

**Want List for Andrew Desiderio [2020]**

A pandemic, riots, violence, mass unemployment, a presidential election—2020 was one for the scrapheap, for sure, but at least it yielded some fine recordings and glimmers of assurance that music, like life, will go on. At least that's the hope I've received listening to this year's Want List selections:

If Sergei Rachmaninoff calls you “the greatest composer of our time,” you'd better keep up whatever it is you're doing right. He was referring to Nikolai Medtner who, like Ullmann, is another one of those Cinderella composers once relegated to obscurity, but who is starting to receive his due as a true creative genius. Although known as one of the great pianist-composers who gave us rich character pieces, as well as arguably the greatest cycle of sonatas since Beethoven, Medtner also was an accomplished composer of art song, penning more than 100 in his lifetime. He combined his superb musical craftsmanship with a deep understanding of poetry (particularly of his favorites, Goethe and Pushkin) to create a seminal contribution to the Russian art song literature. As in the sonatas and the three magnificent piano concertos, Medtner's songs are replete with contrapuntal intricacy and constant inner-voice activity, but his gift of melody and instinct for formal clarity reigns supreme. Unfortunately, learning the songs is a tremendously demanding feat for a vocalist, who, in addition to having a wide vocal range and keen sense of line, must have the sensitive support of a virtuoso piano accompanist. The rareness of such a chemistry may be one reason performances of Medtner's songs are few and far between, and successful ones at that. Mezzo soprano Ekaterina Levental and accompanist Frank Peters, however, have this chemistry in spades on this recording, called *Incantation*, imbuing each song with the unselfconscious musicality Medtner prized above all. Levental's control of vibrato and subtlety of dynamic shading are magnificent, but her expressive voice is never timid. Similarly, Peters hones Medtner's notoriously dense piano writing to execute the double role of accompanist and tone painter. Hearing this album was a revelation to me of how profoundly beautiful Medtner's songs are. If this is only volume one, the second volume can't be released soon enough.