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Reconciling Tradition and Innovation: the Sonata Romantica Op. 53 no. 1 of Nicolai Medtner

Tonight, by means of musical analysis, I wish to show how Medtner reconciled tradition and innovation by incorporating very personal and innovative traits while adhering to time-tested forms, in this case, the sonata and its basis in tonality. Innovation was not a conscious goal for Medtner; nonetheless, unusual elements are mixed in with more traditional techniques to create a unique and rich musical language.

Nicolai Medtner (1880-1951), like Rachmaninov, was one of those composers whose heart was in the 19th century. The ebb and flow of romantic emotion, the lush piano sound, the focus on extended chromaticism, along with his mastery of traditional sonata form, and his quest for thematic unity bind him to the music of the past. He never apologized for this; in fact, in the later part of his life, in 1935, he took pen to paper, and, in prose, summarized his views on composition in the book entitled "The Muse and the Fashion". (the Muse being the eternal source of artistic inspiration and the Fashion being the God of the so-called "Modernists".) In this book Medtner religiously defends and embraces the musical language of what he calls an inherited "collective tradition". He writes:

"It has taken centuries to tune up this musical lyre, and all its strings or modes have been adjusted both by the output of the great geniuses and the thought of theoreticians, but not in any accelerated or "revolutionary" way".

I am not aware of any political pressures which may have influenced this opinion. His writings about respecting musical tradition seem genuine, even unshakeable, and obviously grounded in a very thorough musical education. In opposition to following "the muse", he accuses the modernists of following "the fashion", slyly commenting:

"The cowardly artist is compelled to run after Fashion, but she; the artful wench, does not stop in her flight and always leaves him behind."

And again:

"The music of the extreme Modernist often makes a morbidly repugnant impression on the unbiased listener."

Medtner abhors "discordance" (dissonances not properly resolved), polytonality, and any disjunct elements, comparing these techniques to

"suffocating gases, the effect of which is equally pernicious to the art and to the inventor himself "

Medtner believed in the concepts of unity, homogeneity, and believed that the centre of all music is the genesis of song. In terms of art music, this translates into the theme and its many manifestations. He believed that the theme is the kernel of form, and the development of the theme "opening up the kernel". A very traditional and Germanic view, indeed. His concepts take the form of concentric circles: unity encircled by plurality, the tonic note by the scale, mode or tonality, the diatonic scale encircled by the chromatic scale, consonance encircled by dissonance, etc.

In creating these increasingly larger concentric circles, however, I think he does at times exceed the perceptual bounds of tonality. Along with other devices inherited from Russian folk-song, dance and art music of his Russian predecessors, Medtner creates an unusual mix which is complex and interesting. Medtner embraces the octatonic, whole-tone, and a variety of synthetic scales and modes. These rich flavours, originating in Russian and Hebrew folk-songs from various parts of the Russian Empire, are embedded in an extraordinary use of chromaticism. The gamut of expression is therefore very extended - from extremely disorienting moments of chromatic excess to poignant modal flavours. This use of what theorists call "modal variance" belies a more modern approach than even he would admit.

Let us turn to the Sonata Romantica, written in the years 1931 and 32. The title itself defies the current "Fashion". The first theme has an air of nostalgia, due to the modal colouring of the natural minor scale, as well as the predominance of the dominant note, with the lower tone neighbour E flat, harmonized by ii 4/3. The flattened 2nd occurs often as well as the regular second degree, already demonstrating a modal variance. At this time we will also note the motivic units in the theme - the falling thirds, the 3-note scale motive, and its inversion. The development of these cells contained in the theme will be important materials as the movement unfolds.

Example 1 (1st mv't, bars 1-5)

Soon after this first statement, in the transition to the second theme, Medtner employs the octatonic scale, which gives an unsettled quality, leading to and highlighting the dominant preparation and peaceful 2nd theme.

Example 2 (1st mv't, bars 12-13)

The chromatic scale is never abandoned by Medtner. This movement in thick with chromatic movement, derived from the 3-note descending motive, now appearing in its chromatic form.

Example 3 (1st mv't, bars 26-29)

Another example of his strong affinity for the chromatic scale is the fact that the entire development key structure is based on a slow-moving chromatic bass line (f minor through b flat minor).

Medtner's methods of modulation are sometimes quite unique. A technique I found most intriguing was the use of a Dominant 13th chord to modulate to another key containing some of the same tones. Thus the 13th loses its normal function of resolution, and instead, transforms itself into another chord, which then forms the new tonality. Medtner refers to these in his book, calling them "seven-note chords", obviously built on thirds, and describes the use of enharmonics to effect these modulations. These are truly memorable moments in the harmony, due to their harmonic complexity and surprising transformations.

Example 4 (1st mv't, bars 41-43)

This dominant 13th chord (if all notes were present) contains both the dominant and the tonic chord of the new key!

Throughout this sonata we are struck with the rich textural writing for the piano. Rachmaninov spoke of Medtner as one of Russia's best composers, and was likely inspired by his pianistic writing, for there are many similarities. Medtner, however, insists in "the Muse and the Fashion" that sonority and figuration are absolutely second in importance to harmony. In spite of this firm conviction, we have to recognize that Medtner possessed an exceptional gift for sonority, colour and pianistic figuration.

Example 5 (1st mv't, bars 64-67)

Example 6 (2nd mv't, bars 56-61)

Returning to scales and modes, let me give you an example of two synthetic scales used in the coda of the first movement. - a hexatonic mode, alternating minor 3rds and minor 2nds: in the left hand part in bar 108 (B flat, D flat, D, F, G flat and A) and a heptatonic mode in bar 110, R.H. containing, similarly, 2 aug. 2nds (B flat, C flat, D, E flat, F, G flat, A flat). This one sounds like the harmonic minor scale with a flattened second and a sharpened 3rd.

Example 7 (1st mv't, bars 108-111)

In the Scherzo movement, which uses a striking folk rhythm reminiscent of Bulgarian folk dances (3+3+2+2+2), modal variance is used extensively. Here the main theme of the movement (minor mode) is transformed into the

mode C# D# E F# G natural A# B (note the flat 5 and # 6, compared to the natural minor). A subset of this scale appears against it in the R.H.

Broken augmented figurations, with their components of major triads, destabilize the tonality when used chromatically in succession.

In this movement also, chromatic movement in several layers abounds, especially in transition sections, confounding any definite tonal orientation. As in the first movement, Medtner uses a chromatic foundation to outline the progression towards a tumultuous climax. This involves a dissonant handful of notes, which might seem unusual for Medtner.

Example 8 (2nd mv't, bars 171-173)

On closer examination, we discern that it is actually an Augmented 6th chord occurring simultaneously with the tonic note. Regarding the use of dissonance, Medtner makes a very forward-looking statement:

"Modulation, as the encirclement of tonality, is a movement in time. The discordance, as a vertical formation, is primarily nothing but a modulation compressed into a chord, i.e. a shift in the plane of time".

Thus his dissonances are always functional within the tonality; here the chord functions as a kind of pivot, leading to the tonic. This contrasts with the "Modernists'" frequent use of dissonance for its own sake - for its shock value and its strident effect.

I think that these examples from the Sonata Romantica have given some insight into some distinctive techniques which Medtner uses to extend and elaborate his solid understanding of sonata form and traditional harmony. The interesting use of modal variance and synthetic scales derived from his national heritage is combined with the solid construction techniques and mastery of chromatic harmony that manifests a deep knowledge of 18th and 19th century compositional practices. His adherence to Sonata form is further testimony to his belief in the values of tradition; yet in the details of his musical language he was quite unique, pushing the boundaries of chromaticism, and embedding complex tonal relationships in a richly figurative pianistic style.