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THE SYMBOLISM OF NIKOLAI MEDTNER'S «FAIRY TALES» ON THE EXAMPLE OF «FAIRY TALES» OP.8 NO.1

Annotation

«Fairy Tales» as a unique genre of piano music, which received a vivid implementation in the work of the pianist and composer of the first half of the twentieth century Nikolai Medtner, deserve special attention. In this study, we propose to consider the symbolic content of the composer's piano «Fairy Tales», created in the heyday of the ideas of symbolism of the «Silver Age» and revealing some parallels with the work of Alexander Scriabin. The focus of our article is «Fairy Tale» op. 8 No. 1 as a source of motifs in the composer's subsequent tales.

The artistic images and philosophical aspects of Fairy Tales, features of texture and harmony, performing manner, as well as some issues of their influence on performing practice are analyzed. Particular attention is paid to the method of shaping, the use of harmonic solutions and expressiveness of means. The work emphasizes the importance of «Fairy Tales» as a musical and cultural phenomenon that combines the traditions of Russian music and Medtner's individual worldview.

Such an analysis in a comprehensive consideration of the compositional, intonation, textural and harmonic features of «Fairy Tales» and the identification of theme symbols is carried out for the first time. On the basis of the analysis, characteristic intonation complexes/moves are identified that repeat motifs and other features in different opuses that allow us to talk about the presence of certain theme symbols. This study not only provides new insights into Medtner's compositional language, but also opens up promising avenues for future musicological research, particularly in the area of symbolic analysis and the study of thematic motifs in the works of other composers of the Silver Age.

Key words

Nikolay Medtner, symbolism, «Fairy Tales», piano music, musical analysis, theme-symbol.

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НИКОЛАЙ МЕТНЕРДІҢ ОР.8 №1 «ЕРТЕГІЛЕР» МЫСАЛЫНДАҒЫ «ЕРТЕГІЛЕР» СИМВОЛИКАСЫ

Аннотация

«Ертегілер» фортепиано музыкасының бірегей жанры ретінде ХХ ғасырдың бірінші жартысындағы пианист және композитор Николай Метнердің шығармашылығында жарқын көрініс тапқан. Аталған зерттеуде «күміс дәуірінің» символизм идеясының гүлдену дәуірінде жасалған және Александр Скрябиннің шығармашылығымен кейбір параллельдерді анықтайтын композитордың фортепиано «Ертегілерінің» символикалық мазмұнын қарастыруды ұсынамыз. Мақаламыздың назарында «Ертегілер» бар. Біздің мақаланың т ақырыбы «Ертегі» оп. 8 №1 композитордың кейінгі ертегілеріндегі мотив-рәміздердің қайнар көзі ретінде.

Ертегілердің көркемдік бейнелері мен философиялық аспектілері, фактура мен үйлесімділіктің, орындаушылық әдептің ерекшеліктері, сондайақ олардың орындаушылық практикаға әсерінің кейбір мәселелері талданады. Пішін жасау әдісіне, үйлесімді шешімдерді пайдалануға және құралдардың мәнерлілігіне ерекше назар аударылады. Жұмыста орыс музыкасы дәстүрі мен Метнердің жеке дүниетанымын біріктіретін музыкалық және мәдени құбылыс ретінде «Ертегілердің» маңыздылығы атап өтіледі.

«Ертегілердің» композициялық, интонациялық, фактуралық және гармоникалық ерекшеліктерін кешенді қарауда осындай талдау және нышандарды анықтау алғаш рет жүргізіледі. Талдау негізінде әртүрлі опустарда белгілі бір нышандардың болуы туралы айтуға мүмкіндік беретін уәждер мен басқа да ерекшеліктерді қайталайтын тән интонациялық кешендер/жүрістер анықталады. Бұл зерттеу тек Метнердің композициялық тілін жаңа тұрғыдан ашып қана қоймай, сонымен қатар, болашақ музыка зерттеушілеріне, әсіресе символистік талдау және Серебряный ғасырдың басқа композиторларының шығармаларындағы тақырыптық мотивтерді зерттеу саласында жаңа мүмкіндіктер ұсынады.

Түйінді сөздер

Николай Метнер, символизм, «Ертегілер», фортепиано музыкасы, музыкалық талдау, тақырып-символ.

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СИМВОЛИКА «СКАЗОК» НИКОЛАЯ МЕТНЕРА НА ПРИМЕРЕ «СКАЗКИ» ОР.8 №1

Аннотация

«Сказки» как уникальный жанр фортепианной музыки, получивший яркое претворение в творчестве пианиста и композитора первой половины XX века Николая Метнера, заслуживают особого внимания. В данном исследовании предлагаем рассмотреть символическое содержание фортепианных «Сказок» композитора, созданных в эпоху расцвета идей символизма «серебряного века» и обнаруживающих некоторые параллели с творчеством Александра Скрябина. В поле зрения нашей статьи находится «Сказка» ор. 8 № 1 как источник мотивов-символов в последующих сказках композитора.

Анализируются художественные образы и философские аспекты «Сказок», особенности фактуры и гармонии, исполнительской манеры, а также некоторые вопросы их влияния на исполнительскую практику. Особое внимание уделяется методу формообразования, использованию гармонических решений и выразительности средств. В работе подчеркивается значимость «Сказок» как музыкального и культурного явления, которое объединяет традиции русской музыки и индивидуальное мировоззрение Метнера.

Подобный анализ в комплексном рассмотрении композиционных, интонационных, фактурных и гармонических особенностей «Сказок» и выявление тем-символов производится впервые. На основе анализа выявляются характерные интонационные комплексы/ходы, повторяющиеся в разных опусах мотивы и другие особенности, позволяющие говорить о наличии определенных тем-символов. Это исследование не только дает новые идеи о композиционном языке Метнера, но и открывает перспективы для будущих музыковедческих исследований, особенно в области символистского анализа и изучения тематических мотивов в произведениях других композиторов Серебряного века.

Ключевые слова

Николай Метнер, символизм, «Сказки», фортепианная музыка, музыкальный анализ, тема-символ.

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Introduction. The creative work of Nikolai Medtner occupies a unique place in the history of Russian music. "An original composer and gifted pianist, he represented a rare type of harmonious creative personality, combining the roles of the artist-creator and the artist-interpreter" (Danilova 2018, 135). Despite the composer's significant contribution, his works, particularly the "Fairy Tales" genre, remain insufficiently studied and rarely performed on the modern concert stage. Unlike the large-scale symphonic works of Rachmaninoff or the mystical experiments of Scriabin, Medtner's "Fairy Tales" are chamber music miniatures with profound philosophical and figurative content. "The genre of the fairy tale became for the composer a creative laboratory, in which he experimented with form, texture, musical images, and characters" (Danilova 2018, 114). Their study allows not only an in-depth understanding of the composer's musical language but also a better understanding of his aesthetic views and the cultural context of the era. "Music critics generally agreed that all the best specific features of Medtner's compositional talent are fully revealed in his poetic fairy tales" (Dolinskaya 2013, 133; 2023).

However, the study of Medtner's "Fairy Tales" encounters several challenges. Firstly, there is a lack of analytical and interpretive works dedicated to this genre. Secondly, the symbolic and philosophical aspects of

these works remain insufficiently explored, hindering their full understanding. Thirdly, the limited performance tradition prevents their popularization and comprehension within the academic community.

The choice of Medtner's "Fairy Tales" as the subject of this research is justified by their unique place in the history of piano music. Inspired by Russian literature, philosophy, and poetic allusions, they differ from the programmatic works of other composers in that they are a kind of parables—subtle reflections on life, time, and human existence. Stasyuk and Vinyarska rightly note that "the piano pieces of N.K. Medtner are not only creatively autonomous, complete, and integral works, but also form a unique philosophical concept, where each piece is an important link in the development of the entire artistic series" (Gerasimova 2023, 121).

The title "Fairy Tales" itself evokes strong cultural associations and emphasizes their connection with the traditions of Russian and European culture. The study of Medtner's "Fairy Tales" holds not only historical and theoretical value but also practical significance. It will help expand our understanding of Russian musical heritage at the beginning of the 20th century, reveal new facets of the philosophical and symbolic content of Medtner's music, and provide pianists with new interpretative approaches. "In the works of N.K. Medtner, the

composer's annotation occupies a special place. The texts of his piano compositions are an example of the composer's desire to express his ideas as accurately as possible" (Gerasimova 2021, 81).

Research Methods. The study of Medtner's "Fairy Tales" requires the use of various research methods that allow for a deeper understanding of their artistic value and performance features. In this research, methods such as holistic analysis and structural analysis have been employed, providing a detailed examination of the pieces' structure, harmony, melody, rhythm, and other components. The stylistic and comparative methods helped to determine the place of the "Fairy Tales" in the context of Medtner's work and Russian music, revealing the uniqueness and innovation of the composer. The application of these methods in combination allowed for a comprehensive understanding of Medtner's "Fairy Tales," uncovering their depth and multifaceted nature.

Literature review. The works of researchers on Medtner's creativity are not as diverse, yet substantial fundamental studies have been written about him, particularly by the renowned pianist Isaac Zetzel (1981) and musicologist Elena Dolinskaya (2013), providing a detailed account of the composer's life and work. Significant insights into Medtner's value system and worldview can be drawn from his autobiographical opus (1978), as well as

from works by Western European researchers such as Rimm Robert (2002) and Martyn Barrie (2016), based on personal interactions and memories of Medtner's contemporaries.

In our study, we also refer to more recent works examining the "Fairy Tales" genre in Medtner's compositions, which present various approaches to analyzing the composer's works. For example, general information about the genre, its origins, characteristics, and distinguishing features is provided in articles by L. Bazhutina (2022), where particular attention is given to identifying the peculiarities of the composer's musical language. S. Gerasimova (2023) suggests classifying the "Fairy Tales" into groups based on their figurative-genre characteristics and analyzes two "Fairy Tales" (2022) (op. 14 No. 2, op. 34 No. 4), highlighting the themes of knightly imagery and their representation. Another work by the author (2021) is especially valuable in the context of performance interpretation, where Medtner's annotations in the "Fairy Tale" in C minor op. 8 No. 1 are analyzed and different performances are compared.

The semantics of artistic images and structural features of the four "Fairy Tales" op. 35 are explored in the research by K. Stasyuk and V. Vinyarska (2022). A separate body of works is dedicated to the composer's annotations in performance interpretations of Medtner's compositions (Danilova 2018,

Dolinskaya 2013, Gevorkyan 2020). These studies focus on the emotional aspects of performance, the use of rubato, vibrating pedal, sound palette, and so on.

Thus, the presented works complement each other. For instance, the performance studies by Zetel, Gerasimova, and Danilova, the semantic aspects explored by Stasyuk and Vinyarska, complement the theoretical works of Bazhutina and Dolinskaya, creating a comprehensive picture of the "Fairy Tale" genre in Medtner's works.

Medtner is often regarded as a representative of the Symbolist era, and the composer himself frequently highlighted the importance of symbols in his work. However, there are few studies dedicated to identifying and examining the characteristic intonations and symbolic themes in his compositions (similarly to the symbols in Scriabin's work, for instance). In this regard, to identify such themes, this study includes a panoramic review of Medtner's "Fairy Tales," with the analytical example focusing on the "Fairy Tale" in C minor op. 8 No. 1.

The results of the study. The unique genre of the "Fairy Tale" in music emerged in the 19th century under the influence of Romantic tendencies. This period was marked by composers' search for new expressive forms and an interest in folk art, folklore, and literature. The "Fairy Tale" genre reflected the desire to musically convey not only plot-based, but also fantastical

and poetic images, characteristic of literary fairy tales. Parallels can be drawn with genres that arose at the intersection of literature and music, such as ballads, poems, and rhapsodies.

Medtner was the first to apply the term "Fairy Tale" (or "Märchen" in German) to a musical composition. His piano "Fairy Tales" became vivid examples of the genre. Medtner introduced a new understanding of the "Fairy Tale"—as a philosophical and poetic form of musical expression, distinct from earlier works, which were narrative compositions based on fairy tale plots.

Key features of Medtner's "Fairy Tales" include typical traits of Romantic program music: fantastic imagery, improvisational qualities, and a lyric-dramatic character. Through these features, the composer was able to convey figurative content, demonstrate the free development of musical themes, and build an associative form. "The composer's tendency toward programmatic music is fully revealed in the genre of the fairy tale" (Gerasimova 2022, 28). In the "Fairy Tales," one can hear a combination of narrative and emotional elements, as well as a sense of mystery and magic.

It is important to note that Medtner composed during a time when musical art was undergoing significant changes. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, there was a crisis in Romantic aesthetics, and composers were searching for new forms of

expressiveness (Ponomareva 2022). Against the backdrop of radical experiments, Medtner remained loyal to classical traditions, which made him stand out and even contrast with his contemporaries⁶. "Medtner cannot be called a bold innovator or, much less, a revolutionary in art, but the creative reinterpretation of classical traditions allowed him to say his word about life—not only the past, but in many ways the present" (Zetel' 1981, 61).

Another important figure of the 20th century was A. Scriabin, who was drawn to mysticism and created a "mystery of sounds." In his music, a clear departure from classical tonality and harmony can be traced. Medtner rejected Scriabin's mysticism and innovations, considering them a "delusion." Unlike Scriabin, who sought cosmic generalizations, Medtner looked for harmony in philosophical reflections on the human soul and nature. Despite significant differences in their musical languages and philosophies, interesting parallels can be found between these two outstanding composers. Both were

deeply thoughtful individuals, for whom music was a means of expressing not only emotions but also philosophical ideas. Medtner and Scriabin were both influenced by Symbolism as an important cultural phenomenon of their time. It is no coincidence that both composers had close ties with Symbolist circles, and each was influenced by A. Belyi in one way or another.

While Scriabin's music is based on mythopoetic ideas and serves as a unique expression of the Symbolist aspiration to transcend earthly existence, to search for absolute spiritual light and mystical ecstasy, Medtner's Symbolism is of a different kind—philosophical and moral rather than mystical. Thus, the works of Medtner and Scriabin represented two facets of Symbolist culture—ecstatic and contemplative.

The central genre embodying the idea of Symbolism in Medtner's work was the "Fairy Tale," as an allegorical musical composition, akin to philosophical parables. "All the fairy tales follow the same 'scenario.' They

⁶ Nikolai Medtner was surrounded by a musical environment from an early age and gradually developed a unique style based on a combination of deep philosophical reflection on music and adherence to classical traditions. His formation as a musician was influenced by his family, teachers, cultural movements, and the great composers of the past. Medtner deeply studied the works of classical and Romantic composers, which had a significant impact on his creative style (L.V. Beethoven, J. Brahms, F. Chopin, R. Schumann, F. Schubert). Medtner's brother, Emil Medtner, was a well-known music critic

and had a great influence on Nikolai's philosophical understanding of music—he instilled in him an interest in Symbolism and the philosophical aspects of art. At a time when Scriabin, Stravinsky, and Prokofiev were developing new musical forms, Medtner remained a supporter of classical tonality and strict form. Medtner developed his own unique style, rooted in the past but filled with a deep personal philosophy, which made him one of the most significant figures in Russian musical culture.

begin with an introduction based on independent thematic material, performing the function of a prologue, and end with a fading coda-epilogue" (Bazhutina 2022, 6). Let us turn to the composer's early works.

The "Fairy Tale" op. 8 No. 1 is a striking example of Medtner's early work, combining a rich harmonic language with an individual style. In this piece, Medtner demonstrates a tendency to use unusual cadences with alterations and deviations to distant keys. These harmonic solutions give the work a special expressiveness and

depth. The composer also frequently uses closely related harmonic arrangements and unique doublings, creating an effect of "density" in the sound. This gives the music the richness and intensity characteristic of his style.

Descending melodic lines in the right hand create a sense of immersion, which may symbolize a transition into a mythical or subconscious space. This is a typical element of Symbolism, associated with the image of descending into the depths of the inner world. This motif is reinforced in the "Fairy Tales" as a motif of immersion:



Figure 1. "Fairy Tale" op. 8 No. 1 "Motif of Immersion"

Repeating rhythmic motifs with a tendency towards slowing down may evoke the movement of time or the cyclic nature of events, which is an important concept in Symbolism. The

second characteristic motif—the swirling sixteenth notes—serves as a motif of cyclicity:



Figure 2. "Fairy Tale" op. 8 No. 1 "Motif of Cyclicity"

Motifs with a gradual ascent or descent of chromaticism can be found. In Medtner's Symbolist music, this can be interpreted as the growth of inner tension or a path towards

enlightenment. In Scriabin's works, such chromatic progressions often serve as a means to symbolize spiritual ascent or a transition to a higher reality.



Figure 3. "Fairy Tale" op. 8 No. 1 "Motif of Tension"

The indication of the emotional tone of the piece immediately draws attention to internal experiences and

melancholy – an important theme in Symbolist aesthetics.



Figure 4. "Fairy Tale" op. 8 No. 1 "Motif of Melancholy"

Sudden bursts of chords can be interpreted as symbols of unexpected or mystical interventions, which are characteristic of fairy tale and philosophical themes. Scriabin also

actively used powerful chords as a symbol of revelations and ecstatic states (for example, in his "Poem of Fire").



Figure 5. "Fairy Tale" op. 8 No. 1 "Motif of Mystical Intervention"

Medtner uses harmonies with added dissonances, which aligns him with the Symbolist harmonic experiments of Scriabin.

The analysis of Medtner's first "Fairy Tale" has revealed key symbolic images, hidden philosophical allusions, and distinctive features of the composer's musical language, characteristic of the "fairy tale" genre. The symbols in the "Fairy Tale" reflect Medtner's worldview and are closely intertwined with the ideas of Symbolism in his time. As Bazhutina notes, "Symbolism in Medtner's music is a way of conveying not direct, but metaphysical reality, hidden behind familiar musical structures," which emphasizes the philosophical depth of his works.

Particular attention is drawn to the discovery of intersections between Medtner's figurative and harmonic symbolism and Alexander Scriabin's mystical musical language. Despite differences in their philosophical approaches, their creative interaction is evident in the use of associative images, chromatics, and symbolic musical

progressions that express movement, spiritual search, and inner transformation.

Conclusion. The identified intonational complexes, harmonic features, and textural solutions form the basis for understanding Medtner's unique approach to musical expressiveness. This opens up opportunities for further study of Medtner's "Fairy Tales," including the identification of motifs and symbols used in various figurative contexts. This, in turn, may provide a solid foundation for exploring performance interpretations of his works and contribute to their popularization on the modern stage.

The results emphasize the significance of Medtner's "Fairy Tales" as a distinct genre of early 20th-century piano music. They help clarify the place of these works within the context of the composer's overall creative output and in the broader landscape of musical culture, creating new opportunities for the study and interpretation of their symbolic content.

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