

# Solitude

The synoptic Gospels tell us that Christ, after his baptism in the Jordan, was driven into the wilderness of Judea by the Spirit. After fasting for 40 days and wandering in solitude in the desert, he was tempted three times by the Devil. An unparalleled commentary on the Gospel accounts of this temptation is given by Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), in the parable of the Grand Inquisitor in his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Here let us leave on one side the fact that in this parable Dostoyevsky raises accusations against the Roman Catholic Church. What makes Dostoyevsky's interpretation of the temptation in the desert so incisive is that he brings into sharp focus how power is maintained in this world. The idea of turning stones into bread is not only an attempt to mislead Jesus into direct satisfying of needs without any moral considerations, it also involves confronting the hard truth that positions of power are maintained and consolidated by playing to the needs of the masses, and calls for an answer to this. The aim of the power-holders is to create an output impression of being elevated above everyday matters and of enjoying divine protection. Power, however, is profoundly dependent on making a genuflection towards evil and on the readiness to sell your soul to the Devil.

## Franz Liszt

It can be argued that the reputation of the romantic artist is based on the same principles. The rumours that circulated to the effect that Nicolò Paganini had made a pact with the Devil resulted from the way in which he presented himself to the world. It was not only that his violinistic skills were absolutely unearthly (with which he took advantage of a basic appetite for sensation), but in his whole appearance he conveyed the impression of coming from another world. The young Franz Liszt (1811-1886) modelled his career as a pianist directly on the example of Paganini. The result of this was the solo recital – the “one man show” for a pianist, without which musical life today is no longer imaginable, but which was seen at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the height of conceit. The outrage can however be easily understood when we realise that in his recitals Liszt did not usually play any great piano literature, but above

all gave spirited renditions of largely empty virtuosity. No wonder, then, that there was cynicism in the air when, in 1858, news reached the world that this same Franz Liszt had become a lay brother in the Franciscan Order in Pest (today Budapest). Was the world really to believe that there was now spiritual discipline in the man that until then had, so to speak, yielded greedily to all the temptations of the Devil? Behind the public *persona*, however, an utterly lonely man was sheltering, a man, moreover, who at the age of 15 had already played with the idea of entering a monastery; at that time he had learnt by memory whole passages from *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. Continual concert tours – in Liszt's case including Russia and Turkey – are not only tiring, but thrust a person into deep loneliness because all contacts are fleeting. The immediate occasion for breaking with this existence was an encounter with a woman who was just as lonely as Liszt himself: the Ukrainian Countess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein. Liszt decided to live together with Carolyne in Weimar (a marriage was not possible because Carolyne was already wedded; although she had lived separated from her husband for years, his family refused a divorce in order to keep a grip on her immense fortune) and to begin there a career as a conductor. It is to this relatively peaceful period that we date the poetic *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude* (“God's blessing in solitude”) from the collection *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, after a poem by Alphonse de Lamartine. This work gives expression to the quiet joy which can come over the human soul when seeking to encounter God in solitude. It is said that this was one of Liszt's favourites amongst his own compositions. When guests in the Altenburg (Liszt's villa in Weimar) asked him to play for them, he invariably chose this work, and the inhabitants of Weimar regularly heard fragments of the piece as they passed by the Altenburg in the evening and the music came out to them through the open window.

From his earlier relationship with Countess Marie d'Agouti, Liszt had three children. With Cosima – whose main claim to a role in music history is not as Liszt's daughter, but above all as Richard Wagner's wife – relations were tense, but with the other two, Blandine and Daniel, Liszt had good contact. Daniel shared her father's interest in the spiritual life. But on 13 December 1859 Daniel died, aged 22, of tuberculosis, and almost 3 years later her sister died of postnatal complications which were never fully clarified. *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* – after the opening chorus of the eponymous cantata by Bach (BWV 12) – expresses the confusion of the father left behind, who suddenly fell into a deep abyss of loneliness – but at the same time reveals something of Liszt's life of faith as he seeks to come to terms with the situation in the sight of God and to receive the loss of his children from God's hand.

## Nikolai Medtner

In the usual way of regarding Christ's temptation in the desert, more attention is paid to the Devil's suggestions than to Christ's answers to them. Christ's answer to the temptation to change stones into bread is an appeal to the divine order in things. It is not fitting for man to take his own or another's needs as the basis for his actions. Everything in created reality has a divine purpose and the determining factor in whether we act justly or not is whether we recognise this purpose or deny it. Nor is it to claim God for their own agenda; man has to comply with God and not vice versa. As it ultimately becomes clear that 'der Wille zur Macht' ['the wish for power'] is idolatry, Christ sends the enraged Devil away.

Anyone choosing Christ's answers in life will be lonely in this world. And there have probably been few composers as lonely as Nikolai Medtner. The *oeuvre* of this man, who was, according to his friend Sergei Rakhmaninoff, the greatest composer of his generation, consists to a large extent of sensitive piano miniatures, epic sonatas and songs. Shaped by his childhood in a richly talented family, Medtner chose with complete conviction the life of a composer, in which truth and veracity were the only values of significance. Money and fame did not interest him. The performance of Richard Strauss' *Symphonia Domestica* in Moscow in 1903 had woken in him the first anxious doubts about the direction music would take in the new century. In the face of Prokofiev's concertos and Stravinsky's ballets, this shiver was transformed into rage and protest. In his opinion, the moderns had yielded to the temptations of the Devil. Stravinsky's music was no longer art but fashion, catapulted into the heights by the sophisticated propaganda surrounding it. Modern music appealed only to an inclination towards renewal for its own sake, but did not provide any nourishment for the human soul. Medtner's frustration with modern music culminated, in 1935, in a fascinating book, *Muza i moda* ('Muse and fashion'), which he literally characterised as an act of exorcism. This book is the work of one calling alone in the wilderness, one who has the tendency to observe what is around him and to understand what forces are behind it, but refuses on principle to give up his lofty ideals. In line with a poem by Mikhail Lermontov – of which he quotes one stanza as a motto at the front of his book, but which stands as a whole above his *Stimmungsbilder* ['Atmospheric Pictures'] (op.1) – Medtner proposes the view that all true music is ultimately derived from impressions gained by the soul in the heavenly paradise before being born on earth, and that the task of the

composer/musician is to waken in the orphaned, lonely soul on earth recollections of this paradisaical origin. Where the awareness of this origin is lost, music will become increasingly dehumanised, with disastrous consequences for the human soul. The tragic aspect of *Muza i moda* is that Medtner assumes the untenable premise that the traditional tonality is the only natural musical system. Besides the fact that this premise devalues the old church moulds and non-European tonal systems, the greatest objection is that Medtner does not recognise that this tonality exists only thanks to equal-temperament tuning, which is in itself unnatural.

In this context, it is not surprising that a poem by Afanasi Fet on Christ's temptation in the wilderness found deep resonance in Medtner. It inspired his *Sonata Ballada* (op.27; 1912-14), a work which he described as 'the conflict between light and darkness in the soul'. The beginning evokes the beauty of burgeoning spring, a metaphor for the elements of the Creator. Everyone has his battles with darkness in choices between good and evil; everyone has been assailed by temptations towards evil, but Medtner's sonata tells the story of a soul which withstands these temptations. Above the introduction to the second part, Medtner quotes Fet's poem: 'And Satan departed from there'; and above the third part one reads the words: 'And the angels came'. Years later, Medtner added under the final chords in a printed copy of the sonata a further and final citation (this time in English): 'Before the Lord alone [only] can one kneel'.

The years of the First World War and the Russian Revolution were especially difficult for Medtner. His brother Karl was killed in the civil war and the Soviets confiscated his father's business on seizing power and did likewise with Medtner's apartment in Moscow. There is furthermore no need for discussion to show that the ideals of the revolution were completely incompatible with Medtner's aristocratic views. During this time, Medtner and his wife Anna lived in a small wooden hut in a forest in Bugri (south-west of Moscow, close to Obninsk), which was offered to them by the painter Anna Troyanovskaya. It was in this almost unheated and hardly lit hut that Medtner, in January 1920, played his *Sonata Reminiscenza* (op.38 no.1) to Troyanovskaya and some other guests. Troyanovskaya later recalled: 'Our complete solitude in the forest, the winter behind the dark windows of his room and the richness of the sound of the piano under his hands – all of this made a magical impression on us.'

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