



THE TROUBLE WITH MEDTNER

Nicolas Medtner (1880-1951) was a Russian composer whose lyrical, richly textured music was out of step with the modernist tastes of his own age. A fine pianist who studied with Liszt pupil Paul Pabst, Medtner composed three piano concertos, some chamber music, numerous songs and over 100 solo piano pieces. 'The trouble with Medtner is that he has been "re-emerging" for something like the last 20 years,' explains Sudbin. 'He hadn't really emerged in the first place, which is why it's hard for him to re-emerge! But I think he is one of most wonderful composers ever.'

'It's always been hard for the public to grasp his music,' says Sudbin. 'I think it's partly because it's quite complex music but at the same time, there's something universal about it. You feel you've heard it somewhere. The rhythm is so original in his music. His tunes are very complex and very contrapuntal, but very unique as well. You really need to listen to his music many times to really get what it's about. When you hear it for the first time, it's difficult to understand straight away. I always try to put some Medtner pieces in my recitals. It's really sad how it turned out for him. He deserves more attention than he gets.'

Before he came to the record the Rachmaninov disc, which includes Horowitz's version of Rachmaninov's Sonata No 2, he had listened to and admired the Horowitz recording. He was also impressed by Van Cliburn's version and by 'a crazy recording by Joseph Villa, a rather unknown pianist. Apparently it was his last recital before he died, which you certainly wouldn't be able to tell from the powerful playing.' But Sudbin put all these recordings to one side when it came time to prepare for his own recording: 'When I learn a piece I try not to listen too much to recordings because you don't really want to make a recording of another one. In practice, subconsciously, you'll still have something stuck there. I think it's important to use recordings as educational material and I certainly spend a lot of time thinking about interpretation and trying different things, especially in performances.'

'I had to decide between all 555 Scarlatti sonatas for the recording. That took me a month to do. Practising them actually took less time'

Sudbin recently recorded Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto and Medtner's First Piano Concerto with the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra under John Neschling. 'Some people might think it is strange that a Russian person would record in Brazil, but I thought there was no problem. They're a really good orchestra and I enjoyed working with them.' Given his passion for the little-known composer Nicolas Medtner (see box), he seems to be particularly pleased with this release. 'I'm surprised BIS allowed me to do that – to juxtapose one of the most recorded concertos with one of the least recorded concertos.' Sudbin likes the recording studio and the concert hall equally, although he admits the recording process exhausts him. After the Rachmaninov session, he says, 'I came back from Stockholm and spent about three weeks in bed.'

But there's a down side to performing as well, he says: 'I'm always quite nervous before a concert.' But he's found ways to cope. 'Well, first of all, practice! But the other thing is you should always run your programmes through and have warm-up concerts. That kills about 50 per cent of your nerves, because no matter how much you've practised, it's not the same.' On his first US tour, he had to repeat the very same programme in ten different venues. He wasn't bored, though. 'I thought that was very exciting, because every concert I felt it progressed and I found new things to do.'

Preparing for performance

For Sudbin, performing is a learning process. 'For me, one of the most important things is the mental challenge, to find the right sort of mind. It almost becomes like a routine that you can improve every single time: What do you think about, how do you prepare yourself mentally? How do you get from first time you learn a piece to the minute just before you walk on stage?'

He learns new things even from the worst situations, such as a festival in Switzerland a few years ago: 'I had contact lenses, I lost them. My glasses broke, so I was basically blind. I had a cold, and my flight was delayed. Then when I arrived there was no time to rehearse – so anything that could go wrong did go wrong. I thought it would be a complete disaster, but when I played, I actually really enjoyed it.'

Sudbin is also an enthusiastic chamber musician. He's collaborated with violinists Ilya Gringolts (a regular partner), Hilary Hahn and Julia Fischer as well as the Chilingirian Quartet. With cellist Alex Chaushian, he recently recorded Weinberg's complete music for cello and piano. 'Chamber music is a different art than playing solos or concertos. It opens up your ears a lot, because you have to listen to so much more than yourself. You're on completely equal terms with your partner and it's fascinating.'

Playing chamber music is a big step away from that lonely pianist's practice room, I suggest, and Sudbin agrees. 'The problem with pianists and especially Russian pianists, is that they don't get a lot of training in chamber music. I know a lot of Russian pianists who have problems when they come to the West, particularly in competitions where they have to do chamber music. They find themselves underprepared.' So chamber music experience helps when you play concertos and have to work together with an orchestra? 'Yeah, but playing concertos with orchestras is kind of selfish – you're supposed to be the king. They're supposed to follow you. Many conductors would disagree with that statement,' he laughs. Let's hope that Osmo Vänskä, a conductor Sudbin has long admired, feels the same way when the two work together in the autumn.

Though he's now playing with major artists in large venues, Sudbin is still keen to play in smaller settings, such as musical society concerts, in part because of the audiences: 'You find more knowledgeable people there than you find when you play in at bigger halls. I noticed that, because after concerts they ask really intelligent questions and sometimes know more than me!' Sudbin's diary is quickly filling up with engagements for concerts and recitals at many types of venues. He's looking forward to tackling Haydn, Chopin, Shostakovich, the Rachmaninov Fourth Concerto (he's recording the work with the North Carolina Symphony next year) and, of course, more Medtner. It's clear there's a rich and rewarding future ahead for this talented young Russian. ■

In Concert

- **BUXTON FESTIVAL** (15 July)
 - **ASPEN FESTIVAL, USA** (3 Aug)
 - **LA ROQUE D'ANTHERON, FRANCE** (10 Aug)
 - **MALVERN CONCERT SOCIETY** (27 Sep)
 - **WIGMORE HALL** (15 Oct)
 - **US TOUR** (30 Oct-11 Nov)
- For more details, visit www.yevgenysudbin.com

On disc

- **MEDTNER: PIANO CONCERTO NO 1; TCHAIKOVSKY: PIANO CONCERTO NO 1**
São Paulo SO/
John Neschling (cond)
BIS-SACD-1588
- **RACHMANINOV: SONATA NO 3; CHOPIN VARIATIONS**
BIS SACD 1518
- **SCARLATTI: KEYBOARD SONATAS**
BIS CD 1508