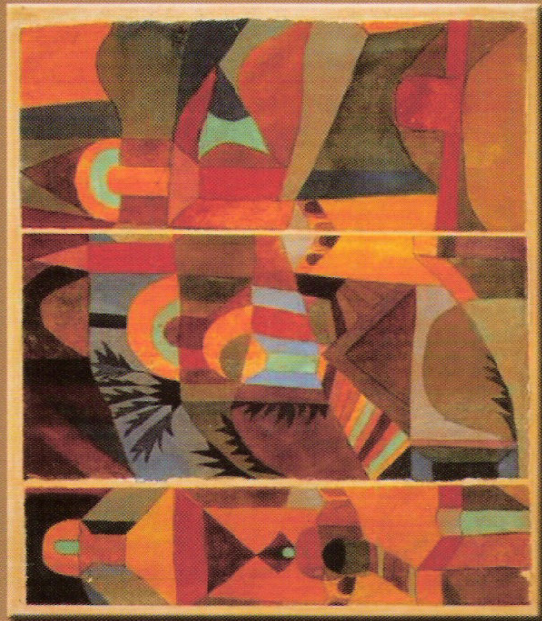


PROKOFIEV SHOSTAKOVICH MEDTNER

PIANO SONATAS



— Tatjana Rankovich, piano —

PHCD 158

Piano Sonatas of Prokofiev/Medtner/Shostakovich Tatjana Rankovich PHCD 158

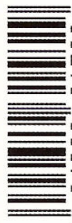
PROKOFIEV SHOSTAKOVICH MEDTNER

PIANO SONATAS

Tatjana Rankovich, piano

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Recorded  
Recorded 9/02-12/03  
Editing by Joseph Patrych  
Cover Design and  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER  
JEFFREY KAUFMAN  
Cover Art: Paul Klec

File under Classical/Medtner



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**SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891-1958)**

Sonata No.2 in D minor Op. 14

19:28

1. Allegro ma non troppo
2. Scherzo, Allegro marcato
3. Andante
4. Vivace

**NIKOLAI MEDTNER (1880-1951)**

Sonata "Reminiscenza" in A minor, Op. 38, No.1 15:30

5. Allegretto tranquillo (andante con moto).  
Svegliando (con moto).  
Tempo 1 concertando

**DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)**

Sonata No. 2 in B minor, Op. 64

27:30

6. Allegretto
7. Largo
8. Moderato

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The Second Sonata stands out for its individual charms and the precocious manner in which it establishes the lyrical style and multi-movement format of Prokofiev's middle and later-period sonatas. While the formal aspects of its four movements are straightforward, the lyrical fabric is full of characteristic surprises. In the opening *Allergo ma non troppo*, a passionately romantic idea bursts forth only to run headlong into a retarding metronomic figure. Another metronomic idea with a faster pulse follows, introducing more of the motoric rhythms, already a Prokofiev trademark, that provide the driving force of the development section. The second thematic material takes us from duplo to triple meter with a dreamily enchanting waltz. The section is a tidy affair, perhaps too cautious in not overstepping its bounds.

Motoric rhythms return in the delightfully charismatic swagger of the *Scherzo*, a toccata-like companion to the independent and more austere piano piece, *Toccata*, Op. 11, written the same year.

The nocturnal cantilena of the *Andante* takes us into the dreamy realm that also characterizes the slow movements of later works such as the Fifth Symphony and the Sixth Piano Sonata. Here, Prokofiev's extraordinary lyrical eloquence rises to the occasion with a set of broadly stretching melodies that hold the listener spellbound. The music moves hypnotically through a number of exotic modulations toward a point of glowing intensity, then subsides.

The final movement gallops along energetically, pausing along the way to recall the waltz theme from the first movement. Prokofiev included the sonata in his much-hailed American debut in New York – in November, 1918. The New York Times described the finale as having "evoked visions of a charge of mammoths on some vast immemorial Asiatic plateau."

The music of **Nikolai Medtner** (1880-1951) is something of an acquired taste. Though it is eminently accessible and can claim enthusiastic followers, it regrettably remains as much in the margins today as it did during Medtner's lifetime. In his native Russia Medtner was hailed as one of the country's leading pianists, composers, and teachers. Yet during his self-imposed exile in the West, he struggled for recognition. The fact that his music shuns any and all modernistic trends did not suit the tastes of 1920s Paris, where Medtner first emigrated and where he eventually ran into serious financial troubles. He found a much warmer reception in England, where he permanently settled in 1935 and found belated support from a number of benefactors. From his student days at the Moscow Conservatory onward, his work looks back with uncanny kinship to past models such as Brahms, Beethoven and Schumann. His keyboard style, however, is often compared to that of his close friend and fellow ex-patriot, Rachmaninov. Yet in contrast to Rachmaninov's flair for sweeping, extroverted gestures and lushly expansive melody, Medtner's music invites the listener into a private world of creativity, one that is revealed through musical events that take place on a much smaller scale. Therein lies the stamp of this sublimely original composer. One comes to appreciate the lyrical concentration of a Medtner sonata, where short melodic ideas are woven together into an all-embracing argument of seamless logic. His gift for melody, whether in his piano music or his more than 100 songs, was irreplaceable. The *Sonata Reminiscentia*, the tenth of his fourteen unnumbered sonatas, is a superb example of the jewel-like beauty and craftsmanship of his art.

It comes as no small surprise that the piano sonata, which has been a staple of Western music since the 18th Century, only rose to ascendancy in Russia during the 20th Century. There appears to have been a patent avoidance of the form by Russian composers. Of the "Mighty Handful", only Balakirev produced a piano sonata of note, and then only his late masterpiece of 1905. Preceding that, Tchaikovsky's 1878 sonata seems to stand as the only rule-proving exception. But with the concomitant rise of conservatory training and the professional status of musicians in the latter half of the 19th Century, an enormous vacuum was soon filled. An inventory of piano sonatas written by Russian composers between 1892 and 1949 – what might be called the "golden age" of the Russian piano sonata – reveals an explosion of interest in the form: Medtner (14), Scriabin (10), Prokofiev (9), Minskovsky (9), Roshavetz (6), Kabalevsky (3), Shostakovich (2), Glazunov (2).

The present disc offers a colorful sampling of sonatas from the "golden age" with examples by three of its most illustrious exponents: Prokofiev's Second Sonata and Medtner's *Sonata Reminiscentia*, both written in the years surrounding the First World War and the Bolshevik uprising; and Shostakovich's Second Sonata, dating from the period of the Second World War. Different as these three works are from one another, the Beethoven legacy remains an ineluctable part of their formal and dramatic design. The preference for terse motifs in the Medtner and Shostakovich sonatas can also be traced to Beethoven. As with much Russian music of the 19th and 20th Centuries, one also finds in these works a certain tension between the respect for conformity to the classical models and the fierce need for independence, the latter borne of Russia's geographic isolation and strong national identity.

Each of the three sonatas is very much a product of its time and place. The environment of political and artistic turmoil in the early part of the 20th Century elicited a very different response from Prokofiev, a precocious conservatory student brazenly challenging textbook conventions, as compared to Medtner, a well-established musical reactionary whose sonata is laced with reveries of the past. Shostakovich's sonata, on the other hand, written at the height of his career, serves as both a personal tribute to the loss of a friend and a profound reflection on a nation recovering from a genocidal occupation.

**Sergei Prokofiev** (1892-1953) is an acknowledged titan of 20th Century piano composition. His five concerti and nine sonatas are more than just concert hall favorites. They constitute milestones that have expanded the virtuosic possibilities of the instrument and opened up new formal and expressive directions. For Prokofiev the keyboard inspired unflagging exuberance and fresh technical challenges, allowing him to combine a Lisztian brand of virtuosity with his own boldly individual strokes of melody and harmony. His sonatas, clustered into three periods, trace a progressive evolution that ever widened the scope of the form. The first four sonatas already show a force to be reckoned with. The leap of progress between the First (1907-1909) and Second (1912) Sonatas is already Olympian, taking us from a rather imitative 19th Century language to a remarkably early blossoming of maturity. In between the two works, Prokofiev wrote a fair number of character pieces that show an individual voice emerging. He also made an early start on what would later become his Third and Fourth Sonatas (in 1907 and 1908, respectively), both of which were revised in 1917.

If the drama of Medtner's *Sonata Tragica* of 1920 is a direct response to the turmoil of the times, the sentimental restraint of the *Sonata Reminiscenza*, 1918, suggests a personal withdrawal into the past. Throughout, the mood is tender. The themes have the delicate quality of a personal confession. The work has the charming feature of being couched in a pair of identical bookends, a lovely, falling two-note idea with a gentle rocking motion that rises pleadingly, then falls back to a state of repose. It turns up once more in the middle of the work, again in recitative fashion, though the careful ear will hear a subtle hint of it once or twice in the development section. The principal sonata ideas follow, each one typically brief and each marked by its own distinguishing rhythm. One is a Brahmsian figure with a pronounced rhythmic stamp (three shorts and a long) that rises to a crest and extends into a set of related ideas of both similar and contrasting rhythm. The second principal material then appears, an inspiration worthy of song that falls and rises, then leads to a march-like motif in dotted rhythm. There follows a wonderfully flexible, totally idiosyncratic yet logically cohesive course of development in which the themes are woven together into an elegant synthesis by means of various schemes of alternation and fragmentation. After a recapitulation, the music returns to its tender starting point, lending a fairy-tale quality to the work.

In contrast to Prokofiev's and Medtner's prolific output for the piano, **Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906-1975) produced only two substantial works for the solo instrument in his maturity, the mammoth cycle of 24 *Preludes and Fugues* and the Second Piano Sonata. Both are unqualified masterpieces. The lesser-known Second Sonata was begun in the early months of 1943 when the composer was evacuated to Kutbyshev from his native city of Leningrad, still under Nazi occupation. Though a Soviet victory was soon declared, the population remained in a state of shock over the devastation and the enormous death toll exacted by the invasion. On a more personal note, Shostakovich was also grieved to learn of the recent death, in October of the previous year, of his former piano teacher and dear friend, Leonid Nikolayev. It is to Nikolayev that the sonata is dedicated. The impact of both personal and collective tragedies is clearly reflected in the sonata's pages.

The sonata falls into three classically structured movements – sonata, song form, and theme and variations – that progressively increase in expressive weight. In view of the grim times in which it was written, the work's seriousness and monumental scope are not surprising. Even Shostakovich's trademark humor, otherwise prankish and coquettish, only appears obliquely and by way of the occasional contradictory tones of the outer movements. Another distinguishing feature is the bleak, unconventional decor of the *Largo*, a gesture of commemoration and, given the notorious political climate, one of daring as well. The final movement secures the sonata's place as among the finest of the contemporary repertoire.

The *Alliegretto* is a bustling, extroverted affair with the declarative nature of a public sounding or cry of trepidation. It is obsessively pervaded by a pulse of dotted rhythms, a feature of all but one of the motifs, that build tension as well as structural cohesion. The dotted rhythms also throw into relief the only idea of contrasting rhythm, the falling two-note motif of the opening bars whose clangorous repetitions are suggestive of pealing bells. Notably, Shostakovich used the material of the more



lyrical second thematic group as the basis of the second movement, *Allegretto*, of his Eighth Symphony, written later that same year. The impression of bell ringing is further enhanced since the opening motif is eventually heard in all registers of the keyboard. The connection with the exalted Russian tradition of bell ringing as a mode of announcement or awakening fits into the sonata's overall design. Though the movement builds to a resonant peak, it concludes with the same high-strung energy with which it began, functioning in much the same way as the opening movement of Shostakovich's Piano Quintet (1940), like a "curtain raiser" for what is to follow.

The succeeding *Largo* stands apart from anything else that Shostakovich wrote in his maturity. Replacing the flowing lines of a typical Shostakovich slow movement is a stunningly bleak landscape, one etched out of short, halting phrases whose lyrical thread vainly searches for a point of repose. The central section offers only a slight hint of lyrical warmth. Otherwise, the mood is one of utter desolation, invoking pain to the point of numbness, an impression of life almost brought to a halt. Also not typical of a Shostakovich slow movement is the absence of a central climax; the music barely raises its voice. Its sparse textures and internalized expression of grief seems to look ahead to Shostakovich's final, death-haunted years. Yet there is just as much in this music that looks back in time. In manner of style and technique—the gray sonorities, the smoky filigrees, the searching ambience, the melodic irregularities—the movement bears a striking resemblance to the iconoclastic piano works of his youth, in particular the Lento section of the First Piano Sonata (1926) and the atmospheric corners of his *Aphorisms* (1927). The throwback to his experimental period would seem to be part of the tribute to the work's dedicatee, Nikolaev, the beloved piano teacher who at the time nurtured Shostakovich's compositional daring. The sense of loss over his dear friend's death could not be more deeply felt or more appropriately expressed.

From the ashes of the *Largo* follow the regenerative strains of the final movement, a theme and variations. A mighty set they are. If Shostakovich's *24 Preludes and Fugues* are his keyboard tribute to Bach, this movement is his ostensible homage to Beethoven. Indeed, the theme's ascending contour and foretold rhythm is as Beethovenian as it is Shostakovian, as is the emotional course of events the theme is taken through. This is music of symphonic scope, wherein the successive variations embrace a broad emotional tapestry of struggle, mourning, perseverance, tenderness, and exaltation, culminating in a final reflection. It the longest and weightiest movement of the sonata, as well as the most emotionally and intellectually engaging. It represents a triumph of the human spirit, and for Shostakovich, of his own powers of melodic invention. Notable among the variations is a later entry which gathers in summary fashion the principal features of the previous two movements: the falling two-note theme and dotted rhythms of the *Allegretto* and the dusky textures of the *Largo*. The concluding variation looks back with seasoned melancholy on the journey traveled.

Louis Blois

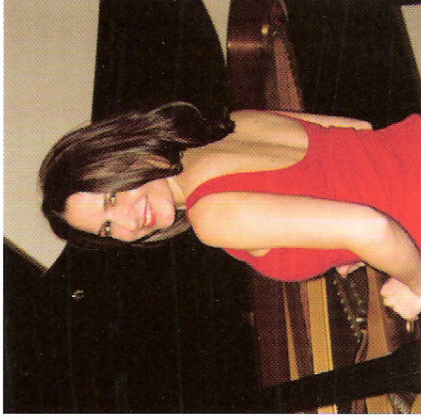


Photo - Joseph Parruch

One of the most versatile pianists of her generation, **Tatjana Rankovich** is an artist committed to continuously expanding the boundaries of traditional repertoire, constantly searching for and discovering new contemporary music and devoting her interest to performing rarely heard works of the past. An innate instinct to create a spectrum of different traditions and styles old and new, known and unknown, is the very essence of her artistry and takes place at every one of her concerts.

Ms. Rankovich is an enthusiastic advocate of 20th Century American music and has recorded and performed a number of premieres. She has revived little known masterworks by such composers as Nicolas Flagello, Vittorio Giannini and Paul Creston, and her performances and recordings of the music of these composers have received lavish praise. Reviewing her previous Phoenix USA release *American Piano Works*, Steve Schwartz wrote, "Rankovich, one of those miracle musicians who can make musical architecture breathe and come alive, can also thrill you just with her sound. I have seldom heard the musical climax to phrases so tellingly prepared for and placed without losing a sense of the thrust of the entire movement. To all intents and purposes, she's a moonwalker. She hasn't heard these pieces before. Later interpreters will take her readings into account." Her premiere recording of Flagello's Second and Third Piano Concertos with the Slovak Philharmonic was released to unanimous praise and chosen for one of the five "best of the year" in 1996 and again in 1999 by *Fanfare* magazine.

Born in Belgrade, Serbia, Tatjana Rankovich is a laureate of numerous first prizes and awards. She has performed throughout the USA, Canada, Europe, Central and South America and as a guest soloist with the Radio Belgrade Symphony, the Novi Sad Chamber Orchestra, the Zagreb Philharmonic and the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra. She studied at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, (former Yugoslavia), at the North Carolina School of the Arts and at The Juilliard School, where she earned Bachelors and Masters degrees. Her teachers have included Arbo Valdma, Benjamin Kaplan, Clifton Matthews and Josef Raieff.

Ms. Rankovich has also recorded for Artek, Naxos and Citadel Records. She is presently Faculty at the Mannes College of Music and was formerly Department Chair of the Preparatory Division. She resides in New York City.