

Alexander Malofeev, piano
Program Notes

***Sonata quasi una Fantasia* [Sonata No.14] in C# minor, Op. 27, No. 2**
“Moonlight”

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Few sonatas are so well known as the “Moonlight,” — or so misunderstood. Schoolchildren and adults alike too often think of this extraordinary work as synonymous with its ethereal first movement. The complete sonata consists of three movements, each of which breaks from tradition and builds tension, culminating in the veritable explosion of the finale. That wonderful opening *Adagio sostenuto* is a mood-piece entirely different from what audiences of 1801 would have expected at the beginning of a sonata. It turns accompaniment into melody and places odd emphasis on the unfolding of arpeggiated chords.

The sobriquet “Moonlight” is not Beethoven’s, but is attributed to Ludwig Rellstab, the German music critic, poet, and novelist. He purportedly likened the opening movement to ‘a boat visiting, by moonlight, the primitive landscapes of Vierwaldstättersee in Switzerland.’ Beethoven assigned this sonata the subtitle ‘*quasi una fantasia*,’ indicating a freedom of approach and an improvisatory quality that was, effectively, an emancipation proclamation from the structural demands of the classical sonata.

Beethoven dedicated the “Moonlight” sonata to Giulietta Guicciardi, a beautiful young Italian woman who came to Vienna in 1800 and studied with him. The 30-year-old composer fell promptly and hopelessly in love with her. He seems to have felt that his feelings were reciprocated, but ultimately the difference in their societal standing precluded any alliance. Those of a romantic persuasion may infer that the melancholy of the famous first movement and the turbulent rage of the last are expressions of a rejected lover’s frustration and grief. Certainly Beethoven explores a wide gamut of emotions in this sonata, but he does so with a subtle unity. The mournful slow arpeggios of the opening, accelerated and telescoped, become the frenetic rockets of the finale.

Piano Sonata No.17 in D minor, Opus 31, No.2, ‘Tempest’
Ludwig van Beethoven

According to the early biographer Anton Schindler, Beethoven stated the explanation for the so-called ‘Tempest’ sonata could be divined within

Shakespeare's eponymous play. The story is probably apocryphal. Nevertheless, Beethoven's tempestuous music, particularly in the first movement, earns the nickname on its own.

The 'Tempest' is Beethoven's sole sonata in D minor, traditionally a dark and stormy tonality. Yet tonal ambiguity prevails from the start, a mysterious *pianissimo* arpeggio in A major. Is the arpeggio part of the theme or a self-contained slow movement? Rapid appoggiaturas in the right hand erupt, colliding with a rising bass line: a frenzy of agitation and turbulence. A second storm wave—Beethoven's second theme--has yet to hit: a thunderous ascending D-minor arpeggio with response in the treble, mediated by an ominous tremolo in the middle register.

The A-major introductory gesture is almost the only major mode chord in the entire movement. Mysterious slow arpeggios recur in key places: inaugurating the development section, then marking the recapitulation. At the recap, a famous passage calls for right hand recitative with no release of the pedal. The blurred sonic effect was quite daring and attests to Beethoven's willingness to experiment. His use of recitative looks forward to the Ninth Symphony.

After such a dramatic start, the slow movement provides an eloquent, dignified oasis—but Beethoven connects the musical tissue by opening with yet another rolled chord, this time in B-flat major. His Adagio maximizes the use of the piano's lowermost register, with extensive passage work and rhythmic interest for left hand.

For the finale, Beethoven turns to perpetual motion in unrelieved arpeggios. Once again agitation dominates, barely controlled and always on the verge of demonic outburst. Beethoven's subtle rhythmic displacements deceive the ear; the pulse is not so regular as one thinks. Part of its genius is that the quiet passages sound just as ominous as the *forte* ones. Beethoven proves this by his *piano* ending.

Piano Sonata in G minor, Op.22 **Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951)**

Nikolai Medtner may be the most significant composer-pianist you've never heard of. In the first half of the 20th century, he was known as the 'Russian Brahms.' He wrote primarily piano music and songs; his three fine piano concerti also deserve to be heard. The solo keyboard works comprise 14 sonatas and more than 100 character pieces with fanciful titles, in the tradition of Schumann and Grieg.

Medtner came by his very un-Russian-sounding surname via his father, who was of Danish descent; his mother's roots were Swedish and German. He claimed Russian citizenship by virtue of being born in Moscow, where his family had established roots in the mid-19th century. Medtner matriculated at the Moscow Conservatory at age 12 and appeared to be headed toward a career as a virtuoso pianist; however, upon graduation in 1900, he opted instead for composition (though he continued to teach piano).

Like many Russian musicians, Medtner fled his homeland after the Revolution. He and his wife initially relocated to Berlin; however, the German capital's *avant-garde* scene had little appeal for the traditionalist Medtner. After an American concert tour in 1924-5, facilitated with assistance from Sergei Rachmaninoff, the Medtners settled in Paris for a couple of years. The French environment was only marginally more comfortable to the expatriate Russian. Eventually, he made his permanent home in London, where he continued to compose and perform insofar as his declining health permitted.

His style is best described as post-romantic. He wrote with key signatures, and though he embraced a wide range of chromaticism, he never strayed far from tonality. In terms of texture, his music is more perceptibly descended from Schumann and Brahms than, for example, Chopin and Liszt, who were the influential musical precursors of Medtner's contemporaries Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. In terms of form, however, Medtner was more adventurous. His fourteen piano sonatas treat formal structure with considerable freedom.

This G minor sonata, which dates from 1911, is an excellent example. Depending on one's perspective, it is in one, two, or three movements. The divisions depend in part on what liberties the performer takes during the *fermate* [temporary stops] between movements. His tempo indications change frequently, as do the interpretive instructions. These changes of mood and character give the sonata a rhapsodic character. While the sonata is nominally in G minor, the key signature changes several times, with segments in A-flat major, C minor, A minor, and D minor.

One doesn't necessarily perceive these changes of tonality because the writing is dense chordally, compounded by rapid chromatic shifts. Medtner has a compelling sense of rhythmic momentum that contributes to a feeling of gathering tension even during moments of calm. There are dazzling passages of rapid right hand filigree sixteenth notes above a melodic/harmonic foundation in the left hand; these

are sometimes reminiscent of Chopin. Ultimately the powerful chordal segments make a stronger overall impression. This is impressive and demanding keyboard writing that demands not only technique, but also a persuasive sense of musical architecture to bind together Medtner's abundance of ideas.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)
Etudes tableaux, Op. 33

With his choice of Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Etudes-tableaux* to close this evening's program, Mr. Malofeev touches on yet another corner of the abundant piano literature. Rachmaninoff is, of course, universally beloved for his magnificent piano concerti and several of his famous *Préludes*. Like Mozart and Chopin, he composed many of his greatest works for solo piano, including some miniatures that really fit into no standard category. The *Etudes-tableaux* are fine examples.

As their title implies, these pieces touch on two aspects of keyboard writing. *Etudes* are studies, each intended to address a specific technical challenge. The term *tableaux* implies a more conceptual, pictorial element, indicating a level of whimsy and imagination on the composer's part. Rachmaninoff composed two sets of *Etudes-tableaux*: Op. 33 in 1911, and Op. 39 in 1916-17. At its first performance, Opus 33 was assigned the title "Prelude-Pictures." These pieces are clearly more pictorial than technical, although each of them celebrates virtuosity and the heart-on-the-sleeve passion that is an unmistakable hallmark of Rachmaninoff's mature keyboard style.

There is confusion with respect to the numbering of the *Etudes-tableaux*. Two were published posthumously, and Rachmaninoff altered the order of the set more than once. The complete set embraces a variety of technical and emotional modes, including quasi-staccato bass in octaves, extended trills, right hand passage work racing almost the full expanse of the keyboard at lightning speed, and some thunderous climaxes. These are balanced by heart-rending lyricism and marvelous poetic melodies. Collectively, they provide a microcosm of Rachmaninoff's inimitable approach to the piano.

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