



FROM UNFAMILIARITY TO MASTERY

-- A DEEP DIVE INTO PREPARING “*FROM FORGOTTEN MELODIES, SONATA REMINISCE IN A MINOR OP. 38 NO. 1*” FOR PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive study and performance guide for pianists aspiring to independently learn Nikolai Medtner's "From Forgotten Melodies, Sonata Reminiscenza in A Minor Op. 38 No. 1." It explores the historical context of Medtner's work, analyzes the musical structure, and offers practical suggestions for performance, including considerations for tempo, articulation, and pedaling. The paper also examines Medtner's unique musical language and compares interpretations from five reference recordings by renowned pianists. By delving into the depths of this exceptional composition, pianists can gain insights to enhance their understanding and performance of this challenging solo piano piece. The study aims to serve as a valuable resource for pianists embarking on this exploratory musical voyage.

Keywords

Nikolai Medtner, Sonata Reminiscenza, Solo Piano, Performance Guide, Musical Analysis, Interpretation

Numerous solo piano compositions provide pianists and listeners a wide range of opportunities to explore and listen. They are like limitless universes. Nikolai Medtner's music is distinguished by its romantic sensibility, lyrical melodies, rich harmonies, and sophisticated counterpoint, contributing to a distinct and emotionally engaging musical language.¹ “*From Forgotten Melodies, Sonata Reminiscenza in A Minor Op. 38 No. 1*” is one of his compositions that shines like a star because it perfectly captures the depth and profound beauty of the composer in the newly solo piece. As pianists, we are drawn to these exceptional pieces and try to transmit their depth and resonance through our own understanding and playing, as well as to simply listening to them and studying them.

The goal of this paper is to serve as a comprehensive study and performance guide for pianists who want to take on the solo challenge of independently learning Nikolai Medtner’s “*From Forgotten Melodies, Sonata Reminiscenza in A minor Op. 38 No. 1*.” It’s an exploratory musical voyage. I will focus on the historical context of Medtner’s work in the pages that follow, analyzing musical structure with my consideration of tempos, phrasing, articulation, and pedaling, exploring Medtner’s musical language with practical suggestions for performance, as well as providing and comparing reference recordings with my interpretation.

It is crucial to immerse ourselves in the musical and historical background of Nikolai Medtner’s “*From Forgotten Melodies, Sonata Reminiscenza in A minor Op. 38 No. 1*” to understand and interpret the piece thoroughly. Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951) is a talented pianist, pedagogue, and one of the most significant Russian composers of the twentieth century. Medtner was born into a family of German ancestry with a strong interest in art and literature, and he enrolled in the Moscow Conservatory of Music in 1892, where he excelled in both piano and composition and graduated with a gold medal according to a short biography of him written by his wife, Mrs. Anna Medtner.² Nikolai then started his career as a composer and concert pianist, touring in places like Europe and the United States while serving a position as a professor at the Moscow Conservatory for a few years.³ Despite developing a heart illness in his final years, he never stopped composing music, and he passed away in England.⁴

¹ Bobby Hughes Loftis, *The Piano Sonatas of Nicolai Medtner* (West Virginia University, 1970).

² Anna Medtner, “A short biography,” in *Nicolas Medtner A Tribute to his art and personality*, ed. Richard Holt (London: Dennis Dobson LTD, 1955):18.

³ *Ibid*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid*, 20.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of musical creativity and exploration. Romanticism, which had been the dominant musical style for most of the nineteenth century, was growing into new forms and manifestations. Composers attempted to push the boundaries of tonality, form, and emotion to expand musical possibilities. In this sense, Meitner's approach is pure and conservative. The restrained, almost austere romanticism, emotional depth, cross-rhythms, frequently intricate harmonic and polyphonic texture, and high level of craftsmanship in Medtner's works are reminiscent of Brahms's, earning him the moniker "the Russian Brahms."⁵

Sonata Op.38 No.1 in A minor which is the opening piece of the first cycle of the three Cycles in Meitner's piano work collection "*Forgotten Melodies*," Op.38-40. Eight pieces make up the first cycle, and each in the collection captures a moment of reflection and longing and functions as a musical snapshot. It begins with the *Sonata- Reminiscenza*, a favorite of the composer whose completion at the start of 1920. The one-movement sonata, which is the most reflective, poetical, and lyrical of the sonatas, begins with what might be referred to as the "theme of reminiscence," which is repeated throughout the sonata and other works in the cycle.⁶ Even though it is set in a single movement, the sonata's structure, harmonical language, and musical coloring are all obvious. The music becomes more tense and enticing when played in unison, which helps to create an overall depressing atmosphere.

My musical analysis will be based on the 1960 Muzgiz edition of Nikolai Medtner's works, specifically from the volume "*Sobranie Sochinenii, Tom III: Sochineniia dlia fortepiano*" (Complete Works, Volume III: Works for Piano) (Medtner, 1960).⁷

Structurally, this piece follows a ternary form: ABA.

The A section (mm.1-167), serving as the exposition, introduces and revisits the main theme to evoke feelings of lyricism, serenity, and nostalgia. In the A section, Medtner skillfully employs melodic and harmonic language, as well as tempo and dynamic contrasts, creating the groundwork for the subsequent emotional voyage.

A parallel polyphonic section in A minor serves as the piece's opening theme (mm.1- 16). The opening theme is heard three times in the piece: once at the end of the exposition (mm.152-167) which in e minor, as well as at the end of the piece (mm.434- 449), which recalls the opening theme. Because the opening theme material appears three times in this work, careful consideration should be taken in preparation to keep the tempo of these three times the same to ensure musical consistency.

Following the beautiful opening introduction, the exposition section is divided into four sections: the primary theme section (mm.17-59) with three motives, the expressive transition (mm.59-83), the secondary theme (mm.84-116), and a lengthy closing section (mm.117-157).

The composer distinguishes the shift of three theme motives in the primary theme section (mm.17-59) by using tempo change, dynamical contrasts, and distinct harmony layers. The first motive is concealed in the soprano and alto voices, the majority of which are expressed by the two voices played concurrently (see Fig.1). These four voices (SATB) are played together to create a sense of grandeur and reverence, like hearing the chorus in a Russian church.



Fig.1

According to "*a tempo risoluto, cantando*," the musical color changes, followed by a second motive (see Fig.2). Medtner now emits his full confidence, with the forte and the firmness of the staccato chords in the outlying voices, by building on the strength awakened in the second motif.⁸ The alto vocal supports the main melodic line, which propels the theme forward with a tremendous harmonic basis. To better outline the motivation for the part, the three voices can be practiced separately, or both hands only play chords while singing the melody, so that the effect of the superposition of the final three parts can be grasped more clearly through the practice of increasing and decreasing the voice parts.

⁵ Richard Holt, *Nicolas Medtner A Tribute to his art and personality* (London: Dennis Dobson LTD, 1955), 86.

⁶ Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: his life and music* (London, SCOLAR Press, 1995), 135.

⁷ Nikolai Medtner, *Sobranie Sochinenii, Tom III: Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1960), Plate M. 28032 Г.

⁸ Christopher John Miranda, "Nikolai Medtner: performing imagination in his Sonata *reminiscenza*, op. 38 no. 1" (DMA. Diss., Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, 2016). 19.



Fig.2

The third motive (see Fig.3) emerges in the left and right hand's question and response, and the melody is mostly concentrated on the tenor section of the left hand. The interaction between the left and right hands, with changes in harmonical modulations, dynamics, and different registers, creates a narrative atmosphere that is both tender and strong at moments.



Fig.3

The soft touching will be controlled by two hands in the transition section (mm.59- 83), with the composer dynamical marking “*p*,” “*pp*,” and the articulation “*legatissimo*.” The consistent narrative conjures up the impression of a veiled woman recounting her story gently. In contrast to the mood of the primary and secondary sections, the entire section is quiet and pure. Since this transition must be played with extremely soft dynamic while also emphasizing the melodic line of the left hand, it is critical to pay close attention to the balance of the two parts when playing, and both hands must practice slowly separately during practice to master touching of the finger and abdomen very close of the key. The secondary theme section (mm.84-116) begins with a melodic line of the same material as the primary theme and the composer shifts towards the subject in the melodic sequence along with the left- and right-hand lines. This portion must be extremely patient to draw out the melody parts on the score without making the melody lines hidden in the left - and right-hand parts sound blurred. In practice, we can remove the accompaniment repeating chords and simply play the melody portions to clarify the musical direction. Finally, we may add the accompaniment parts and plan the melody and accompaniment parts' control. The closing section (mm.117-157) is composed of two strong contrast color parts, the first is a quiet and gentle tone (mm.117- 133), the right hand narrates the melody line, and the left hand plays the role of the accompaniment of running sixteenth notes, the whole under the control of the pedaling of *una corda*, which is giving feeling that a strong force in the heart has been restrained and blocked. It appears to burst out of the trend for the second part (mm.133-157) of the music color. The constant use of the accent notes, the extended crescendo, and the continuous usage of the breakdown of the diminished seventh chord bring the music towards the exposition's climax in the second part. The subdominant broken chord lowering gradually returns to calm, prepared to return to the opening theme in e minor. The B section (mm.168-277) is known as the development part, where Medtner provides a striking shift in character and intensity. To create a dramatic atmosphere in this part, Medtner used a wide spectrum of dynamic contrast. Additionally, some intricate harmonic language and rhythmic variations are used to portray an atmosphere of dread, struggle, and darkness.¹² The composer puts the work's highlights in this section, so it must be important to consider the use of pedals throughout this part of growth. When the melody line is in the bass and the full pedal is used, double-check that the pedal is changed clearly. Try using a slight pedal and shifting the pedal constantly when running with both hands on sixteenth notes to ensure the whole phrase's clarity. This section also includes some very quick passages and challenging hand crossings, suggesting slow legato practice. To steady the tempo, I might also think about using a metronome with tempo control. Last but not least, Medtner uses a variety of rhythmic patterns in this part, including downbeat shifts, hemiola, syncopated rhythms, and dotted rhythms. I believe that during the process of preparation, it may be required to count the rhythm accurately and use a metronome to make sure that the rhythm is proper.

After finishing the contrasting B section, another A section (mm. 278- 449) which is recapitulation returns. However, it is not an exact repetition of the initial A section, Medtner introduces variations and elaborations on the original theme, such as the left- and right-hand decomposition of roundabout style, this time it is more hopeful which gives the piece's emotional landscape more depth and complexity.¹³ I'll concentrate on setting my dynamic range for this section of the treatment by expanding and sublimating the exposition components. I will use the appropriate rubato approach to handle musical phrases. For instance, in the extremely expressive musical lines (see 100 | From Unfamiliarity To Mastery- “*From Forgotten Melodies, Sonata Reminisce In A Minor Op. 38 No. 1*” : Yaqi Huang

Fig.4), I will stretch the material at which slower than the indicated tempo and use the body’s weight to push the finger to emphasize the theme further.

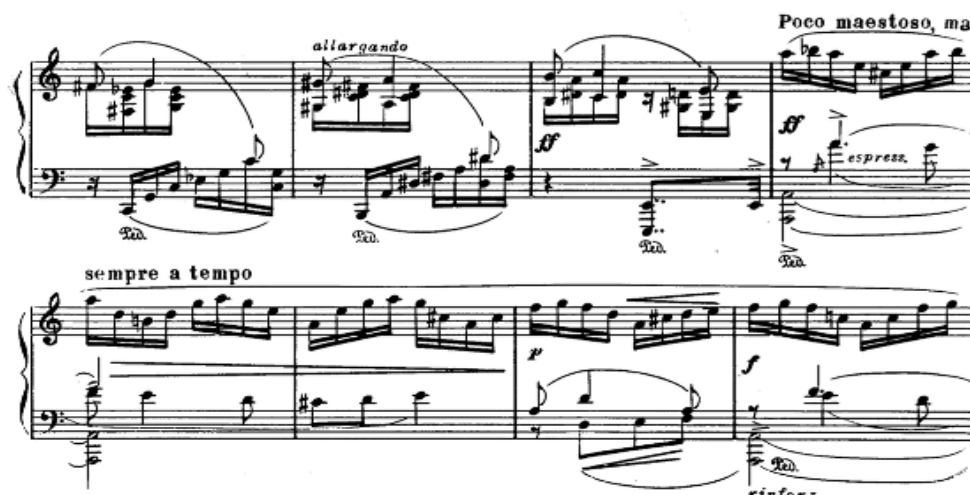


Fig.4

The music’s well-known appealing melodic language significantly increases its literary beauty, emotive depth, and nostalgia. I’ll then examine a few specific instances and offer some performance advice for myself. The piece’s opening theme might be the ideal illustration of Medtner’s talent for composing enduring melodies that can move listeners. It builds a story that draws people in subtly. Medtner adopted the counterpoint compositional approach in the opening theme (see Fig..5) by providing a melodic idea where another voice echoed. The first note of each right-hand beat defines the melodic line. In addition to having eighth notes and sustained notes in the left hand, the second eighth accompaniment double notes also create a vertical melody trend that responds to the right hand’s melody line. When practicing the opening, consider separating the two voices horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, the right hand must apply the legato touching technique, and fingers and ears must be extremely sensitive to drive melody establishing, such as using crescendo and diminuendo in dynamics and sketching the melody in eight measures of a phrase. Consider vertically picking out every eighth note of the responded melody of the left hand and practicing together with the right hand, to create an awareness of two voices interacting in a call-and-response rhythm, stressing the melodic line, and enriching the texture. It aids performers in establishing a sense of interplay and continuity.

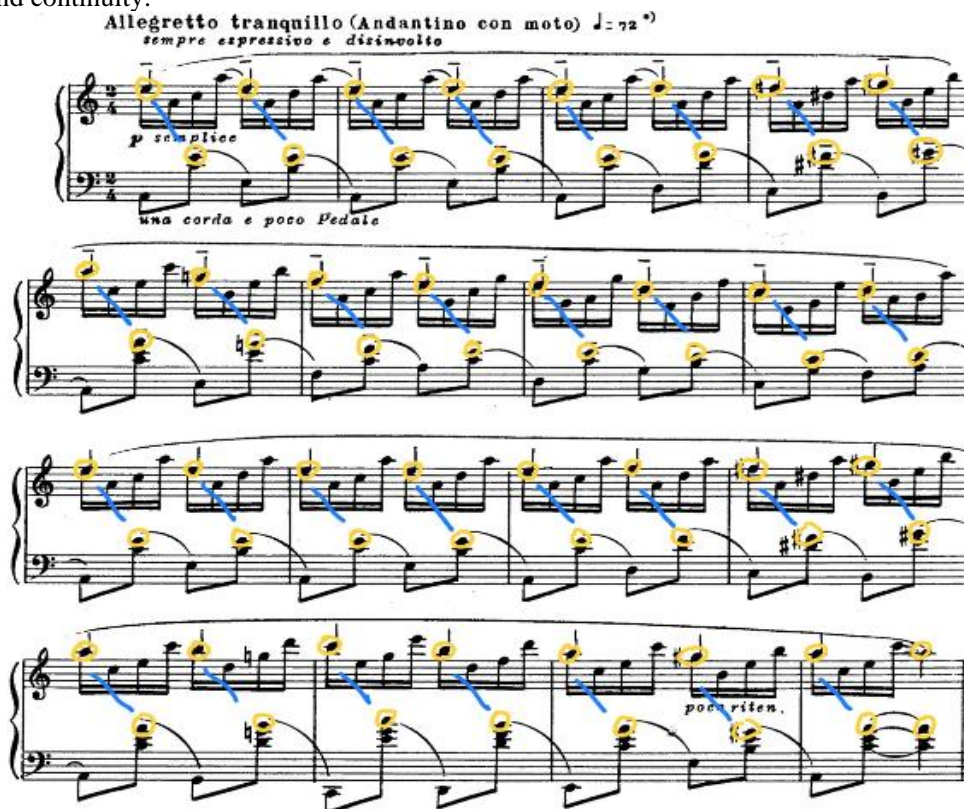


Fig.5

Medtner occasionally employs imitative techniques, in which a melodic phrase is introduced in one voice initially and then repeated even developed in another voice later. As indicated on Fig.6, the right-hand guides the melody line, and the left sixteenth legato passage is like a flowing stream to create a pleasant mood. In this phrase, only the soprano gently outlines the melody. Medtner reproduced and expanded on the melodic motifs of the previous phrases in the later section. The original melodic theme had been compressed and developed into sixteen notes by himself. The original melody, as indicated in Fig.6, was moved by the left hand running at a faster tempo and supported by the right hand's accent chords. The musical color became bright and gradually broke out at this point, forming a significant contrast with the previous section's soft and calm, propelling the total song to a peak. Consider the Fig.6 and Fig.7. I'll think about four characteristics of articulations, dynamics, tempo, and pedaling because these two phrases are in distinct nearby sections before and after. Based on these two sections, I imagine a soprano woman singing slowly and quietly, appearing sorrowful and helpless, followed by a male sobbing more vehemently and frantically, expressing the suppressed emotion to its utmost. According to this contrasting image, Fig.6 I will practice the two voices as much as possible in legato touching, keep the tempo consistent with the previous phrase, change the right pedal frequently to keep the sound clear and pure, and even add the *una corda* moderately to make a quiet atmosphere. Due to a color change in Fig.7, I'm going to emphasize the staccato chords, keep the legato touching for the melodic line by the left-hand, and play faster to push the music forward, and try not to pedal, so that the contrast between the phrases is more intense.



Fig.6



Fig.7

As one of Medtner's well-known piano compositions, "From Forgotten Melodies, Sonata Reminiscenza in A Minor Op. 38 No. 1" has been interpreted musically by numerous renditions, but five performances which are Alexander Malofeev's live performance recording at the "XIV Mariinsky international piano festival" in Mariinsky theatre concert hall in 2019, Sviatoslav Richter's live performance recording at the "December Nights Festival" in Moscow in 1981, Evgeny Kissin's audio in his album "Scriabin: Sonata No. 3 & 5 Preludes - Medtner: Sonata Reminiscenza - Stravinsky: 3 Movements from Petrouchka" by Sony Entertainment in 2005, Paul Stewart's audio in the album "Medtner complete piano sonata, Vol. 1" by NAXOS of America in 2012, and Dmitry Masleev recording

video posted on his YouTube channel in 2021. These performances provide rich sources of inspiration and introspection for any pianist aiming to interpret the piece.

Malofeev's impressionistic performance is reminiscent of a passionate virtuoso expressing deep emotions into the keys. His dynamic range, particularly in sections marked "pp," creates a story full of emotional highs and introspective lows. Emulating Malofeev's massive dynamic contrasts would give my performance an exciting and emotionally charged air. The difficulty is to strike a balance and ensure that the piece's underlying story isn't overwhelmed by the powerful dynamics.

Richter's 1981 Moscow Performance suggests that time has given Richter's interpretation greater depth. The 1981 recording's vintage tone brings listeners back in time, with each note feeling like a chapter from the memoirs of a wise elder. Richter inspires introspection with his thoughtful approach. My intention in implementing this approach is to give the audience the impression that they are traveling through a musical autobiography that is replete with wisdom and memories from olden times.

With a focus on emotional inquiry, Kissin creates a very intimate performance on his audio album. His unique rubato and methodical approach to every phrase result in an emotionally charged and intricate performance. Inspired by Kissin, I feel obliged to explore the piece's emotional undertones in further detail. This would need to carefully go over each phrase to make sure that the interpretation captures the melody as well as the range of emotions that underlie it.

Stewart's performance is so calm and elegant. Instead of using powerful contrasts, he goes for a fluid flow that resembles a peaceful river of sound. The story of the music is told through a steady yet expressive articulate oration. Stewart's acting is a master class in self-control. I would want to take the audience on a contemplative musical trip by infusing my performance with such controlled elegance, letting them enjoy every note and the quiet moments in between.

Masleev provides a lesson in purity and simplicity. His attention to finger movement, rather than showy body language, highlights the natural beauty of the music. His creative pedal approach highlights a variety of textures and gives well-known passages a fresh perspective. Masleev's method calls for an inspection of pedal dynamics and the significance of nuance. I can produce a variety of soundscapes by playing with different pedal combinations, giving each section a unique character while preserving the overall coherence of the composition.

To sum up, these five interpretations - each noteworthy in and of itself - provide a master class in musical expression when combined. I'm motivated to create a version that honors the original work while incorporating elements of my musical personality from their insights.

In closing, Nikolai Medtner's "*From Forgotten Melodies, Sonata Reminiscenza in A minor Op. 38 No. 1*" serves as a witness to the breadth and complexity of solo piano compositions. Through this piece, we have traveled deep into Medtner's romanticism and experienced the allure of its lyrical melodies and rich harmonies. Pianists can better understand the piece's essence by following the historical tapestry and musical nuance. This paper aims to be more than just a reference; it's an invitation to fully immerse oneself in Medtner's world. By truly understanding the intricacies of this composition, pianists are positioned not just to play, but to tell a story, evoking the emotions and reflections that Medtner so masterfully wove into his work. The experience of listening to "*From Forgotten Melodies*" serves as a reminder of the powerful links that music may establish, uniting the composer, performer, and listener in a shared encounter with passion and beauty.

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