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Interview

Name that deserves more, Nikolai Medtner

Founder of the Medtner Society of Korea, Pianist Haeshin Shin

By Se Eun Lee

Composer-pianist Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951) is one of the more particularly noteworthy figures in the history of Russian Piano School. Although Medtner could not attain the same widespread recognition as his contemporary composers, such as Rachmaninoff and Scriabin, he composed an impressive collection of piano works, songs and other chamber music of the highest quality. While his name has largely been forgotten, there have been attempts to represent the legacy of his arts and recover a public interest toward his music. In 2016, the Medtner Society of Korea was established to provide audiences more opportunities to discover and appreciate Medtner's musical works. Here is the conversation we had with pianist Haeshin Shin, co-founder of the Medtner Society of Korea.

Q: In January 2016, you co-founded the Medtner Society of Korea along with pianist Hanna Choi. What was your main motivation for doing this?

I first met Hanna when we were studying with Prof. Hyoung Joon Chang at Seoul National University (Prof. Chang was a pupil of legendary American pianist Earl Wild who was one of the Medtner advocates). I later moved to the states while Hanna went to Scotland for graduate studies. After some time being located on separate continents, we reunited in January 2016 at International Medtner Festival. The festival offered all-Medtner programmed concerts, masterclasses and a conference in London, which gave us a valuable chance to learn about the composer from varying angles. We were both deeply captivated by Medtner's music, philosophy, and arts. Our shared hope to increase the recognition of the composer and celebrate the value of his arts led to the idea of establishing our society. One of our missions was to introduce Medtner's music and pianism to the audiences in Korea in particular, where the composer is not yet widely known. However, not being limited within our home country, we have been collaborating with other musicians internationally.

Q. What elements do you find special in Medtner's music? What was your first reaction to his music?

I immediately found his music very special and interesting, with its unique lyricism, the use of harmonies and unconventional rhythms, and a curious balance between Russian characteristics and a formal beauty often found in 19th century German music. I could not help thinking 'Why haven't I heard of this composer? Why doesn't anyone play his music?' Since I had no prior knowledge of Medtner, I looked for any form of additional information, including books, dissertations, and online sources to learn more about the man and his life. The recordings of Medtner's piano playing have been especially useful sources to learn about his pianism and his own interpretation of his compositions. I went on to spend a semester in Moscow to conduct intimate research in the city of Medtner's birth, at the Medtner archive of the Glinka National Museum. I had an access to examine the original primary sources related to Medtner's work, including manuscripts and notebooks. This was all a thrilling experience for me.

Another important source was his book 'Muse and the fashion'. Medtner was a great writer as well, and he wrote about his beliefs in arts and published it as this book. His strong sense of vocation carried an almost zealous conviction, and is well displayed in his book, leaving a profound impression on me. I learned that not only his music, but also his life and philosophy as an artist, can teach us important lessons.

Q. The Medtner Society of Korea presented a debut concert in Seoul on February 23. It must have been a great chance for the Korean audience to learn about Medtner's music. Did you get feedback from the audience?

After the concert, I had a chance to talk with one lady who introduced herself as "a big fan of classical music". She had met many musicians and been listening to classical music for her entire life, but she had never heard of Medtner before, and this was very surprising to her. As soon as she discovered our Medtner concert, she searched online to investigate the composer. Many people are now curious about Medtner in this same fashion, and wish to listen to more of his music. This kind of interaction with the audience helps to strengthen our sense of mission for promoting Medtner's music.

Q. Medtner is not widely known yet in Korea. How is Medtner's music received in other European countries?

Compared to his good friend Rachmaninoff, Medtner is lesser known even in European countries. Meanwhile, Medtner and his music is more often performed and studied in Russia and UK, where he was born and died respectively. Due to an active effort of the Internationale Nikolaj Medtner Gesellschaft, Medtner's music is getting more recognition in Germany. Pianist Marc-André Hamelin, Berezovsky, Lugansky, and recent winners of the international Tchaikovsky competition, such as Daniil Trifonov, Dmitry Masleev, Lucas Debargue, have also contributed to introducing his music worldwide.

Q. We look forward to the future events of your society. Could you tell us about your plans?

Medtner wrote a great number of works for piano and voice. I cannot wait to introduce the major works, including piano concertos as two-piano version. At the Boston concert in May, soprano Elena Mindlina and I will perform Medtner's songs based on Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837)'s poems to celebrate the 220th anniversary of Pushkin's birth.

For our society's recent concert series, I had programmed Medtner's works with other compositions of his contemporary Russian composers. For future seasons, I would like to include the pieces that had an influence on Mednter's music, as well as other piano works that Medtner used to perform. Additionally, I plan to give lecture recitals and seminars to discuss Medtner's pianism, compositional style, and his philosophy of arts. I also expect the competition and workshop dedicated to Medtner's music will give the younger students a chance to explore his compositions. Lastly, since few Medtner-related materials have been published in Korea, I would like to publish useful materials in the Korean language to assist Korean musicians with their future studies and research.