

Once Upon a Time

JENNY LU

Having recently completed her Masters candidature studying the concept of narrativity in Nikolai Medtner's works under Drs. Joel Crotty and Tamara Smolyar, Melbourne-based pianist Jenny Lu has a particular love for 20th- and 21st-century music. She is drawn to compositions of lesser-known composers, breathing new life into forgotten gems that have not been frequently played. Her affinity for the Romantic, post-Romantic, and new music eras has led to her playing works by Cecile Chaminade, Oddvar Lonner, Kaija Saariaho, Dmitri Shostakovich, Carl Vine, and obviously Nikolai Medtner to name a few.

As an ardent writer and voracious reader, truly a storyteller in all aspects of her life, Jenny writes fiction, poetry, prose, and academic journal articles. She contends herself in threading the convergence of literary and musical worlds.

TONY GOULD EMPATHY

Dr Tony Gould has made an outstanding contribution to Australian music over the course of a career spanning more than 40 years. As an extraordinary pianist, composer and pioneering music educator, Gould has brought a unique voice to Australian jazz, improvisational and classical music through his extensive involvement in both performance and music education.

(Biography taken from Australian Music Centre)

Empathy was written for and premiered by Dr Tamara Smolyar in 2013. Blossoming from an almost improvisatory introduction, the piece narrates the endearing empathy between musical genres, Jazz and Western Classical music, feelings and time.

PERCY GRAINGER COLONIAL SONG

Born in Melbourne, Percy Grainger was known for his piano performances, folk song arrangements, compositions and innovative fashion tastes. The Colonial Song was a gift to the composer's mother, who was British, and was first composed for 2 voices, harp and strings. Grainger described the piece as a folk song without using existing melodies that aimed to portray the Australian countryside. It was not received very well, in fact, Sir Thomas Beecham the conductor condemned it as the worst piece in the century. Grainger himself regarded the work as a fragment of sentiment. With a melody embedded in the ample harmonies, the composition paints a pastoral but luscious Australian landscape with a hint of nostalgia.

FRANZ LISZT HARMONIES POÉTIQUES ET RELIGIEUSES S.173 (1846-1849) VII.

FUNÉRAILLES

Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses (Poetic and Religious Harmonies) is a piano cycle with ten pieces, borrowing the title from a collection of poems by Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869). *Funérailles*, however, leads to a different narrative.

On 6 October 1849, Austrian general Julius von Haynau executed the Hungarian Prime Minister and thirteen leading generals as an imposition of terror to Hungary's unsuccessful Insurrection for Independence (1848-1849). Devastated by this ruthless bloodshed in his homeland, Franz Liszt (1811-1886) conjures in *Funérailles* (1849) a dramatic succession of a patriotic funeral.

The opening of the composition evokes the ominous wrenching of a bell that gathers a crowd to witness the execution as the chained prisoners laboriously amount their scaffold. Liszt paints glimpses of hope for freedom and memories of their loved ones that they will never behold again with the lyrical colour that reminisces the compositions of Frederick Chopin, who also deceased in 1849. *Funérailles* is also imbued with defiant outcries for justice, an impression of the battlefield before tearing the audience back to the drastic reality of the execution. The seventh and the most well-known piece in the cycle *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses* S.173, *Funérailles* is a powerful blend of profundity and homage to Liszt's patriotism.

ELENA KATS-CHEERNIN RUSSIAN RAG

Born in 1957 in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), Elena Kats-Chernin immigrated to Australia in 1975 and is now one of the most performed female Australian composers with creative output touching almost every genre. She writes:

This piece was originally written in 1996 for a pianist Donna Coleman, as a commission from ABC Classics, for her CD "Rags to Riches". It was my first ever Ragtime and it has a slightly nostalgic feel, with a slight reference to Russian Cafe Music.

The charming melody of this Rag saw many arrangements for various ensembles since, most notably for piano trio (clarinet, cello and piano) and violin, harp, strings with marimba. The quirky wistfulness of this piece furthermore makes itself Max's theme in Adam Elliott's *Mary and Max*. The piece's dainty dance drifts momentarily to a day-dream in its middle section before bringing the narrative to a climax.

KAIJA SAARIAHO BALLADE (2005)

Born in 1952, Kaija Saariaho is a Finnish composer whose music is imbued with the timbral nuances and dramatic vigour of Spectralism. Spectralism defines a change in aesthetic thoughts, and through this perspective, the depiction of timbre becomes a forefront parameter of a composition. Leading figures who promote this perspective include composers such as Grisey (1946-1998), Murail (b.1947) and Teodorescu-Ciocanea (b.1959).

The fixed nature of the notes on the piano renders it not as convenient and versatile in manipulating its pitch constructions as the string instruments, for instance, which are capable of microtonal pitches. This obstacle makes the solo and unprepared piano a rare instrument in the spectral repertoire.

Written in 2005 for the pianist Emmanuel Ax and the first of Saariaho's two existing solo piano compositions (the other being *Prelude*, composed in 2007), *Ballade* (2005) presents a theme that is born from the depth of texture. As the piece progresses, Saariaho forges a diverse spectrum of portrayals that range from drastic *furioso* to mournful *tristemente*. The tension and release between various degrees of textural density paint the light and shade in the composition across extreme dynamics in a juxtaposition of *pianississimo* and *fortississimo*.

In doing so, *Ballade* treats the piano as an orchestra, exploring the instrument's capacity to facilitate tonal contrast in a polarity of registers that traverse the top and lowest octaves on the instrument.

NIKOLAI MEDTNER SONATA-SKAZKA OP.25 NO.1 (1910)

I. Allegro abbandonamente

II. Andantino con moto

III. Allegro con spirito

Nikolai Medtner (1880 -1951) was a Russian-born pianist, composer and a contemporary to Sergei Rachmaninoff. Medtner's compositions concentrated on the piano, consisting of numerous solo piano works, three piano concerti, but also more than a

hundred lieder and chamber duets with the violin. During the communist revolutionary period in Russia, he first fled to France and lived and died in England.

Unlike Rachmaninoff, Medtner's compositions received little popularity while exiled in England. This was perhaps the result of his prolific compositional style that was often criticised as complex and repetitive as well as his adamant Romantic contentions in an era when harbingers of Serialism engaged the public attention. A brief surge of interest in Medtner's compositions rose in the 1990s, during which period pianists such as Geoffrey Tozer and Hamish Milne recorded the full collection of his 14 piano sonatas. Nikolai Demidenko also recorded Medtner's piano concerti.

Medtner's belief that music is a form of language combined with his devotion to German and Russian poetry to inspire a keen avidity to design his compositions in a discursive manner that arguably reflects dramatic writing. Instead of portraying a written programme, Medtner used descriptive titles or reflective epigraphs that quote from Russian poems to suggest the discourse and inspiration behind the composition.

Sonata-Skazka is the first in the pair of piano sonatas in Op.25. The other Sonata in this opus bears the subtitle of the *Night Wind Sonata*, which has been associated with Fyodor Tyutchev's poem *Silentium*. Dedicated to the composer's cousin, the composer Alexander Goedicke, *Sonata-Skazka* embeds a narrative contention in the music through its allusion to the Russian literary genre of *skazka*, which most appropriately translates to 'tales' in English. Medtner composed this Sonata while staying at a provincial estate in Khovrino in 1910. The move

has been an attempt to alleviate the strains of society on his creativity. There has been no explicit indication of the narrative discourse intended for this sonata confirmed by the composer, although early scholars of Medtner's music such as Harold Truscott argues that its association with *skazka* denotes a collection of three interrelated trajectories.

In the opening movement, Medtner paints a yearning theme that is at times hesitant and tender but grows desperate and concludes in a bold declaration of passion. The second movement opens with a warm, lyrical theme that blossoms into fuller sonority. At the challenge of a descending chromatic motif, this movement breaks into a peal of semiquaver tolls. The original theme of this movement is reborn from the chaos with a fluttering ostinato, which pours into the third movement. The final movement, *allegro con spirit*, portrays a pompous liturgy that melts away pleading. A tragedy unfolds as this protagonist theme succumbs to the challenge of the musical materials that have been previously exposed in the composition.

NIKOLAI MEDTNER SKAZKI OP.34 (1916 – 1917)

- No.2 'When what we called our own, forever departs from us'**
- Fyodor Tyutchev
- No.4 'There once was a poor knight'**
-Alexander Pushkin

In 1905, Medtner first associated the term 'Skazka' with his compositions, which appeared in the form of a pair of character pieces in Op.8. He would compose over a hundred Skazki across his creative output in 33 collections. Medtner devised the genre

Skazka from the Russian narrative literary form that broadly ranges from legends of oral tradition, children's fables to epic poetry. The most appropriate English translation for the term is a tale, though it has mistakenly been translated as fairy tales in order to increase publicity.

Surveying the epigraphs in Medtner's *Skazki*, quotations from Shakespearean tragedies, poems from Romantic poets Johann von Goethe, Fyodor Tyutchev and Alexander Pushkin are the most frequent. The second *skazka* from the Op.34 set bears an epigraph 'when what we called our own, forever departs from us'. It musically depicts the opening stanzas of Tyutchev's poem *Peace* through an ostinato that illustrates the poem's river motif as the poet stands at the bank of a river and allows his sorrow to flow with its relentless torrents.

The fourth *skazka* in this collection of four pieces prompts a quotation from Pushkin's *the Poor Knight*. Pushkin's poem narrates the chivalrous tale of a paladin knight who fought for religious aspirations instead of worldly desires. Two slow-pacing, solemn themes govern this composition: the first portrays the role of the pious protagonist while the subsequent *pietoso* theme depicts an angelic prayer. The piece concludes in a depiction of an exuberant succession of Christmas church bells, heralding the knight's salvation.

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