

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: STUDY OF TWO RUSSIAN COMPOSERS
WHO HAD CONFLICTING AUDIENCE
ACCEPTANCE; NICOLAI MEDTNER AND
SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Lilly Junghee Ahn, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2016

Dissertation directed by: Professor Dominic Cossa
School of Music

This study discusses selections of vocal works by Rachmaninoff and Medtner, two composers who had conflicting audience acceptance during their time. This study reflects the programs of three recitals comprised solely of songs composed by Rachmaninoff and Medtner. The pieces included in these programs are presented in chronological order. The dissertation outlines the lives of each composer as well as musical analysis of songs performed in recital.

STUDY OF TWO RUSSIAN COMPOSERS WHO HAD CONFLICTING
AUDIENCE ACCEPTANCE; NICOLAS MEDTNER AND SERGEI
RACHMANINOFF

by

Lilly Junghee Ahn

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Dominic Cossa, Chair
Professor Peter Beicken
Professor Carmen Balthrop
Professor Tim McReynolds
Professor J. Lawrence Witzleben

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Introduction

This dissertation project is comprised of three performances featuring twenty-seven songs by Nikolai Medtner and thirty songs by Sergei Rachmaninoff. Songs were programmed in chronological order with the exception of Medtner's Op. 13 and Op. 15. While Rachmaninoff suggested the type of voice needed for each song, it is not indicated nor suggested by Medtner. Therefore, I reviewed all Medtner's songs, evaluated their range and the tessitura, and chose songs appropriate for my voice, lyric soprano. This report includes program notes for each performance. The last chapter addresses the preparation for these recitals and the personal objective I tried to achieve through them.

Chapter 1: Medtner versus Rachmaninoff

Medtner and Rachmaninoff are both notable Russian composers who substantially contributed to the music played in concert repertoire today. It is no surprise that the vast majority of works by both composers are piano pieces since they were known as two of the greatest pianists of their time; we can presume the level of their piano skills by examining the difficulty of their piano pieces and even the piano accompaniment to their vocal works. Medtner and Rachmaninoff both wrote a considerable amount of music for voices—Medtner, 106 songs, and Rachmaninoff, 71 songs. Although they both lived in the same time period, each had a distinctive style. Unfortunately, Medtner's music was not as well received as Rachmaninoff's by the audiences of their time.

Medtner (1880–1951), born in Moscow, started training in piano from an early age and entered the Moscow Conservatory at the age of ten. He won the Anton Rubinstein prize the year he graduated, 1900. Soon after his graduation, Safonov (1852–1918), Medtner's formal piano teacher, planned a European tour of Rubinstein concertos, but Medtner did not want his life to be that of a travelling virtuoso. Thus, the European tour was cancelled and Safonov and Medtner parted with bitter feelings.¹ Medtner soon dedicated much of his time to composition, with songs being a significant portion of his early works.

In 1920, Medtner decided that it was time for him to leave Russia and take his music to other countries. Medtner's first official concert outside Russia took place in

¹ Martyn, Barrie. *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music*. Brookfield: Scolar Press,

Berlin in 1922 and consisted entirely of his own work, including the piano piece, Op. 12, *Forgotten Melodies*. Despite a near capacity audience, the concert elicited bitter criticism. Erich Urban wrote that “*Forgotten Melodies* will quickly be forgotten.”² Medtner left Berlin without achieving much success and went to France where his music, again, failed to impress the public. His experiences in Berlin and France made him long for his motherland, Russia, where he returned in 1925. In 1936, he moved to London where his music received its warmest reception and there he stayed until he died in 1951.

Medtner was known to have an affection towards Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s writing. This affection can be observed in a letter he wrote to his brother, Emil, where he writes that he much admires poems by Tyutchev or Fet but finds they paled in comparison to Goethe’s poems.³ Medtner devoted three entire opuses to Goethe’s poems exclusively—Opus 6, Opus 15, and Opus 18. In total, 30 of Medtner’s 108 vocal compositions were settings of Goethe’s poetry. The composer also admired the works of Pushkin, setting 30 of his poems to music as well as devoting 4 entire opuses to Pushkin’s work (Opus 29, Opus 32, Opus 36, and Opus 52).

Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was born in northwest Russia to a wealthy family. He started formal piano training at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, continuing it at the Moscow Conservatory. While enrolled in the Moscow Conservatory, he was commissioned to write a piano reduction of *Sleeping Beauty* by Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky was not happy with his first draft of the reduction but with

² Martyn 149.

³ Martyn 21.

Rachmaninoff's persistent effort, Tchaikovsky accepted it and was delighted with the final product. Rachmaninoff graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1892 with the Great Gold Medal, which was the most prestigious award that had been given only to three people before Rachmaninoff.⁴ In his early career, he was able to establish his fame as a concert pianist as well as a composer, however, he had to temporarily forego his composition career in order to support his family financially. He moved to the USA in 1918 and gave his first concert in America. Once he established his career as a concert pianist, he was able to restore his fame as a composer as well as a conductor. Although his heart was always devoted to piano music, his vocal pieces, particularly those composed before leaving Russia, are worth noting.

⁴ Norris, Geoffrey. *Rachmaninoff*. New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 1994. 4.

Chapter 2: Medtner Opus 6 and Opus 15 and Rachmaninoff Opus 4 and Opus 8

The first recital is comprised of eleven songs by Medtner and seven songs by Rachmaninoff. All 18 songs were composed in the early stages of their respective careers when they were in their early to mid-twenties. Through these songs we can observe what these two great composers offered during this part of their lives and careers and perhaps imagine what they could sound like once beautifully polished.

Medtner: Opus 6

Medtner's Op. 6 is one of three devoted solely to Goethe's text. No. 2, *Mailed*, is one of Medtner's rare cheerful and charming pieces. The song describes a man in the month of May frantically looking for his lover everywhere. The piano and voice depict the frenzied motion of a man running around with excitement; the man goes to a field, a hedgerow, a pasture, and even to her home to find her, all unsuccessfully. The poem ends with the man saying, "I see something! Is it she?" The postlude suggests that he is still roaming to find her.

No. 4, *Im Vorübergehn*, is about a man who roams the meadow and discovers a little flower and, while he was trying to pluck her, the flower begs him not to but to transplant her if he really wants to keep her. The song is divided into three parts: the first is a man's monologue; the second is the plea of the flower; and the third is a repeat of his first thought that he is roaming with his spirit high. The interlude between the first and second parts moves in extreme chromaticism providing a fluid transition from the man's voice to the flower's voice. The piano's chromatic

movement is also the flower's theme. The voice of the flower is painted with a gentle melody, mostly moving in a stepwise motion. Between the second and third parts, another extended interlude appears, again with extreme chromaticism. In the third part, it is unclear if he plucks, transplants, or leaves the flower alone; however, the chromatic postlude suggests that the flower still lives.

The texts of No. 6 and No. 7, *Inneres Wühlen* and *Sieh mich, Heil'ger, wie ich bin*, are taken from Goethe's libretto for the singspiel *Erwin und Elmire* by Duchess Anna Amalia. The story is fairly simple with only four characters. Elmire and Erwin are lovers, but because of a small misunderstanding, Erwin believes that Elmire is not in love with him anymore causing him to run away to a secluded valley. Bernardo, a mentor to Elmire, tries to help the love affair by convincing Elmire that she can find an answer by visiting the old hermit in the valley. At the end the two lovers meet again, with the help of Bernardo, and find out that they are still in love. *Inneres Wühlen* is sung by Erwin in the earlier part of the opera when he thinks that Elmire is not in love with him anymore. Medtner's use of a recurring rhythmic, as well as melodic, theme paints the anguish and heartache left by Erwin. (Example 1)



Example 1: *Inneres Wühlen*

Sieh mich, Heil'ger, wie ich bin is another excerpt from *Erwin und Elmire*. When Elmire visits Erwin thinking he is the old hermit, Erwin does not reveal his identity. Elmire sings *Sieh mich Heil'ger, wie ich bin* to the old hermit, not knowing he is Erwin in disguise. She confesses her sorrow of losing her beloved as well as her everlasting love for him. Elmire sings “*Sieh mich, Heil'ger, wie ich bin*” (See, me holy one, as I am) four times: in the beginning of the first stanza and at the end of the remaining three stanzas. Medtner uses the exact same music for all appearances, unifying the piece from the first to the last stanza. (Example 2)

The musical score is for the song "Sieh mich, Heil'ger, wie ich bin" by Nikolai Medtner. It is written for voice and piano. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into two systems. The first system shows the vocal line with the lyrics "todt! / зубъ!" and "Sieh mich, Heil'ger, / Взрѣ скло-ни, о -". The piano accompaniment starts with a forte (ff) dynamic and includes markings for "accelerando", "poco rit.", and "Tempo I. piano". The second system shows the vocal line with the lyrics "wie ich bin, / тецъ ся-той, ei - ne ar - me Sün - de - rin. / грѣшница здѣсь предъ то - бой." and the piano accompaniment with "sempre dimín." and "pp" dynamics.

Example 2: *Sieh mich, Heil'ger, wie ich bin*

The final song in Op. 6, No. 9, *Gefunden*, reminds the listener of the earlier song, *Im Vorübergehn* (No. 4): A man walks in the wood roaming, finds a little flower, and tries to pluck her. The flower delicately tells the man that she will wilt once plucked, to which the man tells us how he dug out all of her roots and planted her in the garden next to his house.

Medtner: Opus 15

Op. 15 is Medtner's second opus devoted to Goethe's work. No. 4, *Sie liebt mich*, is another text from *Erwin und Elmire*: here, Erwin sings after Elmire confesses her love for Erwin to the old hermit (Erwin in disguise). Erwin expresses his happiness by repeating "Sie liebt mich" (She loves me) twice in a row, three times. Medtner crafted these three "Sie liebt mich" repetitions ingeniously. For the first "Sie liebt mich," the melody moves in small steps with a familiar tune. In the second, both "Sie liebt mich"s leap up a minor 6th, before descending a major 2nd to express Erwin's pursuit of Elmire. The third "Sie liebt mich" appears at the end after a short piano interlude; the voice sings a high A for over 2 measures on the word "liebt" to demonstrate the flaring of Erwin's emotion. In No. 5, *So Tanzet*, delightful music in ABA form tells the story of a poet who encourages a young lad to dance. In the B section, Medtner uses witty word painting on "schläfert" (sleep) to illustrate someone dozing off. (Example 3)



Example 3: *So Tanzet*

The final four songs of this recital serve as additional examples of Medtner's treatment of Goethe's poetry. The text of No. 6, *Vor Gericht*, is a monologue by a woman with a child who is being accused of adultery while standing in front of a judge. She claims her child is a legitimate child from a marriage although she cannot name her husband. Her crying to claim her innocence is depicted dramatically by the music, and the long prelude to this piece depicts the bleak and heavy air of the courtroom.

No. 10, *Der untreue Knabe*, is one of only a few examples of Medtner's use of a strophic form and tells a romantic horror story over six verses. A man seduces a young maid and later abandons her, after which she dies from the madness caused by the abandonment. The man flees the town and runs for seven nights and seven days through storms and floods before arriving where he thinks he can rest. At the end he gets haunted by his dead lover who appears in front of him wrapped in a white shroud.

No. 11, *Gleich und Gleich*, is a charming song illustrating an early blossom of a bell-shaped flower and a bee complimenting each other. The last song of the first half of the program, No. 12, *Geistergruss*, has a heavy and somewhat dull accompaniment that balances the voice of a ghost, who is recalling his lively youth and wishing other travelers a fair journey.

Rachmaninoff: Opus 8

Medtner was not the only Russian composer to choose a German poet's text. Rachmaninoff's *Waterlily* (Op. 8, No. 1) was written by Heinrich Heine, and depicts a waterlily that looks upon the moon, blushes, and looks down to hide only to find out that the moon is reflected on the water. The music is beautifully crafted with a mirror image prelude and postlude that are identical with strophic form in the middle. No. 5, *A Dream*, is another beautiful text by Heine set by Rachmaninoff in a modified strophic form. Each stanza ends with delicate melody saying "but it was a dream." The texts of No. 6, *A Prayer*, appeared earlier in the performance in German under the title *Sieh mich, Heil'ger wie ich bin*: the text of this song was translated from Goethe's German by Aleksei Pleshcheyev and published in *Sovremennick* (The Contemporary) in 1846.⁵

Rachmaninoff: Opus 14

In No. 4, *Sing not to me, beautiful maiden*, the poet asks a maiden not to sing a song of Georgia that reminds him of sorrowful and cruel memory. His descending

⁵ Sylvester, Richard D. *Rachmaninoff's Complete Songs: A Companion with Texts and Translations*. Indiana University Press, 2014, 60

melodies speaks for the poet's nostalgic and yet mournful reminiscent. Aleksey Tolstoy's poem, *Harvest of Sorrow*, compares the vastness of a field to the man's depth of thought side by side. Rachmaninoff changes the time signature 11 times through the music, continuously tying the text to musical drama.

The text of No. 7, *How long, my friend!*, is written by Arseny Arkadyevich Golenishchev-Kutuzov a favorite of many other Russian composers including Mily Balakirev, César Cui, and Modest Mussorgsky.⁶ Although the title of this poem suggests it is about a friendship, it later becomes apparent that the poet is actually talking to his lover, being ecstatic about their reunion after heartaching separation.

⁶ Sylvester 44.

Chapter 3: Medtner Opus 13, Opus 18, and Opus 24 and Rachmaninoff Opus 14 and Opus 21

The second recital is comprised of a selection of songs from three Medtner opuses and two of Rachmaninoff's. Among the twenty-one songs presented in this recital, nineteen are in Russian. Unlike Medtner, Rachmaninoff only set poems either written or translated into Russian. Here we can observe these two great composers' treatment of their native tongue.

Medtner: Opus 13

Medtner's Op. 13 consists of texts by two Russian writers, Alexander Pushkin and Andrei Bely. The first song, *Winter Evening*, talks about two people (likely lovers) spending a cold winter night together. The figuration of the accompaniment depicts a restless cold wind, except when they imagine themselves together in the springtime. They come back to reality in the fourth stanza, and so the accompaniment returns to that of the chilling wind. Medtner chose Bely's text, *Epitaph*, for his second song. It is about a man who feels remorseful towards a poet's grave that is in disrepair, with dead flowers and a moldy statue. The accompaniment of this piece is very sparse—almost minimalistic—causing audiences to doubt whether the same composer who wrote *Winter Evening* wrote this piece.

Medtner: Opus 18

Op. 18 is the third and last opus that is devoted solely to Goethe's text. No. 1, *Die Spröde*, is a playful song depicting a young shepherdess roaming carefree through a field. While she roams, three suitors pursue her, and each offers her lambskin, ribbons, and his heart. She rejects them all. She laughs after every rejection, with her cheerful, almost dispassionate, laughter illustrated by the dotted rhythm pattern. (Example 4)



Example 4: *Die Spröde*

No. 5, *Das Veilchen*, is a monologue poem sung by Elmire from *Erwin und Elmire*. Though Mozart's setting of *Das Veilchen* is loved by singers from beginner to professional, it is very different from Medtner's treatment of the text. If Mozart's violet was an illustration for a children's story, Medtner's violet is an emotional drama for mature audiences. Medtner's setting of *Das Veilchen* resembles the typical form of an aria from the romantic period and starts with recitative-like phrasing and a simple accompaniment. The true prelude starts with a theme echoed in the voice part. In the last stanza, Medtner's setting of "so sterb' ich doch" (I shall have died) to three

consecutive B-flat with grace notes moving in an upward motion by half steps imitates the violet's crying. (Example 5)



Example 5: *Das Veilchen*

Medtner: Opus 24

The first song from Op. 24, *Day and Night*, is divided into two parts. The first part beautifully illustrates the glorious day by comparing sunlight to a golden cover spread by the gods. Medtner keeps the key of E-flat major throughout the first part and uses a repetitive triplet rhythm to create a calm and settling mood. The second part talks about the night that comes to swallow the day, saying the mortal will suffer until the dawn comes. In the first phrase of the second part, Medtner sneaks in a G-flat and starts to dismantle the music of the day. The accompaniment soon becomes chaotic, each hand playing a different, heavily chromatic scale in every bar. (Example 6)



Example 6: *Day and Night*

The vocal line also moves chromatically with no distinguishable tonal center.

Medtner combines the sounds of the day and night at the end, but night overpowers the day, as if the night will never end. Despite the level of craftsmanship in this piece, it received very harsh criticism when it was performed in America for the first time.

A Musical America review in 1918 stated that the “The Medtner songs we found decidedly unimportant.”⁷

No. 2, *Willow, Why Forever Bending*, is written in the Aeolian mode,⁸ recalling a folk sound. The poet asks willow a rhetorical question “why she is bending forever to sip the stream when the brook would not pay any attention to the

⁷ R. B. “Eva Gauthier sings list of novelties.” *Musical America*, 16 February 1918, 26

⁸ Martyn 82.

willow.” Medtner creates the laughing sound of the brook with the accompaniment while singer holds a note to highlight his word painting. (Example 7)



Example 7: *Willow, why forever bending*

In No. 3, *Waves and thoughts*, a poet compares these two elements through a song made up of four phrases. The first three seem directionless due to the many notes that do not fit in the chord. However, the piece arrives at the dominant (A-natural) of the key (D minor). The very last phrase is more unsettling than the first three and ends with C-sharp, making this song ultimately distressing.

No. 4, *Twilight*, has a lavish prelude with complex rhythmic changes. Medtner sets the rhythm signature pattern in the prelude, and it continues throughout the piece—4/8–5/8–6/8–5/8. The first stanza describes how the night comes and its darkness can make all nature fall asleep. The second stanza illustrates the coming of twilight while the darkness of the night fades with a slight taste of comfort.

Medtner chose Afanasy Fet’s text for the last four songs of Op. 24. No. 5, *Humble yet valiant*, is the first of those four. A poet confesses that he can be humble during the chaos but also can be passionate and fiery when it comes to love. No. 7, *Dawn in the Garden*, is a beautiful poem that portrays the beauty of dawn. Medtner

creates almost somber music to complement the color of dawn with beautifully crafted word painting.

Rachmaninoff: Opus 14

No. 1, *I Wait for Thee*, is a poet's imploring monologue about the torment of waiting for his love. Rachmaninoff interprets his torment with passionate music, creating almost six measures of text without rest. The text of No. 2, *The Isle*, creates beautiful scenery of a little island. It was originally written in English by British romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, but was translated by a Russian symbolist poet, Konstantin Balmon.⁹

In No. 5, *These Summer Nights*, with gentle use of chromatics Rachmaninoff expresses the uncertainty of what night can bring to a man. But, when the poet states that the brightness of the moon will open up another door for helpless love, the music becomes declamatory, using bigger leaps and accents.

Many composers including Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, have set Aleksey Tolstoy's work to music. No. 7, *Don't Believe Me, Friend*, is a love poem and monologue of a man trying to convince his lover to not believe what he tells her when he says he does not love her anymore. He tells his lover that he is in love with her once more in a persuasive manner that Rachmaninoff illustrates by repeating phrases with similar melody that elevates the drama at the same time.

Like German lieder, spring is a frequent topic in Russian songs. Russia experiences all four seasons, but their winters are long and cold. The poem *Spring*

⁹ Sylvester 65.

Water (No. 11) animates the coming of spring with running brooks in the fluttering of the accompaniment.

Rachmaninoff: Opus 21

The French poet Jean-Marie Guyot's *Twilight* (No. 3) portrays a woman gazing at the coming of twilight in silence. The piece begins with an almost recitative-like voicing with simple accompaniment. Later the accompaniment adopts a triplet pattern throughout that resembles the night sky illuminated with stars.

The original text of No. 4, *They Answer*, is by a French writer, Victor Hugo, and translated into Russian by Lev Mey.¹⁰ The poem concerns men asking women three riddle-like questions which the women each answer with a single word: row, sleep, or love. No. 5, *Lilacs*, is beautifully based on the pentatonic scale. A Russian superstition holds that it is good luck to find a five-petal lilac flower and the word “счастье” appears 3 times and means “good luck” or “happiness.”¹¹

In No. 6, *Loneliness*, Rachmaninoff uses an almost recitative like voice followed by his signature sound—thick and lush chords—to elevate the drama to conclude the song. No. 7, *Here It's So Fine*, is a short piece consisting of a divine melody that touches the deepest part of your heart. Glafira Galina wrote the text: Rachmaninoff's other settings of her work are equally as exquisite.

In No. 11, *No Prophet I*, the last song in the program, a man declares that he is not a prophet, warrior, or teacher, but a poet should God allow him to be one. His declaration is accompanied by heavy, lavish chords; however, when he describes his

¹⁰ Sylvester 102.

¹¹ Sylvester 105.

humble duties as a poet, the music becomes tender. The song concludes with a beautiful figuration that represents the sound of a lyre.

Chapter 4: Medtner Opus 37 and Opus 45 and Rachmaninoff Opus 26 and Opus

34

Most poems Rachmaninoff set to music were written in Russian by Russian poets, but when he did make use of foreign-language poetry, they were all in Russian translation.¹²

The last series of the dissertation consists of four songs from Op. 37 and two songs from Op. 45 by Medtner, and six songs from Op. 26 and six songs from Op. 34 by Rachmaninoff. The texts of Medtner's pieces are all originally in Russian but sung in German translation; all twelve Rachmaninoff songs sung are sung in English. I chose to sing translations in order to ascertain whether an audience can truly understand songs in a language they do not speak, or whether it helps when the performer sings in the audience's language. I will address this question later in the paper.

Medtner: Opus 37

No. 1, *Schlaflosigkeit*, describes the poet's sleepless night with his weary soul. He says we are at war with all creation but are deserted and left alone. The prelude of this piece is only two profoundly dark measures with E-flat repeating four times, reflecting the depressing sleepless hours conjuring images of a clock chiming the passing hours.

¹² Norris 139.

In No. 2, *Tränen*, the poet talks about never-ending tears that descend forever. The voice moves downward chromatically to depict the falling tears both at the beginning and the end of the song. (Example 8)



Example 8: *Schlaflosigkeit*

In No. 4, *Waltzer*, a poet describes a woman who died and was carried away dancing around him. He then dreams that he and the woman are dancing together. Although the music is in a waltz rhythm, the circular motion of the right hand in the accompaniment makes this waltz almost hypnotic. Medtner composed No. 5, *Night Wind*, after he received the news of his brother's death and added it to the opus at the last minute before the publication.¹³ In this song, a poet asks the night wind why it cries sadly and implores it not to awake the storm that might cause chaos.

Medtner: Opus 45

Pushkin's *Elegy* (No. 1) ruminates on the remainder of life at middle age. Though only sadness awaits him, the sweetness of life's beautiful moments buoys his spirit and makes it worth living. The song is considerably extensive and beautifully

¹³ Martyn 134.

created with a lavish melody that floats over quintuplets. No. 2, *Wagon of Life*, compares a rough journey of a wagon to human's life. The style of accompaniment represents the relentless movement of the wagon, simple and rough.¹⁴

Rachmaninoff: Opus 26

In No. 5, *Beloved Let Us Fly*, the poet gently requests that the lovers go on a journey to be freed from reality. The poem illustrates their escape to nature; Rachmaninoff uses a triplet meter in the accompaniment throughout to create dream-like music. No. 8, *Thy pity I Implore*, is another song about spring: perhaps the spring represents a love that can be hurtful and distressing but it can heal a weary soul. In No. 9, *Again, I am Alone*, the poet joyfully announces the arrival of spring, but soon realizes that it is time for farewell. The poet cries out and he is alone once again. *Before My Window* (No. 10) illustrates the beautiful scenery of a cherry blossom tree. Rachmaninoff sets the scene with one note and lets the voice gently ease in. He again uses triplets to create gentle floating accompaniment. In No. 11, *The Fountain*, the accompaniment visually imitates the motion of a fountain in successive ascending phrases.¹⁵ (Example 9)

¹⁴ Aron, Leon. "Learning to love life on the downslope." *The Wall Street Journal*, January 10 2014.

¹⁵ Sylvester 163.

как пла - ме - не - ет,

как дро - бит - ся е -

Example 9: *The Fountain*

In this song, the poet talks about his observation of the fountain saying that, although the fountain shoots up the water, eventually all the water has to come back down. No. 12, *The Night Is Mournful* is a reflective monologue comparing the night to his dream: they are both sad. Rachmaninoff creates a dream-like soundscape through a repeating pattern of quintuplets in the accompaniment, while the vocal line sings in duple meter.

Rachmaninoff: Opus 34

The Muse (No. 1) is a monologue by a man inspired and taught by his muse. The prelude represents his muse's flute playing while the voice sings the melody as if

telling a story. In the second part of the song, Rachmaninoff frequently switches from triple to duple meter, illustrating a voice breathless with passion. The *Storm* (No. 3) illustrates a battle between a fair maiden and a storm. At first, the storm seems to be the likely victor but in the end, the maiden defeats the storm with her beauty. In *Day to Night comparing went the wind her way*, the day and the night are trying to convince a woman that one is better than the other. Night tries to win over the woman by saying it has greater sway, but soon, dawn arrives and the sun comes up. At the end, the day is declared victorious. No. 5, *Arion* is based on the Greek legend that a poet named Arion was able to escape the pirates by playing music which charmed them. Arion also charmed dolphins so he was able to escape to the shore on their backs. No. 10, *The Morn of Life*, is a very sensual text. Rachmaninoff's music is simple and yet gracefully seductive. In No. 12, *What Wealth Of Rapture*, the melody whispers while the accompaniment gently moves in triplet. The poet and his beloved are alone at night at the river, which reflects countless stars. The poet confesses that he feels anxious at that moment and he soon declares that he is in love.

Chapter 5: Performance Preparation

Language has been a frequent hurdle in my life since I moved to the United States. Because of this, I took the “fast course” in learning a new language, Russian. After I chose the topic for my dissertation, I started to watch children’s videos of the Russian alphabet song along with listening to Russian news to become more familiar with the language. Every language has its unique tone, color, and flow that combine to create its nuances. To mimic that nuance is best learned through native speakers: I was fortunate to work with native Russian and great pianist, Alexei Ulitin, for the past four years, who has helped me to sound more idiomatic in the language.

Medtner’s vocal works are extremely hard for the singer as well as for the pianist. He often uses intense chromaticism, odd leaps, and complicated rhythmic figures for both performers. Medtner’s music is three-dimensional, like a sculpture that one can observe the different perspectives from various angles. Dynamic and tempo markings appear in almost every other measure together with unpredictable melodies and phrases. Therefore, for the musical preparation of Medtner’s music, my pianist and I had to spend many hours separately learning notes. It then took more hours to put the two parts together. Given that Medtner’s music resembles Hugo Wolf’s in the sense that the accompaniment and the voice make the music whole, it is difficult to practice phrase by phrase due to the interwoven voice and accompaniment lines.

On the other hand, Rachmaninoff’s music took less time to learn and was less challenging to put together with the accompaniment. However, even though

Rachmaninoff's music is less challenging to learn than Medtner's, I found that it takes more time to fully immerse oneself into the depth of its beauty. When a pianist and a singer follow Medtner's notes, dynamic marking, tempo marking, and necessary articulation, his music becomes alive. In contrast, Rachmaninoff's signature elements, such as the use of thick, lavish chords or consecutive, rolled chords, are all beautiful in different ways but require a variety of musical interpretations. To find the most convincing interpretation, my pianist and I had to rehearse certain phrases in many different ways.

Preparing for the first recital was particularly laborious since I had never been exposed to Russian music before and was not familiar with the language. To complicate matters, the songs were written in both composers' early careers and therefore lack maturity and understanding of the voice. This is more apparent in Medtner's music than Rachmaninoff's. For example, in *Mailed*, Medtner made it immensely difficult for singers to articulate diction while observing the rests especially at the given tempo marking. (Example 10)

The image displays a musical score for a song titled "Mailed" (likely a translation of "Mailed" from Russian). The score is written for voice (Canto) and piano (Piano). The tempo is marked "Allegretto frescamento. (M. M. ♩ = 84)." and the key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature is 2/4.

The vocal part (Canto) begins with a rest, followed by a melodic line. The piano part (Piano) features a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and single notes. The lyrics are written in both German and Russian.

Lyrics:

German: Walzen und Korn, zwischen Hecken und Dorn, zwischen Bäu-men und Gras.

Russian: -ни-цы и ржи, меж-ду ча-щи кустовъ, меж-аъ -совъ и лу-говъ.

The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano), *poco rit. dim.* (a little slower, diminishing), *crescendo*, and *dim.* (diminishing). The piano part also includes the marking *leggerissimo* (very light).

Example 10: *Mailed*

The most challenging aspect in preparing for the second recital was to sustain and surrender to emotion. It took considerable preparation to be able to perform in different emotions one after the other in rapid succession, especially in the second half when I sang eleven Rachmaninoff pieces. Kimball states that Rachmaninoff's work "generate[s] immediate emotional excitement."¹⁶ Much of Rachmaninoff's music is beautifully written which allows the singers to easily express the correct emotion, but since Rachmaninoff's vocal works were put together in their respective opuses for publication and not by the composer as cohesive song cycles, every song demands a completely different emotion.

¹⁶ Kimball, Carol. *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature*. Revised edition. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2006. 463.

The last recital was musically most rewarding. I was able to understand Medtner's music better having become familiar with his style. Kelly claims that Medtner's "contribution to the art of song in the twentieth century is matched only by Poulenc and Britten."¹⁷ Medtner's music is very organic and it is hard to digest when it is heard by people who are not acquainted with his style.¹⁸ I prepared all of Rachmaninoff's songs in English from Edward Agate's translated version provided in Dover's *Complete Song Book for Rachmaninoff*. I was able to connect better on a personal level with the English translations of the songs and the same is true for many audience members, as I found out after hearing audience comments after the concert.

I faced one common obstacle while preparing Medtner's works for all three recitals. It was to find recordings of his songs. Medtner himself recorded a selection of his songs with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Margaret Richie, Tatiana Makushina, and Oda Slobodskaya. Other than songs that are available at www.medtner.org.uk¹⁹, I was able to find only two CDs through various libraries.

Medtner and Rachmaninoff lived in the same time, in the same country, and had a similar education. Both were exceptionally talented pianists who had passion for composition. Their work in vocal music is extraordinary yet neither composer's is frequently performed, as it deserves to be, although Rachmaninoff's vocal works are much more frequently performed these days. Boyd states "Medtner's songs have never been more in need of advocates, among both performers and critics, than they

¹⁷ Kelly, Terence. "The song of Nicolai Medtner." Dissertation, University of Maryland, 1988. 137

¹⁸ Anderson, Martin. "Reviewed work: Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music by Barrie Martyn" *Tempo*, no. 195, 1996, pp. 37–39.

¹⁹ Nicolas Medtner: Works, Discography, Publication, News. "Nicolas Medtner: Works, Discography, Publication, News. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Nov. 2015.

are today,”²⁰ and I was thrilled to be one of those advocates. The dissertation recitals I prepared over the past three semesters make up the most ambitious project I have ever attempted. It was also an effort to bring an unfamiliar sound to the audience. Every single song I performed was out of my comfort zone and I was able to improve through them musically, personally, and emotionally. I hope that that the audience experienced the same.

²⁰ Boyd, Malcolm. “The Songs of Nicolas Medtner.” *Music & Letters*, 1965

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Aron, Leon. "Learning to love life on the downslope." *The Wall Street Journal*,

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The article analyzes Pushkin's poem *Elegy* and also provides an English translation of an excerpt of the poem.

Boyd, Malcolm. "The Songs of Nicolas Medtner." *Music & Letters* 46.1 (1965): 16-22.

This article provides Boyd's opinion on Medtner's position in the classical music community. It also provides musical and poetic analysis of a few songs by Medtner.

Kelly, Terence. "The songs of Nicolai Medtner." Dissertation, University of Maryland, 1988. 137

This dissertation includes biographical information on Medtner and provide Kelly's musical analysis on a selection of Medtner's vocal pieces.

Kimball, Carol. *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature*. Revised edition.
Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2006.

The book is an extensive survey of composers and contains a selection of representative songs from the early Classical period to the early twentieth century. Composers are categorized by nation and in chronological order.

Martyn, Barrie. *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music*. Brookfield: Scolar Press, 1995

This book contains biographical information about Nicolas Medtner with a small amount of information about his music in chronological order.

Norris, Geoffrey. *Rachmaninoff*. New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 1994.

This book contains biographical information about Rachmaninoff. It also analyzes his music by genre.

R. B. "Eva Gauthier sings list of novelties." *Musical America*, 16 February 1918, p.
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The article is a review of a performance by Eva Gauthier of contemporary vocal pieces on February 10, 1918.

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The score contains a complete collection of Rachmaninoff's vocal score.

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The book includes brief biographical information about Rachmaninoff, as well as all of his song texts, with phonetic pronunciations and translations.

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The website contains Medtner’s brief biography, list of compositions, articles, news and sound recordings of his works.