

A close-up portrait of a man with a beard and dark hair, looking directly at the camera. He is resting his head on his hands, which are clasped together. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

PIANO
CLASSICS

Medtner

FORGOTTEN
MELODIES

VERGESSENE
WEISEN

Mattia Ometto
piano

NIKOLAI MEDTNER 1880-1951

FORGOTTEN MELODIES | VERGESSENE WEISEN

Vergessene Weisen I Op.38 (Forgotten Melodies, Cycle I)		Vergessene Weisen II Op.39 (Forgotten Melodies, Cycle II)	
1. Sonata Reminiscenza	14'54	10. Meditazione	5'40
2. Danza graziosa	3'15	11. Romanza	4'50
3. Danza festiva	6'14	12. Primavera	3'59
4. Canzona fluviala	3'12	13. Canzona matinata	4'47
5. Danza rustica	2'54	14. Sonata tragica	10'19
6. Canzona serenata	4'27	Vergessene Weisen III Op.40 (Forgotten Melodies, Cycle III)	
7. Danza silvestra	4'11		
8. Alla Reminiscenza (coda)	3'29	15. Danza col canto	4'44
9. Danza silvestra (an earlier version with a different coda) <i>first recording</i>	4'47	16. Danza sinfonica	10'00
		17. Danza fiorata	3'09
		18. Danza jubilosa	3'19
		19. Danza ondulata	3'30
		20. Danza ditirambica	7'30

Mattia Ometto *piano*

Jotted Memories: the *Forgotten Melodies* of Nikolai Medtner

Born in Moscow in 1879 or 1880 (depending on the calendar adopted), Nikolai Karlovich Medtner (or Metner, which would be more correct) came from a family of German origin, although they had been living in Russia for the past two generations. The Medtners were great admirers of Goethe, and the young musician grew up in a cultural environment that was lively and stimulating, initially studying with his mother and later with his uncle Fëdor Gedike, who taught at the Moscow Conservatoire. Given the boy's evident talent, at the age of twelve he was accepted at the Conservatoire, where he studied under Anatoly Galli, who in his turn had been a pupil of Nikolai Zverev, the pianist and teacher whose students had included Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. Medtner also took lessons in theory with Kashkin and Arensky, who had previously taught Scriabin and Rachmaninoff as well. Moreover he continued his piano studies with Paul Pabst, who had been a pupil of Liszt, briefly with Sapelnikov, and lastly with Safonov, the renowned teacher whose earlier pupils included Scriabin, Lhévinne and his wife to be, Rosina Bessie. Another influential teacher was Sergei Taneev, with whom Medtner took private lessons. Taneev had studied piano under Nikolai Rubinstein and composition under Tchaikovsky, and was considered one of the foremost teachers of the century. His erstwhile pupils included Scriabin and Rachmaninoff, as well as Ziloti, Gliere, Grecaninov and even Prokofiev when he was still very young.

This line-up of names provides us with an idea of Medtner's early musical universe. Arguably the person who played the most decisive role in his musical education was not the musician he spent most time with, but Taneev, whose complex polyphonic constructs and far-reaching studies of the western musical repertoire were particularly influential. The contacts with this famous teacher probably helped Nikolai Karlovich to decide to follow up the gold medal he was awarded for his piano studies with a career as a composer-pianist, in the wake of the slightly older Sergei Rachmaninoff, who had already made a considerable name for himself, and of course Anton Rubinstein. As a pianist

Medtner managed to reconcile extensive concert tours in Russia and abroad with his teaching assignments, achieving significant fame during his own lifetime, especially for his rendering of Beethoven as well as for his own compositions.

Medtner emigrated with his wife, Anna Bratenshi, in 1921, largely in search of a situation that was financially more rewarding and without imagining that he would only once return to his native country, for a series of concerts in 1927. During the first years he was based in Berlin and Paris, although he also performed in various tours of the United States. Then in 1935 he settled in England, where two fundamental encounters were to help shape future developments: the first was with Edna Iles, a pupil of his to whom we owe much that we know about the composer today; and the second was with the Maharajah Jaya Chamaraja Wadiyar, who in 1946 founded a Medtner Society through which he financed recordings of Medtner playing his own works, as well as a sensational interpretation of the Beethoven *Appassionata*. Although by then he suffered from heart problems, these recordings hugely enrich our perception of the composer and his musical personality. Medtner died in 1951 at Golders Green, in London.

Tanev declared that the young Medtner was «born armed with the classical sonata», and indeed he was always considered a champion of tradition, a role that he clearly enjoyed, to judge by his comments on 'modernism' in the book *The Muse and Fashion*. Granted, being the last of the Romantics was typical of the early 20th century, but the fact that Medtner felt the need to theorise his own creative vein tells us a great deal about him as a person. His music is eminently learned, with formal structures and counterpoint that can ramify to the point of abstraction. Yet unlike Tanev in his somewhat Flemish compositional solemnity, Medtner never abandoned a certain lyricism, which may not have embraced the instinctive spontaneity of Rachmaninoff or the ecstatic refinement of Scriabin, but was nevertheless heartfelt and constant, often with literary hints of ancient times, including errant knights, paladins, elfin creatures and country dances. In his oeuvre as well as his style there is

an evident dichotomy between poignant lyricism and intellectualism: on the one hand there are the fourteen piano sonatas, the three sonatas for violin and piano, the three majestic piano concertos and the imposing quintet for piano and strings; and on the other, the arabesques, the sketches, the dances and over thirty *Skazki* or fables, as well as other miniatures for piano and a huge number of exquisite *Lieder*. The *Forgotten Melodies* that are the subject of this recording are a middle ground between the two categories.

Let's start with the title: *Why Forgotten Melodies*? Medtner was in the habit of jotting themes, motifs and ideas down in notebooks, calling these fragments *soggetti*, the Italian term normally associated with the fugue. The opus numbers 38, 39 and 40 derive from these snippets, committed to paper over the years and then forgotten until they returned to mind, ultimately taking on a shape of their own in the form of the three cycles. I have described the *Forgotten Melodies* as a "middle ground" between the classical framework and the Romantic sketch, and in these pieces Medtner effectively manages to reconcile the two extremes. The thematic material in the *Melodies* is extremely cohesive, not only on account of the tonal relationships, but also because the compositions largely derive from the same *soggetti* and a sonata may well share elements with a dance or a romanza.

The foremost example of this balancing act is *Op.38*, which originally had the subtitle "Nature". The opus opens with the placid development of the famous *Sonata Reminiscenza*, provoking reflections on the unusual choice of entrusting reminiscence with the job of presenting the material that was to prevail throughout the work. There is a flowing quality to *Sonata Reminiscenza*, with movements similar to court dances that evolve amid hazy timbres and then suddenly launch into frantic outbursts before subsiding into the languor of seductive melodies. It goes without saying that the handling of polyphony is absolutely faultless. Next comes the *Danza graziosa*, which changes in character as it succumbs to the *leggiéro* passage that alternates with an engagingly worldly Allegretto section. Although the following *Danza festiva*

reveals the influence of Rachmaninoff's exuberant *Étude-Tableaux Op.33 No.7*, the dance form also bears witness to Medtner's constant desire to develop and expand his chosen material. For the next piece, the *Canzona fluviala*, he adopts the same chords used for the opening of the *Danza festiva*, generating a sort of barcarola in which some of the *Sonata Reminiscenza* motifs return with greater clarity, appearing and disappearing like objects bobbing on a choppy sea. Despite the echoes of folk dances, especially the habanera, the *Danza rustica* is essentially polite and refined, creating a sense of contrast that makes it one of the most bizarre and fascinating pieces in the whole collection. The *Canzona serenata* begins with an almost literal citation of the opening section of the *Sonata Reminiscenza*, which is then developed in an intensely poignant melody. Very different in character is the following *Danza silvestra*, which seems to belong to the sphere inhabited by Debussy's minstrels and Liszt's gnomes. The most virtuosic piece in the collection, it embraces some of the main motifs of the *Reminiscenza* in the passionate outbursts that give form to the musical underworld portrayed. The last piece in the collection is *Alla reminiscenza*, which follows the opening attacca with a reworking of the theme, this time in the major key, and is entrusted with the narration, gradually bringing the story told to a serene conclusion.

There are two alternative versions of the *Canzona serenata* and *Danza silvestra*. In the case of the former, this is a mere transposition a semitone higher, which is how Medtner played it in the first Moscow performance of a selection of pieces from the collection. By contrast, the earlier version of the *Danza silvestra* contains various differences, including an alternative coda, which was ultimately replaced in one of Medtner's many later reworkings of the pieces.

Although the *Forgotten Melodies Op.39* are conceptually less sophisticated, they nevertheless comprise some of the most inspired moments of the three cycles. The collection opens with a *Meditazione* in which there is an Introduction (quasi Cadenza) involving roving keyboard reflections on timbre and colour

that ultimately lead to a *Meditamente* section reminiscent of some of Liszt's melodies. While there is something of Scriabin in the aura of pensive abandon, the familiar ascending intervals in the left hand contribute more to a sense of ponderous contemplation than to any feeling of passionate élan. The second piece in *Op.39* the *Romanza*, begins in a pensive mood with the returning theme from the *Meditazione*, which is then transfigured in the *Espressivo, cantando* section, where restrained dance motifs and virtuosic figurations are kept within the framework of the introspective and melodious handling of the meditative theme. The flowing figurations in the right hand only come into their own in the third piece, *Primavera*. Here the meditative theme reappears in a completely transformed state, with expanded intervals in a luminous B flat major, while the *cantando* second motif with its insistent dotted notes suggests the vernal sunshine of Schumann and early 20th century Russian music. There are also hints of Schumann in the central part, marked *Con molta tenerezza*, with passages that are almost orchestral in the polyphonic handling of the notes and elegant harmonies. The spring-like opening of the section is followed by a varied refrain – Medtner always modified in some way the passages he chose to reiterate. Next comes the *Canzona matinata*, which abandons the meditative theme and clearly has the completion of the cycle in view. It nevertheless maintains a three-note element as a generating motif, achieving a relatively simple melodious development that is actually based on complex, layered polyphony. The outcome is one of the loveliest themes Medtner ever wrote. Although the modal hints of the *Canzona* may seem to hark back to the more elaborate earlier movements, the piece also embodies a novel form of simplicity, like opening a window to let Spring (*Primavera*) flood into a dusty room full of books and thoughts. This may sound excessively evocative, yet it is hard to explain otherwise the sense of deliberate intent that is an intrinsic part of this second cycle, especially bearing in mind the last movement. The *Sonata Tragica* is arguably Medtner's most famous composition, and little wonder. It is impressively incisive and dramatic from the outset, as it banishes the serenity

so arduously achieved in the previous two sections. Here again the three-note motif is used, but this time it is transformed in the density of the idiom, surrounded by twirling figurations in the left hand. Due space is at last devoted to the return of the central theme of the *Canzona matinata* in a masterly balancing act between compositional skill and dramatic brilliance. The *quasi recitativo* that follows leads to a development that combines the tragic mood of the opening section, the tense first theme and the cantabile second theme, and then hurls itself into a grand refrain, with a heady coda that is ultimately truncated by the absolute despair of the tragic parenthesis.

Though it is unusual that the *Forgotten Melodies Op.40* should contain no sonata as such, the subdivision in six dances does effectively make it a suite, albeit à la Medtner. In this case he casts aside the thematic derivations and relations of the two earlier works to create a gregarious suite that includes some of the most folk-oriented passages of his entire oeuvre. This all comes together in the conclusion with its two-chord feature, reminiscent of the opening of the *Second Sonata* by Rachmaninoff. The first *Danza col canto* begins with an *Allegretto* marked *poco capriccioso*, a bouncing, almost martial section that gives rise to an intriguing *Andantino cantando* combining serenity with touches of anxiety in a manner typical of Medtner. For the *Danza sinfonica* the composer returns to his idiosyncratic Italian terminology: *meditamento*. It begins with a placid introduction, which is followed by developments that are characteristically symphonic. Although Medtner did not write many orchestral works, the strict polyphony, ample cords, the octaves and the odd hint of the *Danse macabre* by Saint-Saëns give an eloquent idea of the sort of orchestration he would probably have adopted for a symphonic suite. Here the final segment seems to dissolve in a flowing arpeggio, disappearing into the *sempre mancando* of the final bars. Next comes a serene and elegant *Danza fiorata*, a charmingly concise and effective piece with occasional echoes of medieval music, naturally within the overall framework of Romanticism. This is followed by the *Danza jubilosa* that succeeds in the arduous, complex

task of being triumphant without pomposity – never an easy undertaking for Russian composers. Once again Medtner would seem to have been inspired by the German school, especially Schumann, yet the path he treads is highly personal. The *Danza ondulata* shares certain features with the *Canzona fluviala* from *Op.38*, above all in the flowing left-hand accompaniment, yet without succumbing to stereotypes such as the *barcarola*. Indeed, there is often a hint of agitation, as in the tenacious Allegro that concludes the *Danza*. *Op.40* ends with a *Danza Ditirambica*, which refers to the ancient Greek poetic form that also inspired Medtner's three *Ditirambi Op.10*. The mood remains celebrative, but in a lighter, simpler manner. Here the Hellenic model is musically more ideal than substantial, influencing to some extent the vertical structure of the piece and sensation of verse form, where Medtner displays his skill in the art of variation. At this point the final parenthesis becomes part of the coda, and the work ends with a possibly ironic echo of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*.

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MATTIA OMETTO



A pupil of Aldo Ciccolini in Paris and Earl Wild in Palm Springs, Mattia Ometto graduated with full honors under Anna Barutti at the “B. Marcello” Conservatory in Venice. Since a young age he has performed in the concert seasons of the main Italian cities, including Venice (Teatro la Fenice), Milan (Società dei Concerti), Rome, Naples, Turin, Trieste, Udine, Bologna, Treviso, Padua (Amici della Musica), Vicenza (Società del Quartetto). In 2008 he made his debut at the Carnegie Hall in New York

and at the Théâtre du Rond Point des Champs Elysées in Paris. Since then he has performed regularly in Europe and the United States (New York, Boston, Des Moines, Redlands, Berlin...) and has been featured a soloist with the Lyric Symphony Orchestra of Los Angeles, the Academic Baskent Orkestra of Ankara, the Vidin State Philharmonic Orchestra (Bulgaria) and the Orchestra di Padova e del Veneto to name a few.

Mattia Ometto has recorded extensively for Brilliant Classics, including Britten's and Poulenc's works for two pianos and orchestra with Leonora Armellini, Franz Liszt's Music for two pianos with Leslie Howard and the complete *Méodies* by César Franck and Henri Duparc. Further recordings include Brahms' complete works for two pianos with Leonora Armellini (Da Vinci) and the complete music for piano duo by Reynaldo Hahn with Leslie Howard (Melba Recordings)

Mattia Ometto is a Professor at “B. Marcello” Conservatory in Venice (Italy).

This recording is dedicated to the memory of the late American virtuoso, my friend and mentor Earl Wild, who first introduced me to the world of Nikolai Medtner

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