ALEXANDER SCRIABIN (1871-1915): PIANO MINIATURE AS CHRONICLE OF HIS
CREATIVE EVOLUTION; COMPLEXITY OF INTERPRETIVE
APPROACH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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Scriabin’s piano miniatures are ideal for the study of evolution of his style, which underwent an extreme transformation. They present heavily concentrated idioms and structural procedures within concise form, therefore making it more accessible to grasp the quintessence of the composer’s thought. A plethora of studies often reviews isolated genres or periods of Scriabin’s legacy, making it impossible to reveal important general tendencies and inner relationships between his pieces. While expanding the boundaries of tonality, Scriabin completed the expansion and universalization of the piano miniature genre. Starting from his middle years the ‘poem’ characteristics can be found in nearly every piece. The key to this process lies in Scriabin’s compilation of certain symbolical musical gestures.

Separation between technical means and poetic intention of Scriabin’s works as well as rejection of his metaphysical thought evolution result in serious interpretive implications. Music of Scriabin provides an excellent opportunity for a performer to find a proper balance between rational and intuitive. The lack of any of these qualities will impoverish his works, making their interpretation incomplete. Following one of main Scriabin’s ideas – synthesis of all arts – this study approaches his music not from the narrow analytical, but broad synthetic standpoint. The suggested solution is an informed performance, based on Heinrich Neuhaus’s teaching method that encompassed all arts. ‘Cross-art’ comparative analysis justifies the composer’s artistic searches and highlights significance of his ideas, which disclose a strong correlation with the characteristic features of the creative faculty, the nature of music and its synergetic aspects.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915), Russian pianist and composer, is one of the strangest phenomena that ever existed in music. Unlike his coevals Rachmaninov (1873-1943) and Medtner (1880-1951), he had a brief life that was interrupted in the midst of his creative plans. The destiny of his works was to be both acclaimed and denigrated. By merging an eclectic set of mystical, erotic, satanic and messianic visions with his music he gained many disciples, on the one hand, yet on the other, let himself open to sharp condemnation by many musicians, critics, and scholars throughout the century. Scriabin’s art is synthetic, in the sense that too much in his musical forms was evoked by ideas external to music. When deprived of these ideas, it is unable to reveal clearly enough the inner world of the thinker-artist. He said:

I cannot understand how to write just music. How boring! Music, surely, takes on idea and significance when it is linked to a single plan within a whole view of the world. People who just write music are like performers who just play an instrument. They become valuable only when they connect with a general idea. The purpose of music is revelation.¹

Some essential qualities of Scriabin’s personality were cultivated by the relatives surrounding him in his childhood and youth. His mother, Lyubov Shchetinina, was one of the first women-musicians of Russia; she knew Anton Rubinstein and studied with Theodor Leschetizky. Unfortunately due to weak health she died soon after giving a birth to her son. Scriabin’s father absented himself from Scriabin’s immediate environment to pursue a diplomatic career. “Two grandmothers and an aunt” – that’s how Scriabin described his childhood in later years; “Love of fairy stories. Strong imagination. Religious.”² Admiring this fragile and sensitive boy these women tried their best to maintain a calm, safe, almost

‘greenhouse’ atmosphere at home so nothing could harm or disturb their favorite. As a result he grew as a very nervous, thin, delicate child, subject to illness and often unhappy. Many critics agree that this environment was the reason for the strong feminine side in Scriabin’s personality and music. Even later, when Scriabin went to Cadet Corps and studied in Conservatory, he was very introverted by nature. This quality deepened with years and brought unbelievable sensitivity and introspection to his works and playing, although at the same time precluded a regular social life.

The closest and most faithful friend of Scriabin became his instrument. “When he first fell in love with the piano he would kiss it continually as if it were a human being; whenever his piano had to be tuned, repaired, or moved he suffered the physical torment of one seeing his beloved operated upon by a surgeon,” recalls Scriabin’s aunt Lyubov.3 He explored the piano’s most intimate sides and abilities, trying to express the ineffable, in accord with searches of another great colorist – Debussy. Of Scriabin’s 74 opuses, 67 were written for solo piano. These works display the most sovereign understanding of the instrument and are both extremely tempting and challenging to play. The Ten Sonatas reveal themselves as landmarks in the evolution of Scriabin’s style and expression, which changed enormously as he progressed. Nevertheless the small works deserve to be viewed closely as fragments of a much larger compositional tapestry. Paraphrasing Scriabin’s belief that his personality is “reflected in millions of other personalities,” his piano miniatures reflect his inner world “as the sun reflects inside splashes of water.”4 This study attempts to gather all these displays into one whole. The piano miniature, especially favored by composers-pianists, grasps the quintessence of the author’s thought and displays it in an easily digestible manner. By looking at his small works,

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very intimate and informative glances, we can trace Scriabin’s development from his youth to maturity. Sorting out his works by genre for analysis substantially narrows the scope and results in overlooking many inherent features. “We should see each work as contributing in a progressive process of growth toward some final achievement…Each work is a link in a chain, or a brick in a wall. Early and late works illuminate each other, and in addition the early works are fulfilled and perfected by what came after.” 5

Scriabin’s life and works can be conditionally divided into three periods. The root of discrepancies here lays in the impossibility to define which element to consider the newest and most progressive – the form, the tonality, the melodic/harmonic language, or philosophic ideas? It might be futile to subdivide the works of an artist into rigidly defined periods, when in reality they overlapped. However, it is also difficult to avoid this artificial division because it allows us to draw a general outline and set down climactic points.

Another frequent mistake is separation between technical means and poetic intention. His discoveries in the realm of harmonic language never were his ultimate goal as a composer. Often some peculiarities were revealed after a work had been written, and Scriabin was always incredibly happy to relate the theoretical explanation to his music. His evolution led him not into ‘atonality’, but rather into a new kind of ‘expanded tonality’ in which symmetrical partitioning of the semitonal scale by means of interval cycles created new consistent harmonic structures. All these harmonies have a symbolical meaning related to the sub-program of Scriabin’s late works. Scriabin never broke his routine of composition in order to master the new technique. Rather, he incorporated his experimentation into compositions which consistently maintained the level of complexity and elegance demonstrated by his earlier works.

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Scriabin’s heritage is an amazing page of Russian history. It is a sensitive “seismogram” of the inner world of an artist, who lived on the eve, in the pre-storm atmosphere of everyone’s expectations, and who was with all his heart in search of a future transformation. Boris Pasternak⁶ in his autobiography *I Remember* describes Scriabin as “not only a composer, but an occasion for perpetual congratulation, a personified festival and triumph of Russian culture.”⁷ Despite complex mystic ideas his music always captures, seduces the audience. It might offend “the listener whose small or great technical knowledge makes him analyze rather than feel the music,” but “delights the crowd which knows not how to analyze but which does feel its deep impelling emotion.”⁸

Two tendencies dominate in previous researches of Scriabin’s phenomenon: one inclines to fall into deep mysticism, another to examine his works from a solely analytical standpoint. This study will follow the principle of “zolotaya seredina”⁹ in understanding Scriabin as a person, artist and mystic. The vital aim of this comprehensive experience, though, is truly practical, because only a performer using combination of rationalistic and intuitive approaches can fully grasp author’s genius and share it with the audience.

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⁶ The Pasternak and Scriabin families were well acquainted; the father Leonid drew memorable sketches of Scriabin.
⁹ “Golden middle”, a common term in Russian aesthetics which means ‘well-balanced’
CHAPTER 2
CREATIVE DOCTRINE

Artists are like heralds of ancient tragedies who come from somewhere beyond into this evenly-paced life with a mark of insanity and fate on their brow.

– Alexander Block

Religious and Philosophical Influences

In the realm of Russian music, Scriabin is an almost inconceivable exception. However, when his art is viewed in the context of the culture of his time, he no longer appears as an isolated figure. Scriabin’s aesthetic code is remarkably similar to that of the vast intellectual and artistic movement that animated Russian philosophy and art early in the century, as a reaction against the realism and positivism of the nineteenth century. 1898-1917 was known as “Serebryaniy vek” – the Russian Silver Age. It was a period of tremendous activity in art, poetry, and theater, a time of supreme blossom of Russian culture immediately followed by her horrifying destruction. One of its most potent artistic forces was Symbolism. Valery Bryusov (1873-1924), one of the founders of this movement, states in his 1905 essay “The Holy Sacrifice” that Symbolists should become the subjects of their creative works and should actually live them out: “Let the poet create not his books, but his life… On the altar of our divinity we fling – ourselves.”

Another important symbolist figure was Vyacheslav Ivanov, a man of formidable learning, a classicist with a special interest in mythology and the cult of Dionysius, a theoretician of literature, an advocate of poetry as a religious quest, and one of Russia’s greatest poets. He and Scriabin first met in 1909; later the composer confessed that Ivanov’s Po zvezdam [All Above the Stars] had as much influence on him as did Die Geburt der Tragödie by Nietzsche.

Ivanov and other symbolists believed that art and people had become separated. Symbols aided in the quest for reintegration because they recalled the lost spirit of the people, the origins of language, and the ear of festive spectacles and communal rituals. A desire to recreate the rites became an important factor in Ivanov and Scriabin’s creative relationship. A central tenet in Ivanov’s aesthetic doctrine postulates a “material substratum” of the visible world that longs for the artist to intuit its latent form. The artist responds to “the complaint of his material” and moulds it in obedience to its dormant form.\(^{11}\) “Material is animated in a work of art,” Ivanov declares, “to the extent that it affirms itself. The artist triumphs if he persuades us that the marble craved its chisel.”\(^ {12}\)

Compare Scriabin’s account, as described by Boris Schlozer, of the genesis of the Fifth Piano Sonata, op. 53:

…”he felt … without the slightest doubt that the work actually existed somehow outside himself, apart from himself, entirely independently, [embodied] in an image inexpressible by words, and that it was as he did not compose it, create from nothing, but so to speak only removed it from a veil, making it visible for people, translating it from latent to a manifest state. Consequently his entire problem consisted in not distorting, not obscuring the image he had perceived.\(^ {13}\)

Several aspects of Ivanov’s thought were quite appealing to Scriabin: the confusion of “cosmic and spiritual love with eroticism and sex”\(^ {14}\) in Eros (1907), his mystical anarchism, and his interest in ancient theater and mysteries. Following Nietzsche, Ivanov claimed that the Gesamtkunstwerk symbolized the dissolution of Apollonian order into Dionysian delirium.\(^ {15}\)

However, this pagan concept was merged with a Christian mystical sensibility taken from Russian mystic philosopher Vladimir Solovyov. Solovyov claimed that the “instrument of God’s revelation of his unified existence,” and his role lies in finding the link


\(^{12}\) Ibid, 200.

\(^{13}\) Boris de Schloezer, *A.Skriabin*, vol.I: *Lichnost’, Misteriia* [Personality, Mistery] (Berlin, 1923), 47.


\(^{15}\) The mystical essence and outward manifestation of Dionysian religions is an orgiastic, with drunken intoxication, ecstatic dancing and sexual activity. By participation in these rituals, one could surpass individual existence and merge with a higher consciousness.
between the “visible world of sensual phenomena and the world of extrasensory revelation.”

Besides Ivanov, a whole group of people inclined toward mysticism and, in the main, affiliated with the neo-Christian current – Berdyaev, Lossky, Bulgakov, Father Florensky, Shestov, Balmont, Baltrušaitis – were evidently extremely interested in Scriabin as a phenomenon close to the sphere of their own ideas. In the opinion of his poet friends, Scriabin took the precepts of Symbolism to an extreme and became a prophet and martyr to the cause.

Nevertheless, Scriabin was not a loyal disciple of Symbolism. He was constantly dissatisfied with any kind of static character, for example traditions or theoretical canons. He had

17 Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev (1874-1948), a Russian religious and political philosopher, Christian existentialist, was preoccupied with creativity and personal liberty of spiritual development.
18 Nikolai Onufriyevich Lossky (1870-1965), a Russian philosopher, one of preeminent neo-idealists, representative of personalism and intuitionism; supported the concept of ‘sobornost’, or mystical communal union.
19 Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov (1871-1944), a Russian Orthodox theologian, philosopher and economist, was close friend with Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Vladimir Solovyov. His teaching is based on the combination of sophiology, the later works of Schelling, and his own ecumenical ideas.
[All Berdyaev, Lossky, and Bulgakov were expelled from the country by the Bolshevik government on December 30, 1922 on the so-called “Philosophers’ ship”, together with more than 200 Russian intellectuals.]
20 Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky (1882-1937), a Russian Orthodox theologian, philosopher, mathematician, and electrical engineer; developed the idea of the Divine Sophia, one of the central concepts of feminist theologians. He founded the Christian Struggle Union, based on ideas of Solovyov, also was a prominent member of the Russian Symbolism movement. He was sentenced to ten years in the Labor Camps for agitation against the Soviet system.
21 Lev Isaakovich Shestov, born Yehuda Leyb Schwarzmann (1866-1938) a Ukrainian/Russian/Jewish existentialist philosopher; deeply rejected idealism. His believes were deeply paradoxical and emphasized life’s enigmatic qualities. One of main concepts is an experience of despair (similar to Dostoevsky). During the Soviet regime he emigrated, eventually settling in France; gave lectures in Sorbonne.
22 Konstantin Dmitrievich Balmont (1867-1942), a Russian symbolist poet, translator, one of the major figures of the Silver Age of Russian Poetry. Together with his close friend, poet Valery Bryusov (1873-1924) represented first wave of symbolists. He actively participated in political life, mostly by writing denunciative poems; also is known for his romantic and erotic poetry.
23 Jurgis Baltrušaitis (1873-1944), a Lithuanian Symbolist poet and translator (knew 15 foreign languages), also was noted as a political activist, diplomat and one of the foremost exponents of iconology. He set up the publishing house Scorpiio, which published the chief Russian Symbolist magazines as well as collections of the greatest Russian Symbolist poets; was a close friend and colleague of such famous Russian writers and artists as Chekhov, Balmont, Bryusov, Ivanov, Gorky, Stanislavsky, Vrubel, Pasternak.
24 After Scriabin’s death, Ivanov became Scriabin’s proselyte, presenting lectures onto composer’s art, his artistic achievements, and his place in the history of music. He also was the founding member of a Scriabin Society. In the commemorative sonnet on Scriabin, Ivanov writes:

Music is orphaned. And with it
Poetry, its sister, is orphaned.
A wondrous bloom has faded at the frontier
Of their contiguous realms, and night has fallen darker. [Vyacheslav Ivanov, Svet vechernyj (London: 1962), 92-93]
a peculiar capacity for picking out, “filter through himself” (according to Andrei Bely)\textsuperscript{25} after a casual acquaintance with some philosophy, certain aspects of it which tended to clarify his own thoughts. He never penetrated deeply into any system, perhaps because of the lack of profound philosophical and religious training. Scriabin’s philosophical studies are extraordinarily interesting, although we should clearly understand that he was a genius composer but an amateur philosopher.

Scriabin’s egocentricity was shaped by Nietzsche’s ideas. He maintained the belief that the artist, as a microcosm, could affect the macrocosm of human activity and declared that he alone was the “higher type” who would lead the “herd” to a new plane. To achieve his goal, Scriabin speculated that he had to surmount his “ya” (“I”) for his “ne-ya” (“not I”), the Ego for the non-Ego, the individual Will for the Cosmic Will. A faithful son of his megalomaniacal age, he always posed as the central figure of his religion. On the other hand, Scriabin’s “I am God” very much sounds like Haydn’s confession that he felt God inside him when he composed \textit{The Creation} (although Haydn never was proclaimed an insane man for this).

Scriabin also frequently quoted Hegel, who said that quantity, growing indefinitely, transforms into quality. For him it was a manifestation of his inner experience, and he speculated that the entire history of the world also obeyed this evolutionary process of gradual accumulation and growth. Upon reaching a degree of saturation, humankind must terminate in a world catastrophe, leading in turn to a new evolution, a new increase in tension, and a new crisis. Scriabin associated this philosophy of life with the specific structure of his major works, which to him represented a series of gradual expansions systematically and logically evolving in the direction of a final ecstasy. His late sonatas are built according to a uniform succession of states

\textsuperscript{25} Andrei Bely, \textit{Mezhdu dvukh revoljutsiakh} [Between two revolutions] (Moskva, 1934), 348.
– languor, longing, impetuous striving, dance, ecstasy, and transfiguration (close to Nietzsche’s “You need to carry a Chaos inside to be able to give birth to a dancing star”).

Another somber source of inspiration for Scriabin was death, a conception very significant for any national culture. Apology of death was commonly fashionable during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The belief that demolition or self-destruction can be a way to accomplish good (whether it’s the Kingdom of Heaven, or universal happiness, or communism) resided in the greater part of Russian society, including “intellectuals.” Death was regarded as a transition to the higher Being, sweet annihilation, and the departure to the world of Goethe’s ‘Mothers’. Scriabin seems to be the sole Russian composer whose life and works are so permeated with the idea of inter-exchange of two instincts – Eros and Tanatos, inseparable oneness of Love and Death (the only parallel would be Wagner’s *Liebestod*). He interprets this experience very differently from the “catastrophic” one of Rachmaninoff and others, depicting death from the point of view of “someone left alive.”

Scriabin had an ardent curiosity about the darker aspects of life. He liked to invoke evil visions and abandon himself to a risky game. He longed to bring to light “all the vital embryos,” as it is phrased in the text for *Le Poème de l’extase*, no matter how monstrous or repellent they were. The diabolic element tempted Scriabin upon occasion (ex. Ninth Sonata, *Le Poème satanique*). In this respect, he had an affinity with such artists as Wagner, Byron, Baudelaire, and especially Liszt.

There was one more source that became the dominating force in Scriabin’s ‘doctrine’ and subsequently modified all earlier influences – Theosophy. Scriabin first became familiar with Theosophy in Paris in 1906. His friend Gissac told him that his vision of *Mysterium*, of the union

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of humanity with divinity and the return of the world to oneness, has much in common with Theosophy. Gissac gave Scriabin a copy of *La Clef de la Théosophie*. This mystical bible was written by Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), née Hahn. She founded the famous religious cult with numerous branches – the Theosophical Society – which still exists today. In her writings, Blavatsky conveyed esoteric and occult ideas of reconciling ancient eastern wisdom with modern science, claiming that they were revealed to her by ‘mahatmas’, who had retained knowledge of mankind’s spiritual history.

A few months later Scriabin was deeply engaged in reading works by Mme. Blavatsky, Annie Besant, C.W. Leadbeater, and other theosophists. Writing to Tatiana Schloezer, the composer said: “You will be astonished at how close it is to my thinking…” But Scriabin’s conversations became full of allusions to Manvantara, Pralaya, Seven Planes, Seven Races, and the like. However, Boris de Schloezer states that after he read some theosophical literature, it became obvious that Scriabin used these terms quite loosely. Quite often he simply adapted them to his own ideas, aspirations, and yearnings and employed theosophical postulates as formulas to explain his own experiences. Yuri Engel (1868-1927) testifies: “Scriabin had only to read a page of Blavatsky and under her flag claim the cargo as his own.”

The theosophical vision of the world served as an incentive for Scriabin’s own work. “I know that Mme. Blavatsky’s ideas helped me in my work and gave me power to accomplish my task,” he confessed. He read *Secret Doctrine* (in a French translation) many times, marking in pencil the most significant passages. Even with the exposure of Blavatsky’s occultism, which

28 Each Race reflects a certain phase in the evolution of man’s spiritual life, so that the history of the races becomes a history of the human psyche, which acquires senses and desires vested in flesh and then gradually denudes itself, abandoning its belonging and returning to the simplicity of the primordial oneness.
appeared headlined in every newspaper of the world, Scriabin was “unshaken”; he felt
tremendous admiration for Mme. Blavatsky to the end of his life. Above all Scriabin was
fascinated by her courage in essaying a grandiose synthesis and by breadth and depth of her
concepts, which he likened to the grandeur of Wagner’s music dramas.

In March 1914 Scriabin visited London, where he gave concerts and also met with
several representatives of the Theosophical Society. Although eager to meet people who
personally knew Blavatsky, the composer was greatly incensed by some English women
theosophists, who tried to interpret his music in theosophical terms and exploit it as theosophical
propaganda. The artist in him rebelled against such misinterpretation: “They do not understand
… they do not love art,” he complained. 31

Seeds of Eastern mysticism planted with Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea*
were well watered by various theosophical tracts. Scriabin was immediately as caught by India
as a fly by the web of imagining. Taking a trip to India became one of Scriabin’s obsessive
dreams. Until the very last day he was planning and discussing it in details with his closest
friends. He believed that India would revive his soul, awaken his feelings and ideas, and enhance
his receptivity. The hills of Himalayas were also meant to be the eventual performance location
for Scriabin’s *Mystère*.

Martin Cooper remarks that pre-Revolutionary thinkers and artists turned with hysterical
intensity to irrational, mystical, and unnaturally “other-worldly” fields of interest because the
Russian intelligentsia was denied activity in political and social affairs. 32 However, a desire to
restore to music its ancient magical powers always belonged to a particular Russian attitude,
which Scriabin extended to his concept of music as the materialization of the occult. He believed

31 Ibid.
that by the most thorough self-analysis he would be able to explain – and therefore compose –
the cosmos.\textsuperscript{33} Affiliation with Theosophy played its negative role in posthumous fate of
Scriabin’s music. After the 1917 Revolution all associations with any occult theories were
considered ‘decadent’ and therefore opposing Soviet ideology. In 1931 Shostakovich wrote: "We
consider Scriabin as our bitter musical enemy. Why? Because his music tends toward unhealthy
eroticism. Also to mysticism, passivity and a flight from the reality of life."

Scriabin had a turn of mind usually called philosophical. He was exceptionally gifted for
speculative thinking and engaged passionately in the interplay of ideas. Scriabin belongs to the
category of artists who make an earnest effort to understand themselves, their creative work, and
the world in which they live. It was absolutely necessary for him to establish a concordance
between his philosophy and his activity as a composer. However, when Scriabin set to work, he
was concerned not with the solution of the metaphysical problems, but technical problems; not
with modeling the world according to his fancy, but manipulating musical sounds. He did what
all composers must do - created sonorous forms to which he could attribute extra-musical
significance and interpret in the light of his ideology, rationalizing the transcendental and
reconstructing the intellectually inexpressible. Scriabin’s creative and theoretical tools operated
with equal acuteness.

Extra-musical Connections

As is obvious from the above-stated, Scriabin’s thought tended to blend in diverse ideas
from East and West, according to his own intuition. A span of an almost century since the
composer’s death gives us a huge advantage in understanding and interpreting his music. First of

\textsuperscript{33} John C. and Dorothy L. Crawford, \textit{Expressionism in twentieth-century} music (Bloomington: Indiana University
Press, 1993), 57.
all, the Soviet regime collapsed, and so did its prejudice against anything different from the Soviet ideology, making available new original documents. Second, more open borders and technological progress made it easier and faster to access any data about different cultures and doctrines from all over the world. And last, but not least, many extra-musical artistic discoveries made by Scriabin’s contemporaries and descendants are assonant to his progressive pursuits, and can greatly contribute to a deeper and more integrated recognition of the composer’s conceptions.

Two famous painters, Kandinsky and Vrubel, present interesting parallels with Scriabin; former one mostly through his aesthetic thought, and latter one directly through his artistic technique. Certain aspects of Scriabin’s style are very close to representatives of seemingly remote art and spiritual movements such as Art Nouveau and Agni Yoga. Seeds of some Scriabin’s creative ideas are strikingly similar to Cortázar’s witness once again the high degree of the composer’s progressive thinking.

Herbert Read observes that human consciousness is a field of perception to whose dimensions we can occasionally add in those moments of clear attention when a new image forms like a crystal on its confines. Such images are not arbitrary; on the contrary, they are “moments of vision when the mind penetrates to the essence of the phenomenal world.” 34 The whole legacy of Scriabin was defined by the idea of creating an all-embracing work, intended to employ the “counterpoint of different arts,”35 involving dance, color, light, perfumes etc. It was meant to represent a system of intricate multilayered constructions flowing from poetic expression. Hence the whole body of art should be more than welcome by a performer to be used as a source of inspiration.

Kandinsky

35 Sabaneev, Vospominaniya o A. N. Scriabine, 206.
“Color is the keyboard,” Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944) wrote, “the eyes are the harmonies, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibration in the soul.”

Kandinsky always was a great admirer of Scriabin for his attempt to connect art and music with the metaphysical and cosmic. As Scriabin did in his music, Kandinsky sought to express in his paintings not only moods and emotions but also a world outlook. He believed that an authentic artist creates art from a devotion to inner beauty, fervor of spirit. In his compositions Kandinsky attempted not to represent the outside world but to evoke, as music does, instant feelings. The analysis made by Kandinsky on forms and on colors doesn't result from simple arbitrary ideas associations; it is a radically subjective and purely phenomenological form of experience and inner observations.

Perhaps more than any other modern artist of the twentieth century, Kandinsky is linked to the speculative analogy between music and visual art. The literature on Kandinsky is wider and more controversial than that devoted to any other abstract painter. He believed in mysticism, and steeped himself in a vast body of mystic lore. He also was known as the most romantic of the early abstractionists. Kandinsky was formed by the Symbolism of three countries: Russia, Germany and France, and became the Symbolist par excellence. In two short sentences he encapsulated the whole mystique of Symbolism: “Speaking of the hidden by means of the hidden. Is this not content?” During his years abroad he kept up with developments in the work of literary Symbolists like Bely and Ivanov.

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37 French philosopher Michel Henry calls it the *absolute subjectivity*
In 1911 he founded the controversial avant-garde art movement *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) with his fellow Franz Marc. The group was influenced by diverse developments in science, theater, color theory, and music. The *Blaue Reiter* expressionists were interested in Scriabin’s rejection of art-for-art’s-sake and his consequent notion of the artist as an active force in the universe, as well as his novel ideas of synthesis. In 1912 *Der Blaue Reiter* almanac published a major article on *Prométhée*.\(^3^9\) However, Scriabin’s music was “too beautiful” and not sufficiently rigorous for Kandinsky.\(^4^0\) His own music of spheres was to be of sterner stuff.

Strikingly, from the start Kandinsky had given music supremacy over painting (in his youth he learned how to play the cello and the piano). In 1911 he wrote: “After music painting may well be the second of the arts unthinkable without construction…thus painting will attain the higher levels of pure art upon which music has already stood for several centuries.”\(^4^1\) Hereby Kandinsky acknowledged a debt to one of his and Scriabin’s mentors, Schopenhauer, who had stated that “to become like music is the aim of art.”\(^4^2\) By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of music being supreme among the arts because of its abstract, non-imitative qualities had become widespread. Baudelaire (1821-1867) was also known for speaking about the musical properties of color.

Significant for the Modernist movement was the fact that Kandinsky considered great works of art to be “symphonic,” in that the “poise and systematic arrangement of parts” was more important than the “melodic” or decorative element.\(^4^3\) Sometimes he used musical terms to designate his works. Many of his spontaneous paintings are called "Improvisations" or

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\(^3^9\) Crawford, *Expressionism in twentieth-century music*, 63.


Table 1. Comparative characteristic of views on art and creative process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kandinsky</th>
<th>Scriabin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“A work freed from an artist gets independent life; it becomes a person, a</td>
<td>Believed that his works are living creatures^[44]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spiritual subject, which has real material life, which is a Being”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central aspect of the art – creating from “a deep spiritual internal</td>
<td>In the process of composing experience must be conjured up spontaneously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>necessity”</td>
<td>from within and translated into music^[45]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritually influenced by H. P. Blavatsky; his book Concerning the</td>
<td>Deeply engaged in reading works by Mme. Blavatsky, especially Secret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual in Art (1910) and Point and Line to Plane (1926) echoes this</td>
<td>Doctrine, and other theosophists and found them incredibly close to his</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>basic Theosophical principle</td>
<td>own thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compared the spiritual life of the humanity to a large Triangle similar</td>
<td>Maintained the belief that the artist could affect all humanity; declared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to a pyramid, penetrating and proceeding into tomorrow; its point is</td>
<td>that he was the “higher type” who would lead all people through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>constituted only by some individuals who bring the sublime bread to men,</td>
<td>transfiguration to a new level of existence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the artist’s task and the mission is to lead others to the top by the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exercise of his talent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claimed that all forms of art were equally capable of reaching a level</td>
<td>The paramount aim – omni-Art, gigantic multimedia work Mystère (“It’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of spirituality; Wagner’s opera Lohengrin, particularly the idea of</td>
<td>possible: melody starts with sounds, and then continues with gestures,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesamtkunstwerk, irrevocably changed his life.</td>
<td>or starts with sound, and continues with the symphony or lines of light.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argued that all states of time exist simultaneously and reveal</td>
<td>It shall be absolutely new sensation^[46]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>themselves in a single moment (Composition VI was intended to evoke a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flood, baptism, destruction, and rebirth simultaneously); implied space</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>of a new kind, with “the collaboration of different spheres”, therefore</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>a cosmic one</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developed an intricate theory of geometric figures and their</td>
<td>Repeatedly associated certain types of expressive language with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships (for example, descending series of circles, triangles,</td>
<td>specific musical gestures, creating a body of consistent musical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and squares); used their veiled imagery as symbols of the archetypes (the</td>
<td>symbols for plot archetype, especially throughout his later works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circle is the most peaceful shape and represents the human soul etc.)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

“Impressions.” More elaborated and worked at length works Kandinsky entitled "Compositions", and numbered them like sonatas or symphonies. His ten large “Compositions” (analogously to Scriabin’s ten piano sonatas) are considered to be his most important achievements and definitive statements. Some of them are primarily concerned with evoking a spiritual resonance in viewer and artist. Others, created right before World War I and influenced by Theosophy and the perception of a coming New Age, develop a theme of the Apocalypse, showing a coming cataclysm which would alter individual and social reality. Raised an Orthodox Christian, Kandinsky drew upon Jewish and Christian mythology, various Russian folk tales, and the common mythological experiences of death and rebirth.

Vrubel

Mikhail Vrubel (1856 – 1910) is another great Russian painter whose name is routinely associated with Russian Symbolism. He was a versatile artist, excelling in painting, graphics, sculpture, as well as in monumental and applied arts. In his art Vrubel was able to combine old traditions (the Early Renaissance or Late Byzantine art) and contemporary artistic movements (Neo-Romanticism, Art Nouveau). At St. Petersburg University he studied German philosophy and was especially enthusiastic about the theories of Nietzsche and the idealist philosopher Schopenhauer (two of the most influential Western thinkers in Scriabin’s life). All his life Vrubel was sensitive to and inspired by music. His stepmother was a fine pianist, his wife was a prominent opera singer, and a composer Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov was one of his good friends.

It has been often pointed out that Vrubel’s works also have the cosmic experience that Scriabin’s music possesses, a certain mystic vibration which finds its way to everybody’s heart. Vrubel’s cult of beauty is one of the most characteristic features of his style – melancholic,
enigmatic and refined. He tended to employ the synthesis of arts in everything, be it an illustrated book, a theater performance, or décor. His technique and style characterized by "volume cut into a multitude of interrelated, intersecting facets and planes … and fiery and emotional color combinations …." 49

One of valuable components of Scriabin’s symbolic vocabulary - the theme of flight - receives a proper artistic treatment in Vrubel's cycle of monumental panels based on Goethe's Faust (1896). Both artists paid extreme attention to details. In works like “Pearl” or “Flowers” Vrubel unfolds to the eye of spectator an eternity within a microcosm.

The painters of Blue Rose (Blaue Rose), a Symbolist artist association in Moscow in 1906-1910, emphasized color as a 'tonal' medium to construct rhythm in a painting and the elimination of shape and contour. They often exhibited Vrubel together with their works and proclaimed him their Teacher. His paintings resonate with the poetic understanding of the Eternal Feminine of Vladimir Solovyov's prophecies and the writings of such Symbolist poets as Alexander Blok, Andrei Bely and Vyacheslav Ivanov.

Along with an expressiveness and rich imagination, Vrubel’s works reveal a taste for improvisation, fragmentary composition. He fuses his characteristic “unfinished” manner with classical style and monumentality. Vrubel does not give his image a sense of completion, as if he is afraid to distort it. This feature draws a parallel with the late works by Scriabin, for they also acquire a similar quality of timelessness, openness (partially due to abandoning the tonality).

One of the central themes and a source of endless variations for Vrubel was Demon, a hero of Mikhail Lermontov’s poem. Vrubel created the image of the "Light" Demon as an attempt to deviate from the Christian interpretation of his hero as the personification of darkness.

49 Ekaterina Seredniakova, official site of State Tretyakov gallery http://www.virtualmuseum.ru/dev (accessed on 10/19/2007)
He said: "The Demon is misunderstood; he is confused with the devil… But Demon is Greek for ‘Soul’." Scriabin went even further in this justification; he speculated that as Light has been separated from Dark at the beginning of Creation, both Good and Evil derived from the same source of Power. “Prometheus, Satan, and Lucifer all meet in ancient myth. They represent the active energy of the universe, its creative principle,” wrote Sabaneev in the authorized program notes for the first performance of *Prométhée*. Vrubel and Scriabin shared a desire to reconcile religious thoughts and characteristics of both Christianity and paganism. Vrubel's method of creative mystic intuition is parallel to images from Solovyov's poetry, penetrated by a premonition of an "unknown god." In the context of aesthetic theory, Russian Symbolism in many ways pushes away from the artistic practice of Vrubel’s and Scriabin’s works perceived as a mystery play, a mystical life order, which was understood as the highest form of art.

In his *Demon Downcast* Vrubel wanted to express the strong, even sublime side of the human being (sensuality, passion for beauty, for refinement), which usually is rejected by people because of Christian ideas. He even wanted to name his manifesto painting “an Icon.” When this work was put on display at the “World of Art” exhibition, Vrubel kept coming every morning to redo the Demon’s face – up to forty times, according to witnesses. However, it is said that the former angel, which has become a head of dark forces, has thousands of appearances; none of them being the true one. The ideas of *The Demon* continued to haunt Vrubel till his death, even when he began to suffer from a mental illness and rapidly developing blindness.

Scriabin’s emphasis on harmony (‘vertical’ quality of music) and the way he built the unique chains of chord progressions is frequently compared to a crystallizing process. Similarly, the key to Vrubel's unique painterly method is his special device of stylized crystal faceting. The struggle of the visual fabric gives birth to an impression of a constantly transforming symbolic
image, like a crystal. The multitude of lines strengthens the impression of constantly transforming shapes and their vivid multiple facets. Layering paint with a palette knife, Vrubel synthesized oil painting, sculpture and mosaic and created an imperishable ‘supersubstance’ of work of art, a kind of philosopher's stone.

Art Nouveau: Lalique, Beardsley

René Jules Lalique (1860 - 1945), France's foremost Art Nouveau glass designer, continued further exploration of manifold layered texture. He was famed for his stunning creations of perfume bottles, vases, jewelry, chandeliers, etc. The very nature of jewelry and any other decorative work, i.e. its preciousness, itself implies the esoteric world of Decadents. Some of the best naturalistic glasswork was created with emphasis on this most thorough exponent of the Art Nouveau psyche. Glass as medium provided to Lalique a new plane for expanding ideas of multiple-faceting crystalline forms and developing their rhythmic line.

Another link connecting Scriabin with the Art Nouveau era is the creative work of Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872-1898). His famous illustrations, mostly on the themes from mythology, and many later works of Scriabin share extreme attention to sensuality and eroticism. However, unlike Scriabin’s erotic motives – full of longing and ecstasy - Beardsley’s images are dark, often perverse, and highly inclined to grotesque.

Cortázar

The idea of openness of the art form, the seeds of which can be found in Scriabin’s late works, was developed by many artists of the twentieth century. It reached its zenith in work of Julio Cortázar (1914 –1984), a Belgian-born Argentine intellectual and author of several
experimental novels and many short stories. Cortázar's masterpiece, *Hopscotch* (1963), has an open-ended structure that invites the reader to choose between a linear reading and a non-linear one that interpolates additional chapters. Cortázar was influenced by Surrealism and Nouveau roman. Some of the programs for Scriabin’s music and many of his notebook entries by a certain extent can be also treated as an attempt of “a stream of consciousness.” Both authors’ thought had a general anthroposophist metaphysical outline.

Cortázar expressed some opinions on compositional process in *Hopscotch* through the fictitious writer Morelli. For example, in an attempt to create a text that “would not clutch the reader but which would oblige him to become an accomplice as it whispers to him underneath the conventional exposition other, more esoteric directions” the author has to “cut the roots of all systematic construction of characters and situations.”50 Strikingly akin to Scriabin is Cortázar’s opinion about “the strange self-creation of the author through his work”, which links both to the ancient philosophy of Eleatics.51

The technological progress, its influence on human evolution and pace of our life today make it more difficult to comprehend the world and ideas of the composer-romantic. In 1961 Artur Rubinstein admitted: “Scriabin always was a romantic lyricist. He always has emotion and feeling, even underneath his most *shablone* – patterned and schemed – music. The public wants coldness, not warmth. Today rejects Scriabin and his romanticism.”52 Cortázar expresses analogous regrets through his character Horacio Oliveira:

51 The Eleatics were a school of pre-Socratic philosophers at Elea, a Greek colony in Campania, Italy. The Eleatics maintained that the true explanation of things lies in the conception of a universal unity of being. According to their doctrine, the senses cannot cognize this unity, because their reports are inconsistent; it is by thought alone that we can pass beyond the false appearances of sense and arrive at the knowledge of being, at the fundamental truth that the All is One.
Until about twenty years ago there was the great answer: Poetry. … But then after the war it was all over. We still have poets, nobody can deny that, but no one ever reads them. What every poet wants and searches for, that well-known poietical reality. Believe me, since nineteen-fifty we’ve been right in the middle of a technological reality.53

Cortázar saw in the contemporary narrative an advance towards what has been poorly termed abstraction. “Music is losing its melody, painting is losing its anecdotal side, and the novel is losing its description…The novel that interests us is not one that places characters in a situation, but rather one that puts the situation in the characters.”54 The assonance of Scriabin’s searches with such of Cortázar represents one more proof of the composer’s advanced artistic thought that surpassed his time and stayed in the mainstream for many years after the composer’s death.

Roerich

Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) was Russian painter and a spiritual teacher. He made stage-designs for Paris premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring in 1913, which were an important element in the success and the scandal of this epochal event.

Together with his wife and sons Roerich founded the theosophical Agni Yoga Society, also called the “Teaching of Living Ethics.” Inspired by the Vedic traditions, as well as by Buddhism and writings of H.P. Blavatsky and Theosophy, the Roerichs published series of books. In 1926 Roerich with a group of his closest friends and relatives went on an expedition to Tibet and Himalayas – pretty much realizing Scriabin’s lifelong dream – and even aspired to establish a new country somewhere in Central Asia.

Agni means “fire” in Sanskrit. As used by the Roerichs, it refers to a spiritual fire within the heart. This psychic energy, which is seen as the basis and the main force of all life, may and

53 Cortázar, Rayuela, 398.
54 Ibid.
should be refined and cultivated. The Agni Yoga also invokes Christ but includes other Theosophical masters such as Solomon, Buddha, Sergey of Radonezh and others. To fulfill people’s life a “new temple,” or a “new world” has to be built, not from physical stone, but inside everyone’s heart.

Although we know that Scriabin believed in materialization of his *Mysterium*, his scheme of transformation of a world is amazingly interrelated to Agni Yoga teaching. The element of Fire takes on a colossal significance for composer; after the *Prométhée* he writes other pieces involving the theme of “flames” or “light.” According to Agni Yoga, Scriabin meets the criteria of a Fire element person, who “always has higher goals and tries to achieve them no matter what,” “even in delusion can not stay inert,” and “moves ahead of the world, but has a thorny destiny.” All these qualities create an exact portrait of the composer. Another postulate of Agni Yoga – “approaching the Fire we begin to learn the rhythm of energy that creates everything” – concurs with Scriabin’s stress on the rhythm as a very important musical device. He would probably read it and cry out: “That’s mine! I said that!”55, as he did with many ideas written by other people in other countries and well-known before he was born.

Conclusion

Cross-cultural and ‘cross-art’ comparative analysis certainly takes speculative risks in a try to stretch and connect different sources, perceptions, and experiences, which normally are left beyond more contained frameworks of study. However, the results of this approach are unusual, and certainly deserve to be more thoroughly explored. For example, Scriabin’s collisions of tonal layouts, a new element in the development of European music, corresponds to the ancient

Chinese system 12 lü (十二律)\(^{56}\) and its rules of combining tonalities (discovered by George Crumb).\(^{57}\) Legends say this system could influence and transform the nature, because each other half-step was a break-through to a system of another order.

Scriabin absorbed numerous world sources and articulated them in very exclusive manner, through the innovativeness of his own originality. The ‘inclusivity’ of Scriabin’s approach carries that paradoxical nature of many great spiritual contributions. For instance the famous jazz musician and composer John Coltrane (1926-1967) was deeply involved with oriental astrology.

Most of the books that absorbed him were on religion and cosmic philosophy…His interest in cosmology has a parallel to his music. … For years he had been trying to relate mystical systems such as numerology and astrology, theories of modern physics and mathematics, the teachings of the great spiritual leaders, and advanced musical theory, and trying somehow to pull these threads into something, he could play.\(^{58}\)

Since the end of nineteenth century, artists’ attention to spiritual ideas of essence, unity, and transcendence shaped the deepening interest in non-Western religious and musical expressions. Unfortunately, there is still an issue of compatibility of such information with a linear Aristotelian worldview so engraved in the Western mind.

Despite Scriabin’s realization that the spiritual communion of viewer - work of art – artist/prophet is ineffable, he attempted to describe it within the limits of words and images. Although his philosophy articulates more through his musicianship than through any abstract writing, Scriabin’s ‘doctrine’ cannot be fully neglected, as in the following statement: “It would be a pity if appreciation of the music required us to follow Skryabin into this world of cosmic

\(^{56}\) A gamut or series of Shi Er Lu defined by mathematical means by the ancient Chinese, from which various sets of five or seven frequencies were selected to make the sort of "do re mi" major scale familiar to those who have been formed with the Western Standard notation.

\(^{57}\) Chen Ying-shi 一种体系 两个系统 by 陈应时(Yi zhong ti-xi, liang ge xi-tong), Shanghai Conservatory, Musicology in Chine, no. 4, 2002.

hocus-pocus.”59 Researchers that believe that composer’s “attempt to make music the vehicle of metaphysical and psychic experiences may seem questionable,” and assert that the only worthy achievements are “a new harmonic language”60 seriously question the phenomenon of music itself. From ancient times music was considered a medium for conceiving the transcendental, “the key to all sciences and arts, the link between metaphysics and physics.”61

59 Macdonald, Skryabin, 10.
CHAPTER 3
THE PIANO MINIATURE
Comparative Style Identification

The identification of Scriabin’s stylistic affiliation poses a problem similar to the classification of his metaphysical ideas. Some critics believed that he was “a mystic impressionist with his roots in romanticism,”62 others that his works “presented many similarities to expressionism.”63 Living on the edge between two centuries Scriabin was surely attached to nineteenth century musical idioms. However, he made his appearance just when romanticism had come to be regarded as obsolete. Music for music’s sake was exactly opposite to Scriabin’s aesthetic creed. On the other hand, if we accept the term romantic in a much broader sense, referring to a constant of creative activity and not merely a historic phenomenon, it is absolutely reasonable to consider Scriabin a romantic. In this case not the subject but the manner of its presentation is what matters. The main purpose of Scriabin as a romantic became to convert a work of art into a means of action, not only on an aesthetic level, but also on the level of reality.

Some of Scriabin’s innovations, such as the condensation of forms, rejection of tonality, use of mystic musical symbols, and the idea of unity in multiplicity (the identity of harmony and melody), can be related to expressionist music.64 His refined and decadent sensuality, however, doesn’t allow us to place him among the expressionists. Scriabin’s style refuses to fit only one category. Influenced by certain traditions, it eventually matured and acquired its very own and unique voice.

62 Marion Bauer, Twentieth century music: how it developed, how to listen to it, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1947), 180.
63 Crawford, Expressionism in twentieth-century music, 56.
64 Ibid.
Chopin

One of composers who undeniably had an impact on young Scriabin was Chopin. As aunt Lyubov states in her memoirs,

… when Chopin became his first musical god, Scriabin not only played the master’s music continually and talked about it indefatigably, but even assumed some of Chopin’s personal mannerisms. He never went to sleep before making sure that a volume of Chopin’s music was under his pillow.65

In Scriabin’s early period, from 1885 to 1903, the choice of the piano miniature form - Prélude, Mazurka, Impromptu, Étude – reflects his affinity for Chopin. Opus 11 even follows a similar key-scheme and has the same number of Préludes. Twenty one mazurkas (opuses 3, 25, and 40), composed between 1889 and 1899, are very much in line with the Master’s. They are sweet, charming, but much more salon-like than Chopin’s, who in his later mazurkas explored hitherto unknown harmonies. Nevertheless, most of the pianistic writing, melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic turns in these years derive directly from Chopin. Cui once made a joke that Scriabin must have discovered somewhere a chest of unpublished Chopin’s manuscripts. Nobody else affected Scriabin’s music so deeply (for example, in Liszt he appreciated only “magic sonorities,” in Wagner – his “personality”).66

Scriabin was certainly not the first musician to fall under Chopin’s influence, but hardly anyone had a closer assonance of spirit. The exquisite handling of the piano, the power of inspired improvisation, a rare aristocracy of taste and an element of salon-like gracefulness: all these traits rendered him close to the Polish master. Nonetheless, Scriabin was far from being a mere imitator. His early pieces already have embryos of his own ideas. The suggestions of the so-called Promethean chord can be found in measures 26 and 58 of the Waltz op. 1, and in several mazurkas from op. 3. What lies in the background with Chopin comes to the fore in

65 Ewen, Modern Music: A History and Appreciation – from Wagner to Webern , 40.
Scriabin: the music grows in nervousness, the tissue becomes closer and more compact. The writing appears neater and more scrupulous than even Chopin’s. The number of dissonances increases as a result of an almost boundless use of suspensions: hardly one little knot has been untied in one of the parts when one or two more crop up in another.

Scriabin’s early works are often underestimated and criticized for their imitation of Chopin’s style. It needs to be mentioned that in those days composers were not ashamed of any resemblance with Chopin, as there is nothing wrong with young painter copying old masters. Many Russians turned away from Western style, which they felt pursued only brilliant technique with too much ornamentation and lacked clear, understandable melodies and forms. However, Chopin’s music, which expressed deep sadness, tenderness, and melancholy through clear melodies, was absolutely worshipped. For example, Taneyev’s own style was deeply imbued with the influence of Chopin (he was Scriabin’s composition teacher in conservatory). When critics labeled him as “Russia’s Chopin,” he accepted this accolade with great pride.67

One way in which Scriabin differed radically from Chopin was his dislike of everything purposely national and folk. Later in his life Scriabin even attacked his youthful god for being nationalistic. “Not even the tragic break with George Sand,” he wrote, “could precipitate a new note in Chopin’s creations… He was overpowered by nationalism; it was too deeply rooted in him…”68 This position was rather contrary to many Russian composers-nationalists, for whom folk music was a source of inspiration (for example, Rachmaninov, Rimsky-Korsakov, the Mighty Five). Scriabin belonged to another group – cosmopolitans and universalists in music.

Stravinsky once remarked that Scriabin was “a man without a passport,” a man of no nationality. Scriabin was outraged: ‘Is it possible that I am not a Russian composer, just because I don’t write overtures and capriccios on Russian themes?’ Although Scriabin’s musical tissue may not have a clearly defined Russian origin, essentially there is much more of the typical Russian in him than in the precise and calculated creative work of Stravinsky.

Russian School: Rachmaninoff and Medtner

Scriabin is frequently mentioned together with Rachmaninov (1873-1943) and Medtner (1880-1951) as one of the three Russian piano coryphaei. All three became famous not only as composers, but also as regularly performing concert pianists. They favored the piano miniature and created vast amount of this very delicate and laconic genre. Despite strong differences in these composers’ styles, their piano works have many kindred features. The texture is often extremely multilayered, has complex voicing and lots of polyrhythms, which makes music of Rachmaninov, Medtner and Scriabin infamous for being impossible to learn quickly, as if it had some special ‘material resistance’. At the same time their writing is marked by well-thought natural comfort, this immediate indication of scrupulous knowledge of the instrument.

There are two favorite musical images reoccurring in many works of these three Russian composers. One is bells - Scriabin doesn’t mention them in titles, but recalls them variously and extensively in his works and program notes; Rachmaninov, for example, refers to them in the Étude -tableau op. 39, no. 9, also his cantata “The Bells” op. 35; Medtner – in the Fairy-Tale op. 20, no. 2 Campanella. Another mutually favored image is dance (Ex.: Scriabin’s Danse Languide, Caresse Dansée, Rachmaninov’s Symphonic Dances op. 45, Medtner’s Danza festiva, Danza silvestra op. 38).

Scriabin was particularly interested in the dance as a plastic rhythm or symbolic gesture and exploited it diversely throughout his whole creative life. (Table 2)

Table 2. Examples of various use of dance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Dance quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Mazurkas</em> op. 3 (1889)</td>
<td>Salon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Polonaise</em> op. 21 (1897)</td>
<td>Chopinesque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Étude</em> op. 49 (1905)</td>
<td>Flattering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Danse Languide</em> op. 51 (1906)</td>
<td>Yearning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Caresse Dansée</em> op. 57 (1907)</td>
<td>Playful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Guirlandes</em> op. 73 (1914)</td>
<td>Dreaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Flammes Sombres</em> op. 73 (1914)</td>
<td>Orgiastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mystery</em> and <em>Acte Préalable</em> (unfinished)</td>
<td>Universal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dance often mentioned in the author’s programs to his works and sometimes in French remarks (Ex.: *L’épouvante surgit, elle se mêle a la danse délirante*). It’s known that Scriabin worked for days with Alisa Koonen, famous Russian actress, to see how music could express itself in a gesture. Dance was meant to play an important role in the synthetic art that Scriabin aimed for.

Under Alisa Koonen’s influence Scriabin composed his Two Dances op. 73 (*Flammes Sombres* and *Guirlandes*) and also *Vers la flame* op. 72.

The following stanzas present some of Scriabin’s essential dance characteristics:

- Tanets prelestnyj            Splendid dance
- Daj mne zabven’ja,            Grant me oblivion,
- Siloj chudesnoj               With your marvelous strength
- Vyrvì muchen’ja.             Tear out the torments.
- Zhizn’ – stradan’ë,          Life is suffering,
- Zhizn’ – somnen’ë,           Life is doubt,
- Ty zhe mechtan’ë,            Yet you are a dream,
- Ty – naslazhden’ë            You are delight.70

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70 Leonid Sabaneev, *Russkie propilei* VI (Moskva, 1910), 127.
Debussy

Scriabin’s exploration of new expressive means in piano music has a remarkable resemblance to Claude Debussy’s (1862-1918) searches. Both found their distinctive voices living in the era of innovation. Being individualists, they did not establish any type of enduring school, although many other composers derived their inspiration from Scriabin’s and Debussy’s music. Debussy was also deeply influenced by Chopin, proclaiming him “the greatest of all, for with the piano alone he discovered everything.” Debussy’s two books of Études were written en hommage à Chopin (i.q. Scriabin’s 24 Préludes op. 11). Debussy and Scriabin brought the piano miniature to a new level. Debussy was more meticulous about the order of pieces within sets, whereas Scriabin’s opuses can be used as a quarry for different combinations.

These two mysterious and complex fin-de-siècle minds were significantly affected by symbolist poets in their respective countries. Their ideas reveal the same blend of Dionysius and Apollo and an interest in rituals. However, they reflect this influence in different ways. Both Debussy and Scriabin wanted to transcend mere descriptiveness of music and expected their interpreters and listeners to be able to read “between staves” (Debussy), to express “the unheard tones between the keys” (Scriabin). In an attempt to guide the performer through their music they used lots of unorthodox and fanciful indications.

Scriabin and Debussy never met, although Scriabin heard Debussy conducting La Mer and owned a copy of the miniature score (it was found on Scriabin’s worktable upon his death).71 Scriabin did not like in general “the passive musical language” of the impressionists. He called

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Debussy *par terre* ("earthy"), and commented that "he shouldn’t have stolen from our Russian music."  

One of the biggest connections between Scriabin’s and Debussy’s piano treatment is their attention to the role of pedal. Both considered the pedal a main device in a new elaborated language. They were famous for a very distinctive style of playing and for the colors they could coax out of the keyboard. Similarly neither one indicated pedaling nor fingering in their scores, depending instead on the skill of their interpreters. Safonov, Scriabin’s piano teacher in conservatory, used to say that the instrument could breathe under Scriabin’s hands. Debussy was looking for the means of indicating the “breathing space” graphically. Scriabin’s pedal enveloped sounds with strange layers of reverberations, which nobody else could replicate. Once he compared the sound of the piano without pedal to the human body, which is not beautiful enough by itself, until it is clothed. “Clothes continue the lines of body movements, otherwise these movements are dry and more resemble gymnastics.” Debussy’s famous “let’s forget the piano has hammers” echoes Scriabin’s thoughts.

Scriabin was convinced that pedal technique must be extremely refined, therefore he promoted use of pedal gradations as 1/2, 1/3, 1/4 etc. Debussy also expressed rather harsh opinion about overuse of pedals: “It is perhaps quite simply a fact that the excessive use of the pedal serves only to disguise inadequate technique, and that a great deal of noise is necessary to prevent the music which is being massacred from being heard.”

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73 Ibid., 144.
75 Sabaneev, *Vospominaniya o A. N. Scriabine*, 114.
A number of technical innovations mark the work of Scriabin and Debussy. They marched away “from the old Wagnerian and pre-Wagnerian harmony into the new fields of dissonance.” Scriabin and Debussy used peculiar scale formations and dissonant sounds mostly in the interest of creating distinctive color effects and expressing extra-musical ideas. Later in the century Olivier Messiaen would continue this particular mix of musical experimentation and religious mysticism. Scriabin never came back to tonality, Debussy, however, combined different techniques in his writing. Allen Forte writes:

It seems clear - to me, at least – that the octatonic in Debussy’s music always connotes the sublime, the exalted, in contrast to the whole-tone, which represents the indeterminate, and in opposition to the diatonic, which seems always to be a means of expressing the world of the immediate and the pictorial.

Poème-Nocturne op. 61 (1911) was the first work in which Scriabin began to experiment with the combination of sonata principles and octatonicism. His octatonicism though differed substantially from the practices of such main Russian exponents as Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky; rather it related closely to his former use of the asymmetric mystic chord as a generating source chord. The octatonic collection for Scriabin was an extension of the mystic chord. He created several astounding pieces, which are purely octatonic in basis. In the Guirlandes op. 73 no. 1 up to 48 (73.8%) of its 65 bars display sheer octatonic, in his Sixth Sonata it is 227 (58.8%) out of its 386 bars.

The appearance of similar ideas and musical structures in works of Scriabin and Debussy is most likely a natural coincidence, since octatonicism was ‘in the air’ at the beginning of the twentieth century. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (b.1908) makes an appealing argument for this case. In his book Regarder, écouter, lire he discusses the connections between the

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various pieces of art from different periods and finds coherences that demonstrate the anthropological patterns common to each work. Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that unconscious commonalities between the memories of different artists create parallels that are involuntarily structuralist.  

Survey of Genres

Scriabin’s career began conventionally enough with the composition of piano miniatures in the same generic categories as the shorter works of Chopin. Around the turn of the century he came increasingly under the influence of diverse aesthetic, philosophical and mystical doctrines, which impelled him toward an artistic vision of unprecedented grandiosity. However, even in the midst of his striving for magnificent ecstatic symphonies and sonatas Scriabin continued to write small pieces, which stand in a special relationship to his bigger works. In a few cases they are mere Kleinigkeiten, “sort of compliments,” as Scriabin describes himself one of his Préludes (E-major Prélude op. 15). Yet other short pieces are much more serious. Some of them were intended for incorporation into larger projects which never got off the ground (for example, the Poème op. 32 no. 2 and Poème tragique op. 34 are parts of his opera based on Nietzschean themes). In middle and late periods nearly every Scriabin’s short piece appears to be devoted to the exploration of the compositional possibilities of some novel component (e.g., in the Feuillet d’album op. 58 Scriabin exploits the potential of the mystic chord of Prométhée op. 60).

Scriabin was free from the superfluous. Some of his short Préludes or Album leaves are worth whole movements of symphonies. Arnold Alshvagn (1898-1960) notes that Scriabin’s

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81 Sabaneev, Vospominaniya o A. N. Scriabine, 207.
short compositions are results “of highest impulse with fullest expanse.”\textsuperscript{82} In search for “the maximum expression with the minimum means” Scriabin’s late works compress fully processed event to a brief moment, hint, snapshot.\textsuperscript{83} Scriabin’s miniatures are ideal for the study of his evolution, because they present heavily concentrated idioms and structural procedures.

As we see from Figure 1, three dominant miniature genres in Scriabin’s music are Prélude, Étude and Poème (last one beginning from the middle period). A large body of mazurkas in his first period was created as a tribute to Chopin and the salon fashion, but this genre does not prevail in Scriabin’s later works. 1903 was a year of great importance for Scriabin.

![Figure 1. Comparison of dominant genres.](image)

It is often considered a turning point in his style development and beginning of his middle creative period. Over the period of three months Scriabin composed an unprecedented stream of

\textsuperscript{82} Bowers, \textit{The New Scriabin: Enigma and Answers}, 54.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
music – thirty-six pieces from op. 30 to op. 43 (including his Third Symphony). Scriabin’s finances definitely stimulated his incredible diligence. However, the quality of these new pieces was not affected by their bulk. Scriabin’s second and third periods together are shorter than the first one. Nonetheless, the number of opuses in early and middle period is about equal. It is interesting to see how composer sorted out his genre preferences by third period, focusing just on five (Sonatas, Préludes, Poèmes, Études and titled pieces). It is obvious that even though there is much discussion about the priority of Sonatas in Scriabin’s late years, his Poèmes outnumber them.

Prélude

The ninety Préludes written by Scriabin are extremely diverse works. They are independent pieces and not necessarily intended to be played in cycles (except maybe op. 11). Some of Préludes are epigrammatically short (Ex.: op. 11 no. 17, op. 16 no. 4, op. 33 no. 3); others are larger in scale and dramatic in content (Ex.: op. 13 no. 6, op. 17 no. 5).

Opuses 11, 13, 15, 16, 17 were composed during two years classified by Scriabin as his “salon period.” The early Préludes reflect Chopin’s tradition, sometimes completely borrowing the texture template (compare, for example, the texture of op. 15 no. 3 with Chopin’s Étude op. 10 no. 11). (Examples 1 and 2)

Example 1. Scriabin, Prélude op. 15, no. 3.
Later opuses 31, 33, 35, 37 and 39 alternate with Poèmes opp. 32, 34, 36, and 41. On the crest of this artistic wave appears opus 43 - Scriabin’s magnificent *Le Poème Divin*. This curious opus alternation also happens between Scriabin’s last five sonatas (opp. 62, 64, 66, 68, 70) and sets of smaller pieces (opp. 61, 63, 65, 67, 69, 71, 73).

There is also a general tendency of decreasing number of Préludes in a set. In earlier opuses there are 6, 7, 24 pieces, while later the Préludes are combined in groups of 3-4. Often just a single Prélude is included in set of ‘Pieces’ (opp. 45, 49, 51, 56, 57, 59). The exception is Scriabin’s very last opus 74, which contains 5 Préludes. Toward his later years Scriabin became obsessed by a theory of correspondences, developed out of the theosophical idea of opposing but equal forces active in universe (creation and dissolution). That’s why more and more frequently the pieces come in pairs: to maintain that balance.⁸⁴

**Étude**

Scriabin’s twenty-six Études made remarkable contributions to piano literature. In both Préludes and Études Scriabin explored particular moods, musical figures or technical problems, alike Rachmaninov and Debussy.

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⁸⁴ Bauer, *Twentieth century music: how it developed, how to listen to it*, 58.
One of the best known of Scriabin’s works, Étude op. 2 (written when he was fifteen), barely corresponds to its title. Its slow bitter-melancholic melody with characteristic ‘sigh’ at the end of each phrase would much better suit a nocturne or Prélude.

Études op. 8 are not radically different from Scriabin’s Préludes either, especially slow ones – nos.8, 11 (similarly to Rachmaninov’s Études-tableaux and preludes). Étude no. 9 has indication *alla balata*, which perfectly describes the spirit of whole opus. These works show Scriabin’s penchant for the highly expressive chromaticism, the palette of mostly minor keys rich with accidentals, and polyrhythms. The sonority of well-known Étude no. 10 is based on the $V_7\#$, which is strongly related with later Scriabin’s harmonic principles.

In more than half of the Études op. 42 (nos. 1, 2, 6, 7, 8) Scriabin continued to explore possibilities of polyrhythmic combinations. Due to asynchronous use of melody, harmony, texture, and rhythm, they often appear at odds at points of formal articulation, instead of reinforcing each other. By this means Scriabin achieves formal ambiguity and adds an almost impressionistic fluidity to his works. The left hand part is very developed and moves in wide spans, similar to Schumann’s and even Fauré’s textures, where chords are not sounded simultaneously in a block, but “atomized” – broken up into a blur of harmony. The harmonies themselves change at a slower pace, but there is agitation in the texture. Bowers calls these eight Études the “etudes of experience”, rather than “etudes of difficulties” or “picture-etudes.”

Two single Études included in opuses 49 and 56 are based on brisk fluttering motives. The organization of these motives-cells vividly recalls *Danse languide* op. 51 and *Poème ailé* op. 51. (Ex. 3, 4, 5, and 6)
Example 3. Étude op. 49, no. 1.

Example 4. Étude op. 56, no. 4.

Example 5. Danse languide op. 51, no. 4.

Example 6. Poème ailé op. 51, no. 3.
Opus 65 has only three Études, but they are extremely innovative. Scriabin wrote to Sabaneev:

I inform you of something … quite painful for all defenders of the faith: A composer you know has written three études! In fifths (Horrors!), in ninths (How depraved!) and in major sevenths (the last fall from Grace!?) What will the world say?85

These pieces remain one of the biggest challenges in the piano literature. No. 1, which demands continuous stretch of a ninth in the right hand, is meant to be played with great smoothness and charm.86 Études no. 1 and no. 3 have two contrasting sections, whose material is related to the Poèmes and sonatas. (Ex. 7 and 8)

Example 7. Poème op. 32, no. 2.

Example 8. Étude op. 65, no. 3.

Poème

The ‘Poème’ genre first appears in Scriabin’s music in 1903 and becomes dominant throughout his works of middle and late period. The poem as a musical genre was the unique

86 It’s known that Scriabin never played the study. He was of a diminutive height, and his hands were not big, plus his right hand was injured during his conservatory years.
creation of romantic composers, however at this point Scriabin’s style started moving further away from romanticism (as a movement). The romantic poem appeared in the second half of nineteenth century and was almost exclusively orchestral. Usually it was in one movement and had a program. Liszt’s *Années de pèlerinage* were the closest adaptation of this new genre in piano works. However, an attempt to create fusion of music and literature forced composers to make too many compromises. Scriabin created two orchestral Poèmes - *Le poème de l’extase* op. 54\(^{87}\) (1905–8) and *Prométhée* op. 60 (1908–10). One of his earlier works, Symphony No. 3 op. 43 (1903), is also titled *Le Divin Poème*. It has three movements - *Luttes* (Struggles), *Voluptés* (Delights), and *Jeu divin* (Divine Play). All three works project Scriabin’s theosophical ideas identical to ones expressed in his late sonatas, and are not related to any external literary source except Scriabin’s own program. Therefore it can be speculated that Scriabin’s Poème is a unique genre developed independently.

Very often instrumental music written by the composers-symphonists has traces of symphonic thinking. Scriabin’s symphonic music by contrast was hugely influenced by his piano thinking. Leonid Sabaneev mentions that Scriabin’s symphonies were much more impressive and clearer when performed on the piano. A pupil of Sergei Taneyev recalled: “The impression was unforgettable, and it sounded much better than with an orchestra.”\(^{88}\) The very first two Poèmes op. 32 that Scriabin wrote were for piano solo. No. 1 is one of the most widely known, Sabaneev calls it “an erotic kiss…a kind of sexual dissolving in waves of sensation.”\(^{89}\) In following years Scriabin’s works more and more become expressions of his intensifying philosophical convictions:

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\(^{87}\) Originally it was meant to be *Le Poème Orgiaque*.

\(^{88}\) Leonid Sabaneev, *Erinnerungen an Alexander Skrjabin*, (Verlag Ernst Kuhn 1925/2005), 32.

...he (or Tatyana) now saw every composition as the expression of his mental world and attached much importance to the meaning, whether mystical, philosophical, or fantastic, of each piece.  

Scriabin considered himself as much a thinker and writer as a composer at this time. Some works (for example Fourth Sonata) were accompanied by a brief program-poem; *Poème de l’extase* was preceded by 300-line poem of the same title. Later the programmatic content became gradually replaced by the delineation of spiritual states.

The Poème (literary term by origin) became a perfect genre choice for Scriabin, as it is versatile enough to accommodate an idea of any sort. He created over twenty piano Poèmes, among them *Tragique, Satanique, Fantastique, Aile, Languide, Vers la flamme*. Paul Valéry believed that poetry as a non-literary concept simply “expresses a certain state of mind.” In poetry (from the Greek "ποίησις" [poiesis], a "making" or "creating") language is used for its aesthetic and evocative qualities in addition to, or in lieu of, its ostensible meaning. Poetry's use of ambiguity, symbolism, irony and other stylistic elements often leaves a poem open to multiple interpretations. It also allows to create a resonance between otherwise unrelated images—a layering of meanings, forming connections previously not perceived.

These poetic qualities were very appealing to Scriabin, who felt the impossibility of imparting his mystic message by regular means of the art in which he was trained. He asked Sabaneev once: “How can you express mysticism with major and minor? How can you convey the dissolution of matter, or luminosity?” The need for personal expression led Scriabin to develop a new highly individualized harmonic language, which in its turn required changes in form, texture and technique. Famous Russian musicologist Varvara Dernova writes: “It is self-evident that his system was an obligation, a law and a discipline to which composer subordinated

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himself…but not for the sake of the system did Scriabin work." The artistic task dictated the frame, not vice versa. That’s why it should be almost illicit to analyze Scriabin’s works without engaging his ideas. As Schlözer comments:

His thought neither followed in the shadow of his art, nor did it precede it like a guidebook. Both activities were equal, direct, original, and single conditions of two purposes. They hinged on a personal and intuitive center.

Poetry is illogical; it lacks narration and attempts to render the beautiful or sublime without the burden of engaging the logical thought process. In music narrative function usually belongs to the melody. Scriabin’s mature style is characterized by an intensified use of motives, mostly as a result of being liberated from conventional harmonic function. This caused multiple accusations of “melodic poverty.” In fact, Scriabin did not ignore the melody, but transformed the very idea of it. The melody became “unfurled harmony,” and harmony – “furled melody.” By dissolving harmony and melody in one whole, he completed an eschatological revelation: the full collapse of time and space.

The Préludes and Études underwent a transformation throughout Scriabin’s middle and late period. ‘Prélude’ came to mean a fragment, a sketch of an idea. ‘Étude’ still suggested a difficulty, but more a musical than a technical one. These completed within themselves pieces seem to be parts of a larger, but rarely expressed whole. Scriabin wrote that the majority of his Poèmes “have a specific psychological content, but not all of them require a program notes,” and referred to specific measures as “the depths of tragedy,” “the flight of clouds,” and the like. The Préludes and Études, as well as other works, which have only descriptive title (Désir,

97 Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically, 349.
98 Alexander Scriabin, letter of Dec.13/26, 1907, Pis’ma (Moscow, 1965), 493.
Nuances, Enigme), render uncanny connections to ones designated ‘Poèmes’ by Scriabin. All of them are concise, saturated with subtle implications, and convey their meaning symbolically.

In John B. Young’s opinion, all the miniatures of Scriabin’s maturity can be seen as regards, or aspects of a whole, as there is more that binds than separates them.99 Scriabin’s choice of giving this or another title to his works comes mostly from certain sensation, which this music is trying to transmit, rather than its particular formal organization. Basically, parallel with the dissolution of melody and harmony time and space, major and minor, genre distinctions dissolved as well, and ‘Poème’ features permeated all Scriabin’s works.

Symbolic Vocabulary

Scriabin repeatedly conjoined certain types of expressive language with specific musical gestures, creating a body of consistent musical symbols, especially throughout his later works. Compiled by Susanna Garcia, a system of main musical symbols for Scriabin’s sonatas can be extrapolated to his smaller works, justifying their homogenous components. The symbolic vocabulary also has much more relevance to an interpretation of Scriabin’s music than mere pianistic vocabulary,100 which simply sorts out multiple pianistic devices (e.g. skips, double notes, rolled chords, thumb melodies etc.), but does not convey much of practical value.

The Main Musical Symbols101

1. Notion of mystical unity – Scriabin’s “mystic” chord.
2. The divine summons: fanfare motive.
3. The Eternal Feminine: Scriabin’s representation of eroticism.

99John Bell Young, American Record Guide .62, no. 3 (May/June 1999): 279.
100Samuel Ludwick Randlett, “The nature and development of Scriabin’s vocabulary” (Northwestern University, DMA diss., 1966): 145.
5. Motive of flight.
6. Vertiginous dances.

1. The chord referred to as mystic or Promethean [C-Fb-B-E-A-D♭ or D] occurs frequently as part of the composer’s harmonic vocabulary from around \textit{Prométhée} (1908-10) through his later works. In Scriabin’s tonal style (1903-10) it mediates between the diatonic and the whole-tone realms, but the harmony is an anomaly within a basically tonal environment. In its embryonic form the mystic chord can be found in the Poème op. 32, no. 1. In the late works (1910-15) the mystic chord links the octatonic and the whole-tone scales in a non-tonal setting and pervades the atmosphere of an entire work. It analogizes mystical unity, for it is the source from which all melodic and harmonic structures derive. In the group of late works the “mystic” chord unfolds at the opening and often concludes everything at the end, functioning as a generative force, a potential energy and an unrevealed mystery that directs the entire work. (Ex. 9, 10, and 11)

\textbf{Example 9. Guirlandes op. 73, no. 1 (opening measures).}

\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example9.png}

\textbf{Example 10. Guirlandes op. 73, no. 1 (closing measures).}

\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example10.png}
2. The fanfare appears already in early works (1898) and is used almost obsessively throughout the late ones. It is typically a gesture of one to three short notes anacrusic to a sustained note, often in reversed dotted rhythm. Fanfares share an annunciatory character and gestural shape rather than intervallic content. The musical description, which Scriabin conjoined with this motive, suggests a summons of a supernatural, powerful, or otherwise mysterious origin. He places the fanfare motive in the privileged position of opening statement and at structurally significant points. (Ex. 12, 13, and 14)
3. Scriabin’s preoccupation with erotic themes is well documented and manifested in titles of compositions and in his poetic attempts accompanying various works. Musically they are lyrical, with a yearning quality engendered by the initiating semitone, upward reaching melody, and intense chromaticism. The chromatic inflections of the melody cause a fluctuation between two chord types – the French sixth that preserves the mystic chord sound and a dominant seventh. A fluid, improvisatory rhythmic style exhibiting such devices as arpeggiated chords, ties, which regularly obscure downbeats, and a rhythmic preference for triplets, encourage a mood of passivity and languor by negating a strong metrical and harmonic sense. (These harmonic characteristics are reminiscent of the musical language of Wagner’s Prelude to act I of *Tristan und Isolde*, a work well known for its expression of erotic longing.) (Ex. 15, 16, 17, and 18)

Example 15. Poème op. 32 no. 1.

4. Scriabin uses trills, tremolos, and other fiorituri to allude to light, and, by extension, to divine illumination. “He uses trills incessantly for luminosity. Trills to Scriabin were palpitation, trembling, the vibration in the atmosphere and a source of light.” In works identified by Scriabin as satanic, divine illumination takes the form of sorcery and bewitchment. Running up scale fragments Scriabin called “silver dust.” (Interesting parallel can be drawn with late Beethoven, who also used trills together with maximally remote registers to create transmundane sensation.) (Ex. 19, 20, and 21)

5. Scriabin was obsessed with one principle: “From the greatest delicacy, via active efficacy [flight] to the greatest grandiosity.” ¹⁰³ He saw the flight as a link between two states, two planes of existence – the material and spiritual. Scriabin’s flight motive imparts a sense of activity and motion contrasting with static and languorous Eternal Feminine material, and is represented by the rapid short arpeggios, sometimes initiated by a quick upward leap. (Ex. 22, 23, and 24)
Example 22. Poème-nocturne op. 61.

Example 23. Etrangeté op. 63 no. 2.

Example 24. Poème op. 69 no. 2.
6. The achievement of ecstasy through intoxicating spinning dances was a part of the Dionysian cult ritual. The result was the dancer’s collapse in exhaustion and an enhanced openness to divine influence. The loss of control was aided by the intoxicating effects of wine, also part of the ritual. The vertiginous dance passages are usually clearly articulated, opposed to the fluid and often ambiguous rhythmic patterns generally preferred by Scriabin. These passages are in square meters of 2/8 or 2/4, and involve straightforward blocked chords in short phrase units of two and four measures. Progressively faster tempi are also characteristic. (Ex. 25)

Example 25. Flammes sombres op. 73 no. 2.
Few other favorite gestures can be identified in Scriabin’s works. Harmonic and rhythmic ostinato impersonated for him the cosmic impartiality, where time stops. In Prélude op. 67 no. 1 ostinato and melodic whirling establish an ambience of mysticism, witchcraft. The same ostinato combined with impulsive texture, rhythm, and polyharmony could acquire demonic qualities. Scriabin also made use of some musical symbolism in accordance with the Theosophist’s emphasis on esoteric meanings (for example, the downward leap of a minor ninth portrays “the descent of spirit into matter”). However he also employs more familiar musical symbols, such as the descending half-step “sighing” figure, signifying sadness or suffering.

Circle and spiral took central space in Scriabin’s ideas as geometrical symbols of infinity.104 He believed in esoteric anthropogenesis representing the Seven Races and their Senses progression. (Table 3) Four first Races are from our Past, the Fifth is Present one, the most “dark” and “demonic.” The Sixth is from the Future, and the Seventh – the result of “fire transformation,” the summary of big cycle of development, and beginning of new circle of evolution. For example, Poème-nocturne op. 61 corresponds to the First Race and its ethereal beings, with hardly tangible body, “Lunar Spirits.”105

Table 3. Evolution of the Elements and the Senses according to Blavatsky.106

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Ether</th>
<th>Hearing</th>
<th>Sound</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Air</td>
<td>Touch</td>
<td>Sound and Touch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Fire, or Light</td>
<td>Sight</td>
<td>Sound, Touch and Color</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Taste</td>
<td>Sound, Touch, Color and Taste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Smell</td>
<td>Sound, Touch, Color, Taste and Smell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

106 Ibid., 173.
The first three Elements and Senses from Table 3 are almost identical to the symbols from Scriabin’s vocabulary. Ether corresponds to mystical unity and Eternal Feminine, Air to flight motive and fluttering dances, and Light – to the Divine luminescence. Fire, as one of the manifestations of Light, had great value for Scriabin. In Sabaneev’s program notes we find: “The fire is light, life, struggle, increase, abundance and thought.” 107 And as phœnix rises from ashes, usually after this struggle everything returns to the original quiet and tranquility, thus completing the cycle. Fire often appears in pieces’ titles – *Prométhée, Le Poème du feu, Vers la flamme* (here the flame is the center of the World Soul); *Flammes sombres* (the “black fire” of ignorance in Theosophical terminology) and also in the author’s remarks (*con luminosita, focosamente, étincelante, radieux, avec éclat*).

It is highly plausible that the French indications in music were related to Theosophical literature and used by Scriabin as reminiscence of French edition of *La Doctrine Secrète*, especially such as *appel mystérieux, épanouissement de forces mystérieuses, le rêve prend forme clarté, douceur, pureté* etc. 108

Evolution of the Harmonic Language

During his early period Scriabin favored several characteristic harmonies and harmonic procedures in tonal music. 

1) $II^6$, which achieves exotic juxtaposition of chords separated by tritone ($II^6$ and $V$)

(Ex. 26)

108 Taneyev, upon hearing Scriabin’s Third Symphony, commented jokingly that many of the performance directions, such as *divin, grandiose, sublime, sensual, passionné, caressant*, seem to be rather compliments to the music than composer’s instructions.
2) Avoiding full triads at the beginning of the composition, but having tonic root as a bass of a dissonant chord (mostly using quite indefinite initial harmonies) (Example 27)

Example 27. Prélude op. 56, no. 1.

3) Incomplete spans – one of frequently encountered prolongation procedures, attenuating the tonal strength

4) Spans whose elements are widely scattered among several registers

5) Spans, which run their courses almost entirely out of synchrony with each other and with majority of parts defining the harmonic progression

6) One real harmony lasting for many measures and any other harmonies supposedly occurring are simply the results of linear or embellishing motions (Ex. 28)

For Scriabin harmony has always occupied a position of overwhelming pre-eminence. There had never been any real counterpoint in his writing, when the harmony is a result of the intertwinemement of the parts. Like any creative artist, Scriabin arrived at his ‘secret harmonies’ half intuitively and half through conscious awareness. He always worked from instinct, using
logic after the fact to reinforce inspiration. As had Baudelaire before him, he struggled to capture “the drunkenness of the heart” while simultaneously demanding “mathematically exact metaphors.”

Example 28. Feuillet d’album op. 45 no. 1.

The mystic Promethean chord was derived from some of the more dissonant upper partials of overtone series, which Scriabin considered a physical manifestation of the astral world. Scriabin treated 11th, 13th and 14th partial tones as consonances. In his new harmonic outlook passing dissonances conceded to fundamental dissonances. The only discords left were suspensions, passing tones and appoggiaturas. Having “discovered” his sounds, Scriabin proceeded to arrange them in ascending fourths: C-F#-Bb-E-A-D, and found that they embrace all four kinds of triads (major, minor, diminished and augmented). That is why it has been also called synthetic. The timbre of the synthetic harmony is clearest in the middle register, in the bass it becomes a low murmur, in the treble – a brilliant sheen. From Prométhée the harmony

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finally assumes the function of melody. The themes in this piece are more than laconic, they are particles of themes. Along with this Scriabin seemed to be avoiding long sustained notes, because he felt they have vulgarizing effect. He rather made use of continuous trills, little runs, appoggiaturas.

The French sixth and its enharmonic sonority $V_{b}^{7}5$ is Scriabin’s favorite harmonic device in the works of his early and middle periods. In the Prélude op. 11 no. 2 (1895) Scriabin uses this sonority nine times in the course of the 68 measures of the piece. A connection can be drawn between the principal harmonic elements of Scriabin’s later style and his early works which consistently apply elements as the French sixth and the $V^{7}$ with lowered fifth ($V_{b}^{7}5$) or augmented fourth ($V_{7}^{7}4$). Using the latter one, which consists of two interlocked tritones, Scriabin established a pantheon of independent chords with qualities of ‘tonal centers’.

In the Poème op. 32 no. 1 (1903) the principal idea of the piece is based upon the ambiguity of the chord as French sixth (upbeat measure), appoggiatura to $V^{7}$ (m.1) and $V_{b}^{7}5$ (m.4). This harmonic combination is nothing but the mystic chord in its embryonic form. The beginning of the Poème languide op. 52 no. 3 (1907) is also noteworthy because Scriabin adds the ninth to the sonority, which now gives us five of the six notes of the mystic chord. Therefore the derivation of mystic chord as a characteristic vertical sonority also related with the French sixth. (Ex. 29 and 30)

Example 29. Poème op. 32 no. 1.
The Promethean chord in its many forms is never resolved; it moves instead to transpositions and rearrangements of itself, often by means of tritone root progressions. The effect of Scriabin’s harmony is basically static, in contrast to the numerous changes of tempo, orchestration, and character and the continuous thematic transformation. Because of this Scriabin’s music was often criticized: “It never moves, but merely heaves and undulates like an octopus in the flowing tide.”

Scriabin quickly developed a preference for harmonies in which a majority of elements are members of a single whole-tone scale because of their rather special properties of pitch retention after transposition. The mystic chord is such a harmony, and this harmony can be found in compositions whose structures are clearly tonal. This confirms that Scriabin started to experiment with atonal components and procedures long before he abandoned tonality. It is widely believed that Scriabin made a complete break from traditional tonal structures and procedures around 1910. But the departure from the tonality was not abrupt; he made a gradual transition from tonality to ‘atonality’ over a period of years. It is interesting that in his early years Scriabin preferred minor keys, although later he stated that “minor keys must disappear from music, because art must be a festival…Minor is undertone. I deal in overtones.” For example, Poème op. 52 no. 1 and Caresse dansée op. 57 no. 2, after complicated harmonic procedures,

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arrive at a sudden final C-major chord. Soon enough tonality completely disappeared in Scriabin’s music and the final cadence was replaced by evanescence.

Since it is harmonic progression that had always articulated the structural rhythm of music, which is to say its sense of directed unfolding in time, a music based on universal invariant harmonies becomes quite literally timeless, as well as quiescent. The two qualities, invariance and timelessness, insofar as we are equipped to interpret musical messages, are in fact aspects of a single quality of quiescence, expressed respectively in two musical dimensions, the “vertical” and the “horizontal.” It was a dissolution at which the composer deliberately aimed, as we learn from Schloezer.113

However, Scriabin retained an important structural tie with tonal music by constructing the formal design of many works on transposition levels outlining symmetrical chords of tonal music, the augmented triad and the diminished seventh chord.

By means of asynchronous voice leading Scriabin created novel harmonic components at the foreground of music. He kept discovering more and more new combinations of chords. Varvara Dernova writes:

In his last opuses almost none of his harmonies is ever repeated. Nor does he “use up” or wear out those harmonies already found in the Poem of Ecstasy and Prometheus which so perplexed his contemporaries, He continued to disclose even more and newer possibilities contained within the system.114

Last Opus

During his late period (1910-1914) Scriabin was totally occupied with the idea of Mystère, a large multi-media work, and preceding it Acte Préalable. The last five sonatas – each one a miniature Mystery - were created as a preliminary to composer’s ultimate goal. However, smaller works written during these years were no less important and continued to be the composer’s creative laboratory. He used these works to test his new ideas before applying them

113 Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically, 348-49.
to a larger scale work. It is known that sketches from *Acte Préalable* include quotations from op. 73 and the 1st, 2nd, and 4th Préludes of op. 74.\textsuperscript{115}

The Five Préludes op. 74 (1914) are particularly special, and can be justly considered the beginning of Scriabin’s new period, unfortunately terminated by his untimely death. They introduce a new aphoristic style, “increasing subtlety and sophistication in compositional technique. Establishing enormous complexity at the outset, Scriabin wanted to unfold his principle that “complexity is the path to simplicity.”\textsuperscript{116} In his *Act Préalable* Scriabin dreamed of sheer “two-tone harmonies…even unisons.”\textsuperscript{117}

According to Sabaneev, Scriabin planned to give a special role to the material from no. 2: “I have this when death appears…Death –sister, white ghost…”\textsuperscript{118} It is remarkable that specific “white” element, symbolizing departure into ‘transcendental’, typical to late works of many great artists (e.g. Beethoven, Tolstoy, Liszt, Vrubel). As Scriabin was writing about Death, death itself arrived. His last words along with the music of Prélude no. 2 reveal death not as a joyful transformation, frequently described so in Scriabin’s notebooks, but rather as a cold and scary entity: “But this pain is unbearable…This means the end…But this is a catastrophe!”\textsuperscript{119}

Préludes op. 74 show great economy of musical material. However, the semantic density, so to say ‘thought-per-note’, is extremely high in these mostly one page long pieces.

No. 1 (*Douloureux déchirant*) is very thick and gloomy, with feeling of desperation and insanity. A succession of highly dissonant chords never fully resolves. Tritones and minor ninths pervade the texture. The Prélude is based on the diverging and converging chromatic motives,

\textsuperscript{118} Sabaneev, *Vospominaniya o A. N. Skryabine*, 281-83.
within slowly ascending movement from E-sharp to E natural. There is no usual Scriabin’s self-indulgence in this music; it expresses emotions with searing directness.

No. 2 (Très lent, contemplatif) creates an impression of timelessness. Its upper voice accompanied by a descending four-note chromatic motive, which is unusual for Scriabin, who tends to favor upward contours. A left hand oscillating ostinato figure anchored by an F-sharp pedal in the bass and consists out of two “empty” fifths.

No. 3 (Allegro drammatico) is more active. Each phrase begins with the Major seventh leaping motive. The unsettling nature of the syncopated accompaniment creates a sense of demonic anxiety and unrest. A descending 9 measures spiral answers the upward exertion of the 4 measures opening. Scriabin indicates that the climatic high point at m.4 should be played comme un cri, “like an outcry against troubles and grief.”

No. 4 (Lent, vague, indécis) presents an almost schizophrenic contrast to the previous piece and embraces all of life in its 24 bars. The opening “fainting” chordal motives try to reach for some answer, making an attempt three times, but always unsatisfactorily. An ambiguous Major/Minor chord in different inversions opens and closes the piece, creating the sense of exhaustion and abdication.

No. 5 (Fier, belliqueux) is more violent and takes passion and drama to a new level. A bottled-up insistence builds in waves only to cascade downward at the end of each section. The basic motive is an expansive sextuplet figure, with a span that often exceeds two octaves; it grows out of the bass octaves with fanfare motive. Both sections end with headlong falling passages, creating an image of a Titan, overthrown from Olympus to the dark Tartarus.

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Although Scriabin’s ‘post-tonal’ writing seems to be related to the twelve-note music of Schoenberg, paralleling in some ways the “New Vienna School,” in fact it remains centric, even somewhat triadic. Therefore the underlying conceptual difference between the two remains profound. The notational disjunctions appear at times bizarre and eccentric; nonetheless they are systematically worked out. If all structures were respelled in a conventional manner, Scriabin’s late works would be considered much less “progressive.”

It seems paradoxical, but Scriabin’s enormously complex and revolutionary emancipation of tonal relationships and theory is at one level readily available and satisfying to “the common listener” and strict musicologist. There is a possible explanation of this case in works of Ernest Ansermet (1926-1966), well-known Swiss conductor. He believed that the dissonance of atonality presented intrinsic problems to human aural perception, and only the music that was still based on common intervals of fourth, fifth and octave, could be naturally apprehended. Primarily a mathematician, Ansermet wrote an extensive treatise about this phenomenon, looking to mathematical postulation for explanation.121

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CHAPTER 4

INTERPRETATION

General Issues

The Nature of Music

One can learn a great deal about personal reflections and sensations of Scriabin from his notebooks and conversations recalled by his closest friends, such as Boris de Schloezer and Leonid Sabaneev. This information discloses a strong correlation with the characteristic features of the creative faculty, the nature of music and its synergetic aspects.

An imitation of nature is rarely the aim of music, nor was it for Scriabin. What the art of music really does is resolution of sound forms given in nature into their abstract elements, and following deliberate recombination of these in harmony with human sensibility and intelligence. Music thus differs widely from sculpture and painting in being less *imitative* and more *creatively expressive*.

Of all arts dealing with forms in space-relations, architecture is the one most closely comparable in method with music. In both, mathematics finds severe and exact application. Browning, with his delight in giving a fresh turn to an old thought, reverses famous Goethe’s characterization of architecture as “frozen music.” He compares music to liquid architecture, emphasizing the inconstant characteristic of this art. 122 The marvelous, fluid, ever-growing temple of sound, surviving across the centuries in a few black marks upon a page, recreates in a liquid wonder of flowing forms by each artist anew, fulfills a wondrous function for the spirit of man.

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However, the quality of response evoked by these two arts differs fundamentally. The temple gives sensuous pleasure with its beauty of line, proportion and color, providing the pure architectonic conception for the intellect of man. An aspect of intellectual response to music lies in the analytical study of its compositions. Analysis is helpful, especially for those who are uninitiated, or find the art somewhat intangible; but if it is expected to give the meaning of the music, it is worse than useless, because it hampers the sound response to music by substituting something else for it. To work out the combination of motives in Wagner’s opera, or analyze the complicated harmonies of a Scriabin’s Poème is an intellectual process which certainly may give delight. However, it is exactly the same as that which we experience in working a difficult problem in calculus. Therefore, this process is totally different from the direct sensual response in appreciation of the work of art.

Interpretation of music consists in associating definite trains of reflection with musical compositions and presenting the dynamic series of sound-forms. Although these sound-forms tend to waken in the hearer a somewhat definite series of emotional states, the associated ideas or meditations are unique in each person, dependent upon his character, knowledge and experience.

The music is the most personal of the arts, searching down into the spirit and bringing to expression feelings that lie far too deep for words to embody them. At the same time it is the most social art, because we enjoy it together. The intellect isolates, the emotions unite.

Another amazing quality of music is the capacity to reveal the infinite. We can think the idea of omnipresent, omniscient God, but every attempt to imagine Him ends in absurdity. That is because the imagination works wholly within the limits of the sensible world. In a special way music accomplishes what is impossible for the arts that picture for the imagination. It does not, strictly speaking, reveal the infinite, but can waken in us the emotions associated with the
conception of the supernatural, the Divine. Consequently, music is the best “vehicle of metaphysical and psychic experiences,” whether certain researchers, as John S. Meeks, admit it or not.123

The Creative Faculty

One can learn a lot about the nature of the composer’s creative faculty and thus draw near to the emotional experience embodied in his music by observing how a composer works and what he himself thinks of his own compositions. A sentence in a letter to a friend may reveal much that we might not realize from first contact with the work itself. It can show us the spirit in which the music was created and tell us about the particular impulse which started the artist on his task. In a letter of this kind Scriabin said he wrote his *Le poème de l’extase* immediately after being relieved from the need to teach for his living. This condition perhaps added for some of the astonishing excitement that is characteristic of this music.

The artist of creative genius is compelled to utter himself. He obeys the dictates of his own impulses, indifferent to social success or the taste of possible patrons. Baudelaire (1821-1867) believed that art ought to be intentional, with the accidental eliminated, or at least restrained to the utmost possible. According to Scriabin, everything he wrote was subordinated to the pryntsip (“principle”). Nevertheless, in the ardour of inspiration creative man is apt to forget systems and precedents and to do what he is moved to do in striving to achieve his particular aim. By this kind of accident many new types of art were born into the world. Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-18989) in a letter says: “…if the whole world agreed to condemn it

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123 Meeks, “Aspects of stylistic evolution in Scriabin’s piano preludes”, 239.
[piece of art] or see nothing in it, I should only tell them to take a generation and come to me again.”

When the performer does not fully accept composer’s artistic beliefs, he must at least understand them in order to present a convincing and informed interpretation. Eva M. Grew contemplates in her work the difference in terms usually applied to works of genius and to those of talent. She suggests that the “finished work of mature genius cannot be criticized adversely,” since that which is sublime is faultless. The piece of art can be liked or disliked. Indeed, it must be disliked if there is disharmony between the maker and the observer; the reasons for his dislike can be shown. Doing this, however, would not be criticizing, but rather philosophizing.

Sometimes a work of art may be obscure only because profound. However, the genius has the peculiar faculty of continuing influence. Given time, it works upon us and leads us to understanding, where liking replaces disliking. That is why the genius rejected by his contemporaries, or accepted by them only in respects that are not elements of his actual and essential genius, may become a proper living power for posterity. Scriabin’s music was forgotten and condemned, but it was able to fight its way back to the top of music literature. Cortázar believed that the painters, musicians and writers who refuse to seek support in what surrounds them, so that their contemporaries understand them, do not choose to be anachronistic. They are simply living on the margin of the superficial time of their period. From that other time where everything has value as a sign and not as a theme of description, they attempt a work which may seem alien or antagonistic to the world surrounding them. Nonetheless, in the last analysis it

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125 The main word applied to the former is “sublime”, signifying completeness, and to the latter – “clever”, primarily meaning skillfulness.
always includes, explains, and orients it towards transcendence within whose limits man is waiting.

Emotion is experience. Impassioned experience is the material of the creative faculty and thus the interpreter’s stimulation and guide. The man who has not felt deeply cannot create deeply; he cannot interpret either. We can tell the very nature of a commentator, who is a critic, and of a performer, who is an interpreter, by the way they treat things of supreme human value.

The artwork represents an artist’s personal experience. His nature and his life are embodied in it. All his weaknesses as a man, all his misfortunes as a member of the social community are there, but considered and recollected. Scriabin’s name was for a long time “linked to the memories of fearsome madness.” Interestingly, Greeks used the word “madness” as an alternative term to what we call inspiration. They were slaves to reason and distrusted poetry, which has some incalculable element. In a way, even accusations of Scriabin simply justify the genius of this great artist, musician and mystic.

The Live Concert Phenomenon

It is essential for musician to comprehend the intricacy of multifaceted performer’s task. Developing Wagner’s ideas of a new musical drama, Scriabin dreamt of all humanity participating in his final gigantic work, Mystère. He was planning to teach orchestras how to move, choirs how to dance. Scriabin’s goal was to affect the listener actively, cataclysmically, by dissolving the confines between the creator (composer), transmitter (performer) and recipient (listener). He confessed: “I can not do it by myself… I need people, who would experience this [Mystère] with me…With the help of music we can accomplish ‘convocational creation’.”

128 Sabaneev, Scriabin, 272.
Today’s performer is highly tempted by the abundance of available recordings to create his own interpretation of a musical work based on someone else’s interpretation. This is particularly true with such highly inflected music as Scriabin’s. However, copying the rubato, tempo, phrasing etc. cannot substitute for the inner work of a performer, no matter how famous the name on the cover. Music as a time-related art loses its essential quality in non-live performance – whether it be an old roll or a modern studio recording. Only during live performance can music reveal its dual material-spiritual nature in the intersection of religious and synergetic aspects. The first one sees in the live concert a spiritual creation, the second– self-organization of musical matter.

The art of musical interpretation is synergetic in its nature, and involves not only an execution by performer, but also a perception by listener. The primary goal of a live concert is communication. The concert functions as a whole complex organism; during performance music comes to life, lives, and dies, with a potential to be re-born. The same program can be executed many times, and each time it will be lived through in a new way. In Scriabin’s own belief, his works were living creatures. 129

The performer’s task is multilayered. He is a co-creator, who transforms sounding “fabric” into musical speech, maintaining an intense interpretive dialog with the work. At the same time the performer is an active listener with ‘conductor’s ear’, who is analyzing the current process and makes necessary adjustments. There is also a no less important physiological part of the performance, which is an ‘athletic event to certain extent. All parts of this performer’s “multi-personality” are equally important, interrelated, and have to be well-balanced through the combination of ratio and intuition. Every tiny decision must be made rationally, but under the influence of intuition– true understanding occurs on the edge.

129 Ibid., 142.
The performer entering the stage is aware that he has to work in an “extreme mode” within the complex and unstable system. He ought to build himself into it by adjusting his psyche, physiology, intellect, and spirit. As a result, each performance has something from improvisation. Since the concert functions as the open system, the information and energy born during it do not fade out; they participate in a continuous exchange. All participants of the concert get involved in this action. One mutual body of the musical event shapes by means of accumulation of everyone’s will, aspiration, and perception. In the beginning of the concert people’s ideas and thoughts are usually separated, their perception is chaotic and undefined, yet at the end an audience feels unanimously enthusiastic.\textsuperscript{130}

The performance of music is a very intimate process that makes an interpreter’s inner life accessible to everyone. Listener’s attention is no less important than the testimony of a speaker. Live performance actualizes the present and its emotional experience, which usually is compressed by our past or future. In a way, it destroys the boundaries between an author, performer and listener. Only in this fashion can the music address us in its fullness and confess to us, making the live concert so unique event.

The musical text is only a “frame,” which enables one to see through it another, different world. A simple rest in music can be an experience of Nothing. “Silence is also sounding… There is a sound inside a silence. The rest always sounds… I believe there can be even a musical piece made out of silence…” said Scriabin.\textsuperscript{131} Nobel Prize winner, poet Joseph Brodsky called in his speech a poetic work “a colossal accelerator of world perception.” Through the live concert we can ascend to the highest symbolic level, using the symbol as a key to the transcendental.

This anagoge represents the religious-philosophical side of music.

\textsuperscript{130} Dmitriy Dyatlov, “K voprosu o dvoystvennoy prirode zvuchashchey muzyki” [The dual nature of live music], \textit{Konservatorskiy Vestnik} (Samara State Academy of Culture and Arts, 2006): 4.
\textsuperscript{131} Sabaneev, \textit{Vospominaniya o A.N. Scriabine}, 188.
Implications of an Interpretive Approach

In general every artist hopes that his reader, listener, spectator will understand him by participating in his own experience, or that he will pick up the determined message and incorporate it. The romantic author wants to be understood for his own sake or for that of his heroes; the classical author wants to teach, leave his trace on the path of history. Scriabin represented a new generation by choosing a third possibility – “making an accomplice of the reader, a traveling companion,” in hope that the performance “will abolish reader’s time and substitute author’s time.” Thus the interpreter should be able to become a co-participant and co-sufferer of the experience through which the artist is passing “at the same moment and in the same form.” He must aim at the maximum, be a voyant as Rimbaud wanted to be, not a voyeur.

Inventing novel forms Scriabin nevertheless had an exemplary sense of decorum, giving his music something like a façade, behind which operated a mystery. Music was Scriabin’s esoteric language. Its essence is comprehensible perhaps only to the ‘reader-accomplice’ but ‘the façade’ can be grasped by the rest of addressees peripherally in some way.

David Dubal reasonably mentions that pianists inclined to Classicism or mental balance may have interpretive problems in Scriabin’s rarefied world. Sensual intensity is Scriabin’s middle name. If it is missing, the performance sounds too easy and the thrust of his music is weakened. Glossed over passages, a lack of passion and verve of imagination top the list of the most common performers’ mistakes, reducing the output to being “nice” and nothing else. But is “nice” the best epithet for Scriabin’s art? Scriabin preferred to shock the establishment rather

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132 Cortázar, Rayuela, 397.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
than soothe their ears. Only his early works with their large component of Chopinisme are an exception. Here the danger hides in an exaggerated ‘oversensitive’ interpretation.

Scriabin’s own style of playing piano was highly emotional and controversial, described by Alfred Swan as “all nerve and a holy flame.” Scriabin deeply believed in the manifold quality of the musical work: “It exists and breathes by itself; today it’s one way, tomorrow another, like a sea. What a horror would it be if, for example, the sea was all the same every day, forever!”

“I want that one piece could be played in absolutely different manner, just like a crystal is able to reflect most various lights and colors.” These and many other similar statements give a performer an indirect author’s permission to be an ‘active’ interpreter. The score of a composer should not be treated as an order to be performed. An interpreter must resolve the entire depth of the ideas contained there. Very often carefully notated shadings, accents, tempo changes reveal not simply a characteristic of sound but rather the untold sides of the author’s concept. Hence many directions should be followed not in a real sound but by addressing the subtlest hints to the imagination of a listener.

Boleslav Yavorsky (1877-1942) observed the discrepancies between Scriabin’s score remarks and his own interpretation in concert performance. They created an impression that at times Scriabin treated the text just as an outline. For example, the author played the bass line in the final of the Third Sonata not in the way it appears on the paper. Sometimes such management of musical text was related to the complexity of texture, but mostly it was rooted in Scriabin’s conviction that all author’s remarks are secondary.

The supremacy of the composer in interpretation is most profoundly felt when the composer himself is a proficient performer. The pianist will find the concrete features of the

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135 Sabaneev, Vospominaniya o A.N. Scriabine, 147.
136 Ibid., 270.
author’s performance in every bar. Not only the presentation but also the only possible means of execution, even hand position on the keyboard, are suggested by the character of figurations. These signs point the attentive and sensitive interpreter in the right direction and tell him more than the most detailed directions.

Scriabin’s rhythmic fecundity is, in fact, only an attempt to fix rubato (very similar to Messiaen’s score technique). From this perspective, slight deviations are acceptable, as far as the logic of the line is understood. Rubato, elegance, flexibility, elastic, nervousness – these characteristics were often ascribed to Scriabin and his most assertive interpreters. He could sign together with Chopin and Liszt under the slogan “La souplesse avant tout!” The secret of Scriabin’s famous rubato, called sometimes his ‘arhythm’, or ‘capriciousness’, was that even though he always played freely, his accelerando and ritardando eventually compensated for one another.\footnote{Bowers, \textit{Scriabin: A Biography}, 1: 91.} He performed well within the framework of an extraordinarily measured and strict rhythmic skeleton. “In every piece there is a struggle between meter and rhythm: meter represents the organized scheme, and rhythm – a live fabric. It’s not even possible to write it down precisely…” told Scriabin to Sabaneev.\footnote{Sabaneev, \textit{Vospominaniya o A.N. Scriabine}, 147.}

Vladimir Sofronitsky, one of closest spiritual descendants of Scriabin, belonged to the same type of artist as the composer, whose performances are not consistent and depend highly on their mood. “Sofronitsky possesses the gift of ‘improvisation’, inspiration, which is so necessary for the performing artist,” wrote Neuhaus. His interpretation of a work could differ dramatically from one concert to the next. This created an impression that Sofronitsky was purely an intuitive pianist, whose performances were based solely on his feelings of the moment. However, nothing could be further from the truth. As Sofronitsky explained, he had a dozen fully thought out
interpretations ready to be performed and simply did not know in advance which one would be rendered – that would depend on the audience and how he felt on the stage. Similar advice considering stage performance came often to their students from Neuhaus (“to know everything, and forget it all”\textsuperscript{140}) and Medtner (“think during work, but during performance – just listen”).

Sofronitsky’s sophisticated command of rhythm, one of the cornerstones of a great Scriabin interpretation, went far beyond simply playing the notes exactly as written. Instead of playing complicated rhythms in a metronomically precise manner, his primary goal was to impart the character and life behind those puzzles to his audience. If that meant stretching or compressing one of Scriabin’s advanced polyrhythms, it was done without hesitation. His secret was in understanding the desired effect and then deciding whether the notated angularity was the intended outcome, or just a limitation of a conventional musical notation. The freedom of rhythmic interpretation in Scriabin’s music should be perceived from the angle of expressivity and not mere anarchy.

Scriabin’s widely admired piano playing was also characterized by great delicacy and erotic impulse. As his friend Konstantin Balmont remarked: “When Scriabin plays, there is no piano, only a beautiful woman. He is making love to her.”\textsuperscript{141} Alexander Pasternak, brother of the Boris, wrote in his memoirs:

His playing was unique...It could not be imitated by producing similar tone, or power of softness, for he had a special and entirely different relationship with the instrument, which was his own unrepeatable secret. I had an impression that his fingers were producing the sound without touching the keys. His spiritual lightness was reflected in his playing.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{140} Heinrich Neuhaus, \textit{Ob iskusstve fortepiannoy igry} [On the art of piano playing] (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe Musykal’noe Izdatel’stvo, 1961), 170.
Stanislav Neuhaus, like Scriabin, treated the piano as a person and required the same from his students: “Love piano, love the piece, then you might get the mutuality and tenderness from piano in response. Piano is very sensitive. If you lie, overplay, piano feels it immediately. And your lie becomes obvious for everybody.” He supported his conviction with words of Lev Tolstoy: “There are three necessities in art: first is sincerity, second is sincerity, and third…sincerity.”

Scriabin highly appreciated Medtner as a teacher. Leaving for Switzerland in 1904, he entrusted to Medtner one of his favorite students M. Morozova. Vladimir Sofronitsky shared some pianistic advice given to him by Medtner. When playing Chopin or Scriabin, Medtner recommended taking a chord or noting slightly pulling it toward oneself, as if gathering the sound from the top of the key. He said that in this way sound “flies, lasts, and becomes non-material.” Medtner was also convinced that sound carries better, if one touches the keys lightly and precisely, with fingers sharply feeling “themselves and the keys.” This advice, although, should not be misinterpreted as suggestion to use less alert touch. On the contrary, Medtner often reminded his students about concentration in the fingertips some sort of ‘electric charge’. During the work process, he recommended playing delicate music with more weight, feeling the hands “within the keyboard,” which is very similar to what Debussy suggests. This method helps to feel all the harmonies as though dots of Braille and develop hand’s muscular memory.

Speaking about plasticity, Medtner recommended feeling upcoming passage ‘inside the hand’ before the hand touches the keys. One of the most vivid suggestions was “to pour passages as water from the pitcher.” Along with Scriabin Medtner was very careful in his use of pedal. In his remarks he demanded “more of $\frac{1}{8}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$ pedal”, or even “pedal vibrato” (the last one was
indicated by a trill symbol next to pedal sign). He emphasizes that the key to refined pedal technique is keen and fastidious hearing.

Scriabin’s music is ultra-subjective. Listening to a great artist we experience the widening of the usual boundaries of our imagination. The music sweeps away the everyday common sounds that create layer upon layer in our consciousness and recovers its original force, vitality and relevance. Unfortunately, all attempts to copy finest shadings of rhythm and sound of recognized artists are doomed to failure. Only overly obvious and explicit things inherent to the playing of an artist may be imitated. The hidden, invisible features, which constitute the mystery of the performer’s charm may not be transmitted and are hard to teach.

Experience shows that matters that are finalized and fixed turn out to be not necessarily the most durable in the development and evolution of style. A performer possesses a complex and perfected mechanism for opening up the content of a composition to a certain audience. Evolitional changes in style, consciousness, and individual ways of perceiving shatter the seemingly unshakable basis of the greatest accomplishments. Those pianists who learn a work using examples established in recordings make an error. They adopt not only someone else’s interpretation but also the conditions under which it developed and was realized, which may be radically different from the ones a given performer can reliably expect. The evolving performing art is less durable than the composition itself, just like a fruit tree’s flowers come and go every spring, but the tree itself may live for centuries. A performer changes with the times, and is alive as artist only as long as his concepts remain unfinished and transform along with modern musical art as well as developments in other arts.

An informed performance is the only efficient solution for an interpreter, who wishes to express Scriabin’s and any composer’s thought most fully. Therefore, the constant artistic growth

143 Isaac Zetel, Medtnr-pianist (Moskva: Muzyka, 1979), 160.
of the performer is a necessary condition to facilitate his development as a thoughtful, poetic and philosophic player. These characteristics were often attributed to Heinrich Neuhaus, who could persuasively fathom out all the complexities and the exquisite frailties of Scriabin’s music. The piano school tradition established by Neuhaus has given to world many genius pianists, one of which was Richter. Up to this day it follows his teaching postulate based on a method that encompassed all arts. According to Neuhaus, a pedagogue should be mostly concerned to raise firstly - a person, secondly - an artist, thirdly - a musician, and only after that, a pianist. An ideal artist-performer should appear in front of the audience as a gifted, complete individual with an active mind, a rich inner world, and the special mastery of musical form— the gift of artistic vision.

144Tatiana Kritskaya, “Your playing is a mirror of your soul” to 80th Anniversary of Stanislav Neuhaus, Nezavisimaya Gazeta (Moskva, March 16, 2007).
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

It would be difficult to identify another composer who had such an extreme evolution of his style as Scriabin. Comparison of his first and last opuses side by side makes it hard to believe they belong to the same hand. More ‘cerebral’ artists typically enjoy Scriabin’s late works and despise the early Chopinesque ones. Others, romantically inclined, indulge in the early poetic works, can deal with ones of the middle period, and tend to reject late opuses. A plethora of studies dividing all works into rigid periods, as well as focusing on isolated genres for easy analysis purpose, are partially guilty in this phenomenon.

This direction of the research can be compared to looking at the kaleidoscopic world of the Master through a keyhole. In order to see a full three-dimensional picture, it is important to embrace the whole body of works “on a small canvas.” Each such work presents a link in a chain of constant style development of Scriabin. Besides, this standpoint makes it possible to reveal many similar features connecting works of all periods. While expanding the boundaries of tonality, Scriabin completed the expansion and universalization of the piano miniature genre. Starting from his middle years the ‘Poème’ characteristics can be found in nearly every piece. The key to this process lies in Scriabin’s compilation of certain symbolical musical gestures. Understanding this vocabulary would enable the interpreter to read an enciphered message of the Composer.

Philosophic ‘doctrine’ developed by Scriabin is eclectic and assembled from the elements of wide variety of concepts. It had immense impact on the composer’s creative evolution, particularly during middle and late periods. The emotions and sensations Scriabin conveyed in his works are far from being ordinary. His notion of joy, struggle, etc. is not mundane but
‘Divine’. The music of Scriabin gives an opportunity for an artist to find a proper balance between rational and intuitive. It appears that the lack of any of these qualities impoverish his works, makes their interpretation incomplete. The way to improve the first one is well-known – it is analysis. The purpose of scrutiny, although, should be a contribution to the main practical goal, which is a performance. The way to develop intuition is to open up to a broader cultural worldview and engage in creative work various arts. Such fusion will bring the performer and consequently his interpretation to new heights.
APPENDIX

SCRIABIN’S WORKS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Opus</th>
<th>Large Works</th>
<th>Piano Miniature Title/Genre</th>
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<td>1 PERIOD</td>
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<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Valse, Fugue</td>
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<td>1886</td>
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<td>Sonata-Fantasy</td>
<td>Mazurka, 2 Valses</td>
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<td>1887</td>
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<td>Variations</td>
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<td>1889</td>
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<td>3 Pieces: Étude, Prélude, Impromptu a la Mazur, 10 Mazurkas, Feuillet d’album, 2 Mazurkas</td>
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<td>Sonata No. 1</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>2 Impromptus a la Mazur</td>
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<td>1894</td>
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<td>12 Études Prélude and Nocturne for Left hand, 2 Impromptus</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>Sonata No. 3</td>
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<td>Reverie [for orchestra]</td>
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<td>9 Mazurkas</td>
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<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Poème Tragique</td>
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<td>4 Préludes, Valse</td>
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<td>Le Poème de l’extase (Symphony No. 4) [for orchestra]</td>
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<td>Poème « Vers la flamme »</td>
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<td>74</td>
<td>5 Préludes</td>
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</table>
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**Dissertations**


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