire form, binding the themes together with its vivid exclamation (Examples No. 10, a and b). The pianist, as a rule, tries to maintain even the tempo.

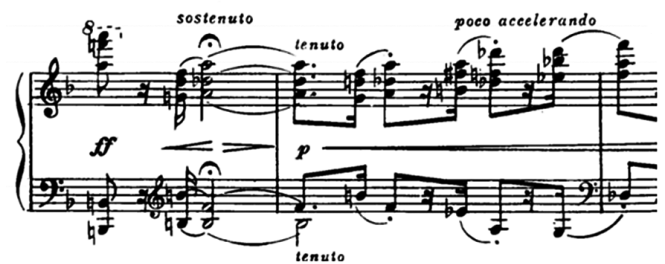
Example No. 10

Nikolai Medtner. Sonata Minacciosa
op. 53 No. 2

a) Primary theme group, mm. 1–2



b) Coda, mm. 422–423



The forms in the composer's sonatas encourage researchers to turn to extra-musical sources, seeking parallels from the fields of philosophy, poetry and drama. Based on her analysis of the compositional semantics of the sonatas, their philosophical and poetic program and existential symbolic images, Ekaterina Predvechnova comes to a conclusion about the "synthetic and symphonic nature of the composer's thinking." [16, p. 176] In her analytical studies, Evgeniya Vasyutinskaya draws attention to the deep penetration of the poetic into his musical text, as well as to the close connection of the sonatas with the works in this same genre by Franz Liszt, Alexander Scriabin and the ballads of Frédéric Chopin. [15, p. 106] None of the authors

ignores the two most important features of the works: their narrative character, which is generated precisely by the poetic, ballad-like, programmatic nature, and, at the same time, the completeness of the concept and form. As Tamara Levaya notes, Medtner's way of thinking was fundamentally antinomic: "...the composer implies unity and multiplicity, homogeneity and diversity, simplicity and complexity, rest and movement, contemplation and action — commenting on them in a special scheme,¹⁴ and later developing these antitheses in relation to the musical material itself." [17, p. 3] Christoph Flamm interprets this idea somewhat differently but in relation to performance — in his opinion, with regard to the piano sound of Medtner's works, "beauty is created in his art, first of all, not by extremes, but by balance." [11, p. 137] In the opinion of the present author, Hamelin's interpretations represent precisely the balance of means, the precision of all details, which is impossible without the highest degree of mastery — that is to say, virtuosity. In fact, this balance also is virtuosity — the precision of the proportions of each element in time and sound space, that very beauty.

The tempo balance is most obvious. Following the logic of the poetic through-composed development, Hamelin most often noticeably increases the tempo towards the end of the work. For this reason, Medtner's music sounds faster in Hamelin's interpretation than in that of other performers. The only exception is the *Night Wind* Sonata, which he plays the slowest of all (which confirms that speed is not an end in itself for him). The codas of the *tragica*, *romantica*, and *minacciosa* ("stormy") Sonatas are the moments of release of emotions and feelings. Although the pianist does not hold back, the way he voices the

entire texture is simply amazing. The denser the musical fabric, the less tone pedal he uses in favour of the precision of the lines. Medtner edited his works in great detail, so Hamelin is precise here. However, if, for example, the accompanying voices are presented in even and fast durations, he can allow himself a certain degree of rhythmic freedom in those places where the harmonic vertical changes more often (without drawing attention to the melody — that is, the melody does not force him to slow down). In those places where the accompaniment becomes sophisticated (hemiolas, polyrhythm, frequent changes in metric content), the pianist strictly adheres to the tempo and meter.

Hamelin is clearly captivated by Medtner's constant rhythmic "play." The composer seems to do everything to make the bar line imperceptible to the ear. This is facilitated by the sophisticated motivic organisation of the themes, the discrepant metrics in the hand parts, increased attention to weak beats, the absence of bass (especially in the early sonatas), and the constantly changing texture. As an experienced performer, Hamelin looks for the longest line in this flow (often accompanying) and does not overload the semantic lines with accents, despite the fact that in Medtner's text there is an abundance of dashes, wedges, check marks, *sf*, playing the lines of sixteenth notes as evenly as possible; the more chromatic the part of the passage is, the more evenly the pianist performs it.

The most crucial balance is maintained in dynamics and *touché*. Hamelin's huge dynamic "breath" is clearly noticeable in his interpretation of Medtner's works. It follows the dynamic transformation of the text itself, since any thickening or lightening of the texture naturally increases or decreases the strength of the sound. In this case, we are talking not

¹⁴ Here, Levaya is referring to Medtner's book *The Muse and the Fashion*.

only about the number of voices, but also about the compaction of space through chords or different types of double notes or repetitions. Hamelin strives not to overload the space before the highest point of dynamic development is reached. Very indicative in this regard is the culmination in the Sonata-Elegy, where, despite *ff* in the powerful chord texture, only one dissonant delay to the second low degree (in the upper register without bass) pierces the entire phrase at *sf*.

It is very typical in Medtner for expansion of texture to be used as a dynamic means. If in the early sonatas this is not so noticeable, then, starting with the *tragica*, such “dynamics” can be seen in every sonata.

Let us turn to the subsidiary theme of the second movement of the Sonata-Idyll op. 56 (Example No. 11).

Hamelin plays this episode very carefully, using only microdynamics, adding sound carefully, and drawing the listener’s attention

Example No. 11

Nikolai Medtner. Sonata-Idyll op. 56.
Second movement, subsidiary theme, mm. 77–92

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece, specifically the subsidiary theme of the second movement of Sonata-Idyll op. 56 by Nikolai Medtner. The score is presented in four systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system begins with the instruction 'dolcissimo' and 'pp' (pianissimo), followed by 'cantando' and 'una corda'. The second system includes 'poco a poco cresc.' (poco a poco crescendo) and 'tre corde'. The third system features 'cresc.' (crescendo) and 'Ta (longa)'. The fourth system is marked 'poco largamente, risonante' (poco largamente, risonante) and 'legatissimo'. The score concludes with 'pp' (pianissimo). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

to harmonic changes. At first, the opposite movement of the extreme voices naturally leads to an increase in sonority. Then a second-inversion supertonic chord sounds, spread over two octaves. On the one hand, the intense harmonic movement is suspended for two measures, while on the other, a large number of sounds, including non-chord ones, fall into the only pedal here, which creates a dissonant long accent. The hand parts diverge even more: the arpeggiated movement in the left hand in sixteenth notes (and not eighth notes, as was the case earlier) dynamically prevails over the third passage in the right, which creates the very *crescendo* that is indicated in the notes. At the end of the phrase, the voices break down widely across registers. By exposing each of them, Hamelin achieves the effect *f* not by adding sound, but by revealing the number of voices.

In this case, the pianist does not use linear dynamics, but a kind of “deep,” differentiating fabric that creates a perspective that allows the sound field to expand and be filled with detail. And Hamelin uses this dynamic as the main approach in his interpretations. It should be noted that such an approach is connected with the depth of auditory perception inherent in composers and conductors. Using this approach, the pianist more often does not increase the sonority, but even reduces it, in order to better voice the entire score, especially in moments when the registers are filled with voices very densely. But one also always feels that there is a kind of “air” in its texture that allows the ear to separate one element from another. In the words of Christoph Flamm, “the composer seems to go beyond the limits of the instrument: not like Rachmaninoff, by taking it to its utmost limits, and not like Scriabin, by extreme refinement, but by rejecting the generally accepted vocabulary, by spiritualisation.” [11, p. 143]

Conclusion

To summarise, let us emphasise once again that Medtner “did not pave an easy path” to the performance of his music — in his compositions there is no overt emotionality, vivid contrast of themes, clear generic affiliation of dance-like interpolations, exact repetitions, familiar accompanying patterns, and so forth. His piano universe is imbued with multi-voice melodicism, rhythmic fantasy and inventiveness of pianistic texture. This world, like a “frost pattern on glass,” is at once complex, natural and incomprehensible, born as if of its own accord.

In Marc-André Hamelin’s interpretation, Medtner’s music reveals its enormous sound-expressive potential: register, dynamic, timbre-harmonic, textural, articulatory. For the pianist, the thematic content of each sonata is a fascinating compositional journey, with many discoveries in the area of transformation of the material and its arrangement in space. Hamelin’s technical mastery literally “uncovers” hidden “corners” in the composer’s sonatas: codas, fugue culminations, and intricate developmental episodes. But what is most important is that, the closer Hamelin gets to the desired sonic embodiment, the brighter and more natural in movement the technical manifestation turns out to be. The musician notes Medtner’s “exceptional pianism,” supporting his assertion with the words of Sergei Prokofiev that “Medtner has everything at his fingertips.” [18, p. 19] It seems to us that Marc-André Hamelin’s interpretations not only reveal new facets of Nikolai Medtner’s music, but also force us to reflect once again on the particular ways in which pianists and composers work on a piece of music, as well as on their respective ways of musical thinking.

Within the framework of this study, it is difficult to refrain from referring to

the composer's entire macrocycle of sonatas. Researcher Raisa Shitikova, examining the sonata genre in the 20th century, draws attention to the features of Medtner's cycles, which represent a unique fusion of lyricism, epic and drama. At the same time, she identifies two main directions in them, which are comprised of lyrical-epic and lyrical-dramatic types. [19] In Hamelin's interpretations, the lyrical element becomes the dominant that unites all fourteen works. Dramatic and tragic episodes highlight and emphasise the main lyrical line. The epic element is rather expressed in a narrative manner, where the parts are transformed into episodes with a gradual unfolding of the material that is used to fill the sonic space. The culmination of the macrocycle is the Sonata-Reminiscence, which stands out for its diversity of figurative content, the completeness of the parts, their contrast, and, in Hamelin's performance, improvisational nature. The first four sonatas are full of light, joy, naivety, playfulness, hope and impulsiveness. Further, it is easy to see that the lyrical and dramatic figurative structures alternately change (Sonata in *G minor* op. 22 — Sonata-Tale in *C minor* op. 22 No. 1;

Sonata in *E minor* *Night Wind* op. 22 No. 2 — Sonata-Ballade in *F major* op. 27; Sonata *A minor* (*During the war 1914–1917*) op. 30 — Sonata-Reminiscenza op. 38 No. 1; Sonata tragica op. 39 — Sonata Romantica op. 53 No. 1; Sonata Minacciosa op. 53 No. 2 — Sonata-Idyll in *G major* op. 56). The *Night Wind* sonata becomes the place of concentration of internal personal expression. This is expressed in Hamelin in a deeper and more expressive intonation and contrast of elements (in the slow movement, as mentioned above). In the following sonatas, the lyrical images become more and more enlightened, reaching their "flowering" in the subsidiary theme group of the Sonata tragica and the primary theme group of the Sonata Romantica. The last two-part Sonata-Idyll is full of fragility and tenderness, light and contemplation (it is no coincidence that "birds singing" — perhaps birds of paradise — appear in it). Hamelin interprets the entire cycle as a kind of lyrical diary of the composer, which captures the desire for light, joy, and the desire to understand life in all its manifestations. Indeed, such an interpretation is close to the pianist's own worldview — and probably for this reason sounds rather convincing.

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