



Michael Brown



NOCTUELLES

Ravel

Medtner

Maurice RAVEL (1875–1937)

Miroirs (1904–1905)

- | | | |
|---|--|--------|
| 1 | I. Noctuelles (Night Moths) | [4:53] |
| 2 | II. Oiseaux tristes (Sad Birds) | [4:29] |
| 3 | III. Une barque sur l'océan (A Boat on the Ocean) | [7:35] |
| 4 | IV. Alborada del gracioso (The Jester's Aubade) | [6:38] |
| 5 | V. La Vallée des cloches (The Valley of the Bells) | [6:27] |

Nikolai MEDTNER (1880–1951)

Second Improvisation (in variation form), Op. 47 (1925) [31:41]

6	Theme: Song of the Water Nymph (Andante)	[1:54]
7	Variation 1: Meditation – (Poco con moto e al rigore di tempo)	[1:33]
8	Variation 2: Caprice (Capriccioso) –	[1:15]
9	Variation 3: Feathered Ones – (Allegro capriccioso – Allegro vivo e risoluto)	[2:03]
10	Variation 4: Charms – (Allegretto con moto)	[1:20]
11	Variation: La Cadenza (Largamente) (Poco quasi una cadenza) *	[2:43]
12	Variation 5: Humoresque (Allegretto ritmico) –	[1:35]
13	Variation 6: In the Stream (Lesto) –	[1:34]
14	Variation 7: The Tumult of the Crowd – (Poco a poco vivace – Vivace, risoluto – Vivo)	[1:33]
15	Variation 8: In the Forest – (Andante sognando – Andante)	[0:54]
16	Variation 9: The Wood-Goblin – (Allegro ritmico)	[0:25]
17	Variation 10: Elves – (Prestissimo)	[1:00]
18	Variation 11: Gnomes – (Allegro risoluto)	[1:16]
19	Variation: Pesante *	[2:14]
20	Variation 12: Incantation – (Andante maestoso)	[2:11]
21	Variation 13: The Threat – (Allegro tenebroso – Con moto instantamente – Tempo I)	[2:14]
22	Variation 14: Song of the Water Nymph – (Poco con moto e al rigore di tempo)	[1:37]
23	Variation 15: Bad Weather – (Tranquillo, ma poco a poco più mosso e crescendo – Sempre allegro agitato)	[2:16]
24	Conclusion (Andante – Maestoso) (Poco con moto e al rigore di tempo)	[2:00]
Total Time:		[61:49]

* Première recording of newly discovered variation

NOCTUELLES

RAVEL: *Miroirs*

MEDTNER: Second Improvisation (in variation form), Op. 47

‘In the shed, the night moths take off, in awkward flight, and circle around other beams.’

(‘Les noctuelles des hangars partent, d’un vol gauche, cravater des autres poutres.’) Léon-Paul Fargue

Noctuelles features two 20th century gems of the piano literature – Ravel’s *Miroirs* and Medtner’s *Second Improvisation, Op 47*. The first movement of *Miroirs* is inspired by the above line by Ravel’s close friend, poet Léon-Paul Fargue. The word ‘noctuelles’ is an obscure description of moths in French, not widely used, and reflects Ravel’s penchant for the mysterious.

Ravel and Medtner composed these works in Paris at the height of their craft. Full of pianistic imagination, Ravel’s treatment of night moths, exotic birds, boats in the ocean, jesters and bells complement Medtner’s epic work depicting mermaids, elves, gnomes, birds, wood-goblins, and streams. Each work reveals an enigmatic fantasy world.

Maurice Ravel: *Miroirs* (1904–1905)

‘The eye sees not itself, But by reflection, by some other things.’ (William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*)

Ravel claimed that his *Miroirs* was inspired by this line from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. The five pieces that comprise *Miroirs* are variously dedicated to Léon Paul Fargue, (a poet),

Ricardo Viñes (a pianist), Paul Sordes (a painter), Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi (a music critic), and Maurice Delage (a composer), all members of a circle of Parisian artists known as ‘Les Apaches’. According to Ravel, *Miroirs* marked ‘a considerable change in my harmonic evolution, one that disconcerted even those musicians who had been most familiar with my compositional style up to then’. With its evocative titles and pianistic innovations, these pieces remain among the most pictorially vivid in the repertoire. *Miroirs* was premiered in Paris by Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes on January 6, 1906. The wildly virtuosic *Alborada del gracioso* was encored.

A line from Fargue’s poetry recited at one of the Apache meetings earned him the dedication of the first piece in *Miroirs*. The shimmering figurations of *Noctuelles* (Night Moths) flutter restlessly up and down the keyboard, unpredictably, rapidly, and almost annoyingly realistic. In *Oiseaux tristes* (Sad Birds), a recurring motif of hushed repeated notes is interspersed with wistful arabesques. Ravel described the piece as ‘birds lost in the torpor of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer’. *Une barque sur l’océan* (A Boat on the Ocean) paints



Maurice Ravel, c.1907

the image of a boat floating and rocking on the ocean. Surging arpeggiation inspired by Lisztian bravura creates a unique sonic landscape. The unrelentingly difficult, *Alborada del gracioso* (The Jester's Aubade), is a Spanish-inspired dance, complete with rapid repeated notes evoking the strumming of a guitar. *Alborada del gracioso* is a satirical portrait of a character from Spanish theatre, the mischievous and clownish gracioso. In the final piece, *La Vallée des cloches* (The Valley of the Bells), lingering bell tones create a sonic haze of overtones hovering in the air.

Nikolai Karlovich Medtner

Second Improvisation, Op. 47 (1925–1926)

Russian composer-pianist Nikolai Medtner's monumental *Second Improvisation* is a masterful set of harmonically complex variations, depicting a fairy tale world of birds, elves, gnomes, goblins, and mermaids. Included in this performance are première recordings of two newly discovered and unpublished variations. The work paints an evocative, dark and brooding fantasy world evoking generalised moods, rather than a specific narrative.

Composed in the mid–1920s, while Medtner was living in Paris, the work is dedicated to the organist Marcel Dupré, a close friend and admirer. *Op. 47* is structured as variations on a theme that Medtner calls 'The Song of the Water Nymph' alluding to Rusalka, the malicious temptress of Slavic folklore.

Two Discovered Variations

First Hand Records director David Murphy alerted me to a line in Barrie Martyn's biography of Medtner stating that there may be unpublished variations to the *Second Improvisation*. I was immediately riveted, and started a detective goose chase trying to track them down. I contacted Medtner aficionados throughout the world – who received my request with great interest. One person led me to another, and finally I was led to the National Library of Canada in Ottawa, where I learned that they housed 89 pages of sketches and drafts of the *Second Improvisation* in Medtner's handwriting!

Upon receiving the sketches, I was struck by several details. Firstly, Medtner wrote out several different order possibilities to the variations. Further into the sketches, Medtner writes the whole work out. To my delight, there are two complete variations included here that were not included in the published edition, and a fragment of another he called *Waltz*. The first complete untitled variation has a tempo indication which reads 'Pesante.' The second he calls *La Cadenza*. Sincere, languorous, and sublimely gorgeous are just a few words that came to mind upon reading through them. I was in love with them and determined to see how I could thoughtfully integrate them into the work. Through months of trial and error, I have come up with the order on this recording – which is based on Medtner's various order possibilities in the sketches, combined with my own aesthetic sense.



Nikolai Medtner, c.1920

quasi sadenza
allargando

accelerando

Handwritten musical score for the first system. It consists of two staves. The left staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a forte (*f*) dynamic. The music features complex chordal textures with many accidentals (sharps and flats) and some triplets. The right staff continues the harmonic structure with similar complexity.

Tempo $\frac{1}{8}$ (ma poco più)

stretto

allargando dimm

Handwritten musical score for the second system. It consists of two staves. The left staff is marked *stretto* and features a dense, rhythmic texture. The right staff is marked *allargando dimm* and shows a more spacious texture with some fermatas. The system concludes with a *Tempo* marking and a $\frac{1}{8}$ note value.

calando

Handwritten musical score for the third system. It consists of two staves. The left staff features a melodic line with many accidentals. The right staff is marked *calando* and features a descending melodic line with some fermatas. The system concludes with a *Tempo* marking and a $\frac{1}{8}$ note value.

poco a poco più mosso

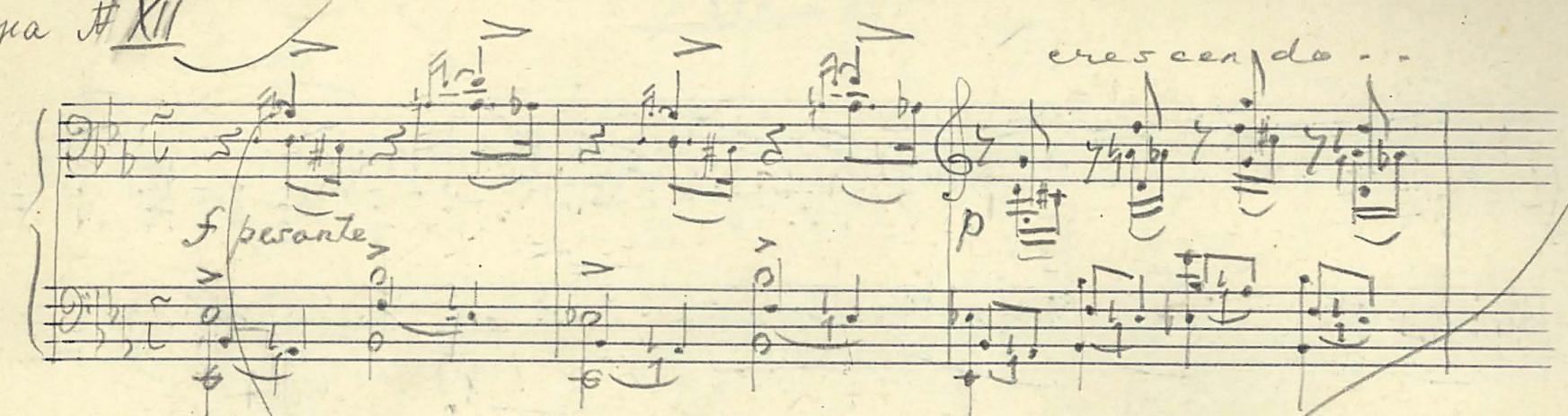
Handwritten musical score for the fourth system. It consists of two staves. The left staff features a melodic line with many accidentals. The right staff is marked *poco a poco più mosso* and features a descending melodic line with some fermatas. The system concludes with a *Tempo* marking and a $\frac{1}{8}$ note value.

Еще одна вариация на предыдущую
но она # XII

f pesante

p

crescendo...



crescendo

ff

p grazioso, vivo

crescendo, pesante

ff



p grazioso, vivo

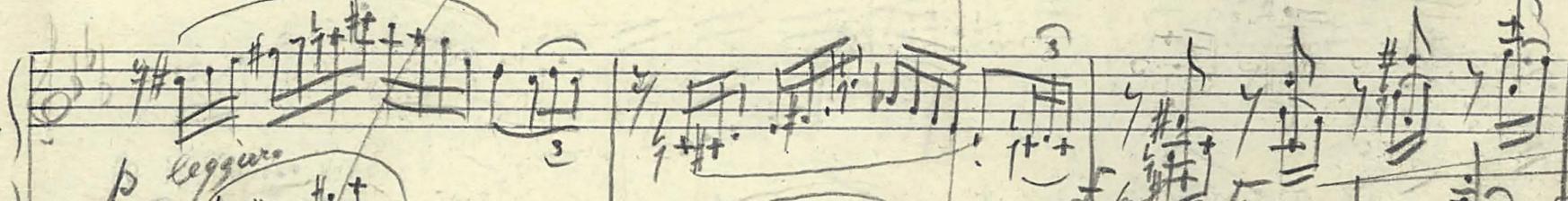
crescendo

ff



p leggero

f



Handwritten notes and scribbles on the right margin, including some illegible text and a circled 'X'.

Michael Brown – Pianist-Composer

Michael Brown has been hailed by *The New York Times* as ‘one of the leading figures in the current renaissance of performer-composers’. His artistry is shaped by his creative voice as a pianist and composer, praised for his ‘fearless performances’ (*The New York Times*) and ‘exceptionally beautiful’ compositions (*The Washington Post*).

Winner of the 2018 Emerging Artist Award from Lincoln Center and a 2015 Avery Fisher Career Grant, Brown has recently performed as soloist with the Seattle Symphony, the National Philharmonic, and the Grand Rapids, North Carolina, New Haven, and Albany Symphonies; and recitals at Carnegie Hall, the Mostly Mozart Festival, and Caramoor. Brown is an artist of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, performing frequently at Alice Tully Hall and on tour. He was selected by András Schiff to perform on an international tour making solo débuts in Berlin, Milan, Florence, Zurich’s Tonhalle and New York’s 92nd Street Y. He regularly performs recitals with his longtime duo partner, cellist Nicholas Canellakis, and has appeared at numerous festivals including Tanglewood, Marlboro, Music@Menlo, Gilmore, Ravinia, Saratoga, Bridgehampton, Music in the Vineyards, Bard, Sedona, Moab, and Tippet Rise.

As a composer, Brown’s *Concerto for Piano and Strings* was premièred in 2020 by a socially distanced Kalamazoo Symphony with the composer at the piano. Brown was the Composer and Artist-in-Residence at the New Haven Symphony for the

2017–2019 seasons and a 2018 Copland House Residency Award recipient. He has received commissions from the Gilmore Keyboard Festival, the NFM Leopoldinum Orchestra, Concert Artists Guild, Shriver Hall; the New Haven and Maryland Symphony Orchestras; Osmo Vänskä and Erin Keefe; pianists Jerome Lowenthal, Ursula Oppens, Orion Weiss, Adam Golka, and Roman Rabinovich; and a consortium of gardens.

A prolific recording artist, he can be heard as soloist with the Seattle Symphony and Ludovic Morlot in the music of Messiaen, and as soloist with the Brandenburg State Symphony in Samuel Adler’s *First Piano Concerto* (LINN Records). Other albums include his début album on First Hand Records (FHR67); an all–George Perle recording (Bridge); and collaborative albums with pianist Jerome Lowenthal (CAG), cellist Nicholas Canellakis (CAG), and violinist Elena Urioste (BIS). He has plans to embark on a multi-year project to record the complete piano music of Felix Mendelssohn for FHR.

Brown was First Prize winner of the Concert Artists Guild Competition, a winner of the Bowers Residency from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (formerly CMS Two), a recipient of the Juilliard Petschek Award, and is a Steinway Artist. He earned dual bachelor’s and master’s degrees in piano and composition from The Juilliard School, where he studied with pianists Jerome Lowenthal and Robert McDonald and composers Samuel Adler and Robert Beaser. Additional mentors have included András Schiff and Richard Goode as well as his early teachers, Herbert Rothgarber





and Adam Kent.

A native New Yorker, he lives there with his two 19th century Steinway Ds, Octavia and Daria.

For more information, please visit:
www.michaelbrownmusic.com

Recording at Tippet Rise

Pianists lead lonely lives, coming home from solo performances to hours of solitary practising. When three pianists meet in the wild and connect on life and music, it is a rare joy and a bright moment in their generally dark and miserable existences!

Adam Golka, Roman Rabinovich, and I all met at the Ravinia Festival in 2009. Fellow piano nerds, we instantly became great buddies and musical comrades. All residing uptown in Manhattan's Washington Heights, (until Roman got married and fled to Calgary), we would always meet – play music for each other, exchange ideas, and hang out.

In 2016, we tried an experiment. We each took turns recording and producing solo albums for each other at the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City. We made a rotation schedule for our week of recording. One of us would record while another produced, and the third would either rest, practise, or get meals for everybody. It was there that our mutual friend and brilliant piano technician Tali

Mahanor (on whose gorgeous Hamburg Steinway 'Chantal' we recorded) invited Tippet Rise Co-Founder Peter Halstead to stop by our recording sessions and observe our process. His insights into my recording session on Beethoven's *Eroica Variations* were thoughtful, poetic, and inspired. He told us about his new Tippet Rise Arts Center with its state of the art facilities in Montana, and we followed up with him for the second instalment of our projects three years later.

Tippet Rise was the perfect environment for our projects. We were able to leave the bustle of New York City and abandon civilisation to focus solely in one of the most wonderful places on planet earth. Surrounded by the sublime Beartooth Mountains, we took turns recording, producing, making pour-over coffees, sharing meals, meditating, arguing, and analysing our friendship dynamics only to make them stronger in the end.

Upon arrival we were met by an incredible team whose knowledge, skills, and devotion were extraordinary. Right away I knew this was going to be one of the most special experiences of my life. There were three gorgeous pianos waiting for us to choose from and I thought we were in heaven. Our chosen one, CD-18, was one of Vladimir Horowitz's favourite pianos, which later belonged to Eugene Istomin. A mid-century New York Steinway with a wealth of colours and sonic complexities, CD-18 boasts a warm tenor register, a scintillating top, and a roaring bass. There is a Tippet Rise podcast where we all discuss the three

pianos in detail and strategically make our piano selection.

We had a monumental task ahead of us – about a week there to record Roman’s nine Haydn *Sonatas*, Adam’s four Beethoven *Sonatas*, and my Ravel and Medtner. We had to be efficient, thoughtful, and clear in what we wanted as artists and producers. Minus a few passionate arguments between the three of us, we slaved away and got our projects done. I have never before seen an environment where the staff is so accommodating, recording us from the early morning hours until well after midnight.

I encourage you to check out Roman’s Haydn *Sonatas* (FHR71), and Adam’s Schumann album (FHR62), all available on First Hand Records, and their upcoming albums.

Michael Brown, 2020





Recorded at Olivier Music Barn, Tippet Rise Arts Center, Fishtail, Montana, USA, 2–10 January 2019

Produced by **Adam Golka** and **Roman Rabinovich**

Engineered, edited and mastered by **Monte Nickles** assisted by **Jim Ruberto**

DXD 24bit, 352.8kHz hi-resolution recording and mastering

Photos: album cover and page 11 by **Gabe Palacio** © 2018

Moths by **Buddhawut** and **Shampanskiy** under licence from Shutterstock.com

Pages 12, 14–15 by **Emily Rund**

Facsimiles on page 8 ( Pesante) and page 9 ( La Cadenza) from *Second Improvisation, Op. 47* / Nikolai Medtner.

Source: Library and Archives Canada/Hector Gratton fonds

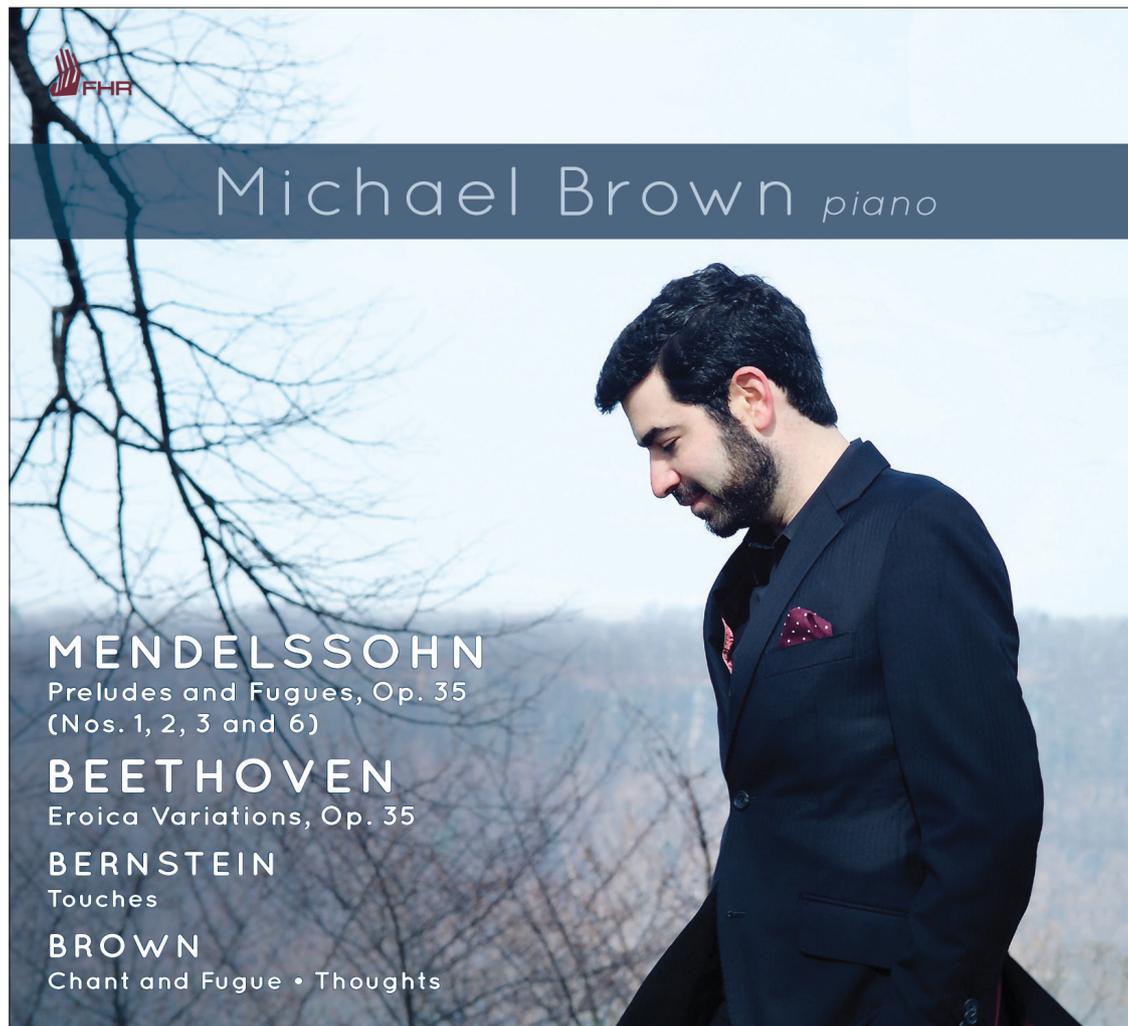
Artwork by **David Murphy** (FHR)

Michael Brown gives special thanks to Peter and Cathy Halstead and the entire Tippet Rise Arts Center staff for their incredible generosity, wisdom, and kindness in supporting this project.

Thanks also to Adam Golka, Tali Mahanor, David Murphy, Monte Nickles, Zachary Patten, Roman Rabinovich, Jeanne Reid White, Jim Ruberto, Emily Rund, and Mike Toia.

For help with the Medtner manuscripts: Wendelin Bitzlan, Chris Crocker, Christoph Flamm, Marc-André Hamelin, and the National Library of Ottawa.

FHR thanks Michael Brown and Peter Bromley



[FHR67]

MENDELSSOHN: Preludes and Fugues, Op. 35

BEETHOVEN: Eroica Variations, Op. 35

BERNSTEIN: Touches

BROWN: Chant and Fugue • Thoughts

'This is an altogether smart and enjoyable release.' **(The Arts Fuse)**

