

Scriabin: Musical Development Through Three Blurred Periods

By Sandon Chevin

December 2016

The evolution of Scriabin's music, from his first composition in 1883 to his last in 1914, can be observed by analyzing his harmonies and pitch collections, specifically the mystic chord and its corresponding pitches, and their function. At the tender age of twelve, Scriabin begins his compositional development with a simple canon in D-minor, much in the style of Chopin. By the end of his career, he has matured far past Chopin's lyrical solon music, through Wagner and Liszt's chromatism, and far into his own twentieth century language.

To understand Scriabin, it is vital to acknowledge that his music is entirely directed by harmony. Harmony is central in his musical thinking, and from it everything else, including texture, form, and even melody develops subordinatesly.¹ In fact, Scriabin often stored melodic ideas over years before using them; saving them until he had developed the proper harmonic context to utilize them.² No harmony is more important to Scriabin than his signature sonority, the "Mystic Chord," also frequently referred to as the "Scriabin Chord," "Prometheus Chord," or the "Chord of the Plaroma." This chord, much in the same way as Wagner's "Trisian Chord" or Stravinsky's "Petrushaka Chord," has been given countless interpretations. Jay Reise calls it a nexus between whole tone and octatonic collections. Leonid

¹ Peter Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin's Works*, (USA: Universal Publishers. 2003.) 7.

² Ibid 48.

Sabaneyer views it as a connection of upper partials, and Peter Sabbagh calls it “ a sexed-up dominant complex.”³ Theorists have a variety of explanations for Scriabin’s signature chord, it is critical for any analyst of Scriabin’s music to view it as a mainstay of his language, which evolved and matured throughout his short career.

This paper seeks to explain the expansive development of Scriabin’s music that occurred over his short career, by surveying his music as whole, but paying particular attention to the piano works. Furthermore, I argue that the course this development takes is not as segmented as most surveys claim, but rather more fluid. Scriabin wrote constantly and without major pause, yet there seems to be a clear directional course that his progress moves towards.

Chord Analysis

Built on a series of symmetrically structured fourths rather than triads, the chord has an intensifying dissonance as it build on what would otherwise be considered impressionistic chromaticism. Although the chord has dominant sevenths in it, and in its early use, functions as a dominant, in writing about it Scriabin says, “This is not a dominant chord, but a basic chord, a consonance. It is true – it sounds soft, like a consonance.”⁴

The chord is typically built on the following scale degrees: 1, #4, b7, 3, 6 and 2. Here Scriabin describes the thought process that led him to the chord:

3 Kenneth Smith. “ ‘A Science of Tonal Love’? Drive and Desire in Twentieth-Century Harmony: The Erotics of Skryabin” (*Music Analysis* XXIX/1-3. 2010) 241.

4 Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin’s Works*, 40.

I decided that the more higher tones there are in harmony, it would turn out to be more radiant, sharper and more brilliant. But it was necessary to organize the notes giving them a logical arrangement. Therefore, I took the usual thirteenth-chord, which is arranged in thirds. But it is not that important to accumulate high tones. To make it shining, conveying the idea of light, a greater number of tones had to be raised in the chord. And, therefore, I raise the tones: At first I take the shining major third, then I also raise the fifth, and the eleventh—thus forming my chord—which is raised completely and, therefore, really shining.⁵

Certain pitches are arguably more structural (1, 3, #4, and ♭7), while others have the potential for variation depending on circumstance (6, and more notably 2).⁶ The variation of 2 is the use of ♭2, and chords employing this variation are sometimes referred to as “Mystic Chord B.”⁷ This is both dependent on, and the determinant of the type of scale Scriabin is working with at that moment of a piece.⁸ In Scriabin’s late works, additional notes are added as pedal points, and in some cases the chord appears in only partial form.⁹ No sonority is more intimately tied with a composer than Scriabin and his chord, which develops along side him through nearly the entirety of his career.

It is easy to talk about Scriabin’s music in periods, and it is almost always discussed as three periods. The first person to divide his music this way was Boris de Schloezer, his brother in law, who wrote about it in “Revue Musicale” in 1921.¹⁰ He divides his periods into: “early”; his music up to and including his *Symphony No.*

5 Ibid 24.

6 Vasilis Kallis. “Principles of Pitch Organization in Scriabin’s Early Post-tonal Period: The Piano Miniatures” (*MTO* XIV/3. 2008.) N.p

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

9 Ibid

10 Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin’s Works*, 11.

2 in C minor Op. 29 (1902), “middle”; his *Sonata No. 4, Op. 30* (1903) up to *Prometheus: Poem of Fire Op. 60* (1910), and his “late” period; *Prometheus* and everything onward.¹¹ While others draw these lines in slightly different places, the common methodology is to define arbitrary periods points, to evaluate his body of work that draw clean lines separating the Chopin imitations pieces that make up his early works, the Wagner-like heavily chromatic pieces during which he gradually matures, and the late work, where he is writing in his most progressive and distinct language. The Boris de Schloezer model is a useful, but imperfect tool. I will highlight where the divisions do not work, particularly in understanding the middle period of his music.

The Early Period (Unpublished music – Symphony No. 2 in C minor, Op.29)

It was natural for Chopin to be Scriabin’s first major compositional influence. Both were performing musicians of Eastern European origins, who aimed to combine central European style with French taste.¹² Chopin was Scriabin’s favorite music to play in his childhood. In his days the cadet corps, long before he attempted composing, he would improvise mazurkas and other dance styles associated with Chopin to entertain the other students.¹³ Even his very early music from when he was studying under Sergei Taneieff, such as the Nocturne in A ♭ Major, shows Chopin’s influence.¹⁴ The pianistic qualities of Scriabin’s music are deeply rooted in Chopin; as are the styles of the early works, which include mazurkas, nocturnes,

¹¹ Ibid 11.

¹² Eric Salzman. *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction* 4th ed., (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall. 2002.) 28.

¹³ Faubion Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1996) 122.

¹⁴ Ibid 202-206.

impromptus, preludes, and etudes.¹⁵ Examples of these are his *Ten Mazurkas Op. 3* (1889), *Two Impromptus a la Mazur, Op. 7* (1892), *Prelude and Nocturne for the Left Hand, Op. 9* (1894), and *Seven Preludes* (1896), which can best be described as “romantic salon improvisations.”¹⁶ The highest quality of his early music many argue, are the *Twenty-four Preludes, Op. 11* (1896), which are described as “Strongly Chopinesque”.¹⁷ He wrote these when he was only in his mid-twenties mostly while traveling through Europe.¹⁸

Scriabin’s early music is too quickly dismissed as being just Chopin copies, with perhaps more emotional intensity. Some theorists describe it in conversation as Chopin on steroids. It is considered more of the former piano prodigy Scriabin getting his feet wet composing, rather than being recognized as the true starting point of his harmonic development. This is a misconception. Scriabin was already a published composer and on a stipend for composing at the time most of these works were written. As early as *Ten Mazurkas, Op. 3*, there are already bars with all the important tones (#4, #6, #7, #9) of Scriabin’s later harmonic language and the “Mystic Chord;” only early on, the #4 and #6 are made less important by 5, and the tones are not compressed yet.¹⁹ The result of having the addition of 5 masking the other two tones is that the importance of their early appearance is overlooked because the quartal harmony is hidden within terisan surroundings. However,

15 James Friskin and Irwin Freundlich. *Music For the Piano*, (New York: Dover Publications Inc. 1974.) 240.

16 Ibid 241.

17 Ibid 241.

18 Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography*, 202-206.

19 Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin’s Works*, 19.

looking past this, one can see that this is a point of future development in his music and why his early music is worthy of serious analysis.

Chopin's dominant forms: D^7 , D^{9b}_7 , D^{6b} and $D^{6b}_{5>}$, pushed Scriabin towards his future language, especially the "Chopin Chord," a compression or superimposition of D^7 and D^6 . The "Chopin Chord" and its process of compression play a role in eventually leading Scriabin to his chord.²⁰ While many attribute the overtone series as the basis for Scriabin's development of the "Mystic Chord," Zofia Lissa realized that the "Chopin Chord" is the historical root of the chord.²¹ She supports this evidence by emphasizing that the position of the 6th, as it is almost always on the top of the chord in both Chopin and Scriabin's works.²² Both explanations are valid, yet the idea that the compressed dominant sonority in Chopin plays an important role in Scriabin's harmony, especially early on, seems to hold more weight. The influence of the overtone series probably comes in later as the chord develops.

Towards the end of what is considered the early period, the triads are enriched with dissonances; *Prelude No. 2 of Op. 27* (1901), written only eighteen years after the canon in D-minor, is such an example.²³ In this piece, hardly any triads are without dissonances, yet all but one of these dissonances resolve in the conventional manner. The only exception is the first bar where the $A^\#$ functions more as an added color to the chord.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid 16-17.

²¹ Ibid 12-13

²² Ibid 13.

²³ Ibid 35.

²⁴ Ibid 35

By the time Scriabin wrote the beginning works of his next period, such as *Four Preludes, Op. 37* (1903), there are hardly any triads without dissonances, and those dissonances function more as colors to chords, like the previously mentioned A[#].²⁵ Moreover, there is an almost fully developed “Mystic Chord,” which has evolved out of the “Chopin Chord.” It is starting to lose its dominant character and resemble the “Tristian Chord,” when it is written as a dominant without a root, and with an added m6 and m9.²⁶

The Middle Period (*Sonata No. 4, Op. 30 up to Prometheus: Poem of Fire Op. 60*)

Like many Russian composers, Scriabin was taught early on to despise Wagner. His teacher at the Moscow Conservatory, Sergei Taneieff, called the music “trash” and only taught it in order to “study the villain thoroughly.” In the winter of 1893, when Scriabin was asked about Wagner, his response was an unwilling “Formless, Doesn’t interest me.”²⁷ Yet, Wagner’s influence with the “Trisian Chord” first appears at the very end of his early period such as in the beginning of Op.27 No.1.²⁸ A review by RMG in 1900 describes his First Symphony (Op.29) as “steeped in Wagner.”²⁹ This highlights Scriabin’s ever evolving musical pallet. Scriabin’s deeper exploration of Wagnerian chromatic harmony is what typically defines this second period. One can also argue that the appearance of the first complete “Mystic Chord,” found in Sonata No. 4, Op.30 (1901-1903) marks the start of the middle

25 Ibid 35.

26 Ibid 23.

27 Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography*. 163.

28 Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin’s Works*, 23.

29 Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography*. 269.

period for Scriabin.³⁰ There is little doubt that while the “Mystic Chord” may have stemmed from Chopin, Wagner’s “Tristian Chord” equally influences it. Both are ambiguous chords, and more importantly share a symmetrical structure.³¹ This symmetrical structure becomes an important feature in his late music. By the time we get past Opus 40 in 1903, there are no more nocturnes and mazurkas that recall the lyricism of Chopin; instead Scriabin is exploring the possibilities of his new found “Mystic Chord.”

There is a notably different tone that progresses through the music of this period. Where before his music resembled solon styles and common practice textures, his music now takes on more unconventional atmospheric qualities and unique textures. He starts writing music that is at times more “nervous” and “agitated,” with “spasmodic motives” such as *Three Pieces Op. 49* (1905) that was written when he was only thirty-four years old.³² His textures become increasingly choral and his phrasing becomes “explosive.”³³ Occasionally he will return to his earlier textures, such as the lyrical nocturne quality of *Poeme Op. 41*, but these moments are the exception, not the rule.

Early in the middle period he begins to experiment with the “Mystic Chord” as a dominant functioning chord. *Four Preludes Op. 37 No. 2* (1903) is a perfect example.³⁴ As he evolves however, the chord expands and gradually loses its

³⁰ Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin’s Works*, 23.

³¹ Ibid 114.

³² Friskin and Freundlich. *Music For the Piano*, 242.

³³ Ibid 241.

³⁴ Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin’s Works*, 21.

dominant character.³⁵ This is because as the chord expands, and the more prevalent quartal structure buries its tertian sound, the function becomes increasingly less clear until it disappears.³⁶ Shortly after this happens, the fifth progression that was common in his previous music starts to gradually be replaced by a structural use of the chord in phrases/sections, foreshowing his later use of the chord as structural linchpin of the entire work.³⁷

Introspection: Psychology and Philosophy Influence Scriabin.

Scriabin's interest in both philosophy and psychology play a distinct role in his musical thinking, especially as he matures and develops as a composer. Feeling indebt to his publisher, in 1903, Scriabin writes an unusually large number of pieces in a short time span. This is also around the time when Scriabin's literary and philosophical taste develops. After the death of Nietzsche in 1900, Scriabin starts reading and discussing with friends a lot of philosophy.³⁸ An excerpt from a letter to Boris de Schloezer from the end of July 1903 reads, "I have nothing interesting to say about myself. I read, write, read, write, and that's how time passes..." and highlights the extent philosophy and literature seep into his creative process.³⁹ Scriabin also writes a libretto for an opera at this time, which is drenched in philosophical dialogue and early leanings toward mysticism.

³⁵ Ibid 22.

³⁶ Ibid 68.

³⁷ Ibid 68.

³⁸ Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography*. 316.

³⁹ Ibid 323.

In 1904, while in Switzerland, Scriabin becomes interested Helana Blavatskaya's Theosophical Society: a group that blurs the lines between philosophy, religion, and mysticism.⁴⁰ Exotic Philosophies and semi-religious cults like Theosophy and Anthroposophy were common in this era.⁴¹ These philosophies particularly appealed to Scriabin's egocentric personality and eventually lead him to a mystic view of himself. The influence of these ideologies, particularly Theosophy, becomes increasingly important in the music of his Late Period. Yet early influences of it are present in his middle works, particularly *Poem of Ecstasy Op. 54*, composed between 1905 and 1907.⁴² The work is based a 300 line poem written by the composer, and ends with a triumphant climax connected symbolically with the self-assertion "I AM!" meaning he is symbolic of God as a creator.⁴³

The influence of psychology is concurrent with his mystic views and is equally important. Scriabin's journals from 1904, when he was composing *Two Poems Op.44*, contain extensive paraphrasing of the experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. Scriabin claimed in his writings "by analyzing oneself psychologically, by studying ones self, man can explain everything, including the whole cosmos."⁴⁴ This idea of self-study manifests a greater understanding of how the chord he was experimenting with could become a complete musical language.

40 Michael Steen. *The Lives and Times of The Great Composers*, (New York: Oxford University Press. 2004.) 833.

41 Faubion Bowers. Program notes for: *Alexander Scriabin "Poem of Ecstasy" and "Prometheus: Poem of Fire."* (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc. 1995.) 3.

42 Steen. *The Lives and Times of The Great Composers*, 832.

43 Bowers. Program notes for: *Alexander Scriabin "Poem of Ecstasy" and "Prometheus: Poem of Fire."* 3.

44 Smith. " 'A Science of Tonal Love'? Drive and Desire in Twentieth-Century Harmony" 235.

At the same time, his interest in psychology leads him to explore what drives the music within the rich chromatic language he is writing in. Earlier a theoretical explanation was made for Scriabin's departure from traditional harmony, but external influences provoke this departure in equal measure. As he studies psychology, he casts away the innate inclinations of most of his chords in favor of stronger ones.⁴⁵ Later, he toys with withholding immediate desires of a chord in favor of creating a structure that fulfills a more powerful desire by the end. It is in this state of development that his connection with Wagnerian harmony falls apart. The novelty of Wagner's harmony, the "Tristian Chord" in particular, is that it perpetually avoids the single tonic resolution implied at any given moment.⁴⁶ Scriabin by contrast, explores his chord's potential for harmonic motion in multiple directions simultaneously, as his music increasingly exists in a type of polytonal context.⁴⁷ Through his study of psychology, Scriabin understands how the dominant seven tension within the mystic chord, and his general harmonic language creates cognitive expectations, and how the listener experiences various alternative discharges of the chord that defy those expectations.⁴⁸ This remains in his thought process in much later incarnations of this chord, and perhaps leads him to eventually leaving tonal conventions in favor of his own system toward the end of his career.

By the time he reaches the final movement of *Quatre Morceaux Op. 56* (1908), titled "Etude," only a few of the dissonant chords obey their innate incantations and

⁴⁵ Ibid 239

⁴⁶ Ibid 234

⁴⁷ Ibid 242.

⁴⁸ Ibid 244.

resolve as one would expect, most of the chords are unresolved.⁴⁹ This is a major evolution from seven years prior, when in *Two Preludes Op. 27* only one dissonant tone defies conventional resolution.

In the time between *Trios Morceaux Op.45* (1904) and *Quatre Morceaux Op.56* (1908), whole tone scales become an important piece of his developing language, particularly alternating between whole tone scales. When he builds chords based on these scales, the result is that there are no common notes in neighboring chords.⁵⁰ While whole tone scales in this period may be prevalent, they are not determinant of pitch organization; pitch organization as a compositional tool emerges much later.⁵¹ Starting with *Scherzo Op.56* (1905), he also starts to employ the acoustic scale, a feature that will take a very important role in his later music.⁵²

Duex Morceaux Op.57 (1908) is the last piece where Scriabin shows a relationship to traditional thinking regarding the tonal progression.⁵³ But even here it is hard to see. Over the course of this work “a certain structure of intervals can be found on any degree and don’t have a fixed function, dissonances lose their clarifying functional meaning and become color-like effect in the chord, [and] the fifth relationship of triads that are superimposed in thirds is hidden, because the work is full of quartal structures.”⁵⁴ This last quality is the inverse, or perhaps the natural evolution of the music of his early period where quartal harmony was

⁴⁹ Ibid 246.

⁵⁰ Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin’s Works*, 152-6.

⁵¹ Kallis. “Principles of Pitch Organization in Scriabin’s Early Post-tonal Period” N.p.

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin’s Works*, 69.

⁵⁴ Ibid 68.

hidden within triadic structures. This piece has an erotic subject matter somewhat similar to parts of *Poem of Ecstasy*, and Scriabin writes about its conception as “animal motions ... change into caresses.”⁵⁵ What Scriabin does in this piece is separate basic animal drives from sophisticated human desires. It is important to understand that as his views on psychology and philosophy mature, they more frequently permeate the subject matter of his music.

While the dominant function, and later traditional function as a whole, is deteriorating throughout his so called middle period, it does not entirely lose its function until after *Album Leaf Op. 58*.⁵⁶ This is his last work before *Prometheus*, and some of this work was written at the same time as *Prometheus*.⁵⁷ This evidence, in conjunction with the increasingly present influence of outside stimuli impacting his music, makes the case that drawing lines in his lexicon of publications does not present an entirely accurate depiction of his evolution as a composer.

Moving Towards the Late Period

Beginning with *Album Leaf Op. 58*, in around 1909, Scriabin started using special non-diatonic sets and their pitch universes as the basis of his language. Where whole-tone scales and acoustic scales were a piece of his language before, now the language is grounded in these pitch collections. The pitch collections he uses are: acoustic scale (0, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, t) – which is the parent scale of the “Mystic Chord,” octatonic model A (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, t) – a symmetrical scale probably

55 Smith. “‘A Science of Tonal Love’? Drive and Desire in Twentieth-Century Harmony” 255.

56 Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin's Works*, 49.

57 Ibid 69.

evolving from work within the whole tone scale, and a union of the two, which my research refers to as “9-10” (0,1,2,3,4,6,7,9,t).⁵⁸ Early during his use of this material, other pitches appear, but only serve supplemental functions.⁵⁹

Understanding certain structural ideas about each scale, and why they come together in such a unique way is important to understanding why and how he comes to his late harmonic language. First, the octatonic scale he uses is transpositional at T₀, T₃, T₆, T₉ and keeps the pitches intact. Conversely, the acoustic scale is transpositionally asymmetrical. Next, it is important to understand that these two scales share a hexachordal subset. Within this subset, the scale degrees that are almost always present are $\hat{1}$, $\sharp \hat{3}$, $\sharp \hat{4}$ and $\flat \hat{7}$, and $\hat{5}$ and $\hat{6}$ are used irregularly.⁶⁰ The three remaining pitches are $\hat{2}$, which is exclusive to the acoustic scale, and $\flat \hat{2}$ and $\flat \hat{3}$, which are exclusively octatonic. These three scale degrees dictate which scale is being used.⁶¹ In addition to being a result of Scriabin’s use of different scales for his pitch collection, the interchangeable use of these scale degrees also come from the variations in the “Mystic Chord” that he was already using, i.e. “Mystic Chord B.”

Sketches show that before creating this unique pitch collection, Scriabin had previously tried to connect his chords in the traditional way. However when he attempted this, he was only met with dead ends. The problem was that the chord had seven notes, and in attempting to connect the chords based on the traditional

58 Kallis. “Principles of Pitch Organization in Scriabin’s Early Post-tonal Period” N.p.

59 Ibid

60 Ibid

61 Ibid

tonal system, the result was just a regrouping, not a progression.⁶² Ultimately coming to this conclusion is what leads Scriabin to finally develop his own tonal system.

The Late Period (*Prometheus* to *Mysterium*)

In 1910, Scriabin found what would be his quintessential language for the few remaining years of his life.⁶³ Using the “9-10” pitch collection, *Prometheus* is the first piece to completely abandon any remaining pieces of major-minor-tonality in favor of a new and unique system. This collection, the two scales it derives from, and the “Mystic Chord” would now be the entire basis on which his compositions are constructed.

While this evolution came by way of his previous musical endeavors, it is equally important to understand how his thought processes outside of music played a major role in getting him to this highly individual vocabulary. He was becoming increasingly obsessed with Theosophy, a collection of mystic philosophies on the mysteries of life and its divine origin and purpose, which provided him a mystical approach to religion where “god must be experienced directly to be known at all.”⁶⁴ While foreshadowed in the *Poem of Ecstasy* years earlier, at this later stage in his life Scriabin took Theosophy’s mantra further to the point of believing that he was essentially god – or at the very least, god-like. He used the fact that he was born on Christmas Day (under the old Russian calendar) as evidence that “the world would

62 Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin’s Works*, 70.

63 John Gillespie. *Five Centuries Of Keyboard Music*. (New York: Dover Publications Inc. 1965.) 273.

64 Steen. *The Lives and Times of The Great Composers*. 231.

be regenerated through a cataclysm that would spring from his own creativity” 238.⁶⁵ This was a major impetus for him, and guided his progress 240.⁶⁶ His belief that his personality was all-powerful, and his claim “I am God, I am the world, I am the center of the universe” directly related to both *Prometheus: Poem of Fire Op. 60* and the nervous and excited piano works of his late music.⁶⁷

Scriabin’s fifth symphony, *Prometheus*, is loosely based on the ancient Greek myth of the Titan Prometheus who captures the sparks from the wheels of Apollo’s chariot and defies the Gods by giving the stolen fire to mankind, thus endowing them with knowledge and divinity.⁶⁸ The piece is profoundly ingrained with Scriabin’s mystic ideology and philosophy. The orchestra, which opens the work with his signature chord, represents the cosmos, and its first chord symbolizes the formlessness of the world.⁶⁹ The chord that has increasingly epitomized his development is perfect for this opening gesture, with its unstable character and fluidity to move in multiple directions.

Following the opening chord, a theme Scriabin called “Creative Principle” builds until the muted trumpet section proclaims the moment Prometheus gives fire to man.⁷⁰ At that moment, the solo piano, playing the role of man, enters in an explosive and contrasting manner, setting mankind in conflict with the cosmos.⁷¹ It

⁶⁵ Ibid 238.

⁶⁶ Friskin and Freundlich. *Music For the Piano*, 240.

⁶⁷ Gillespie. *Five Centuries Of Keyboard Music*. 272.

⁶⁸ Bowers. Program notes for: Alexander Scriabin “*Poem of Ecstasy*” and “*Prometheus: Poem of Fire*.”113.

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Ibid113.

⁷¹ Ibid 113.

is only fitting that Scriabin, a former piano virtuoso rivaling his good friend Rachmaninoff, symbolizes mankind, and likely himself, in this way.

The program notes of the Dover edition of the score denote the themes that follow as “ ‘Joy of Life,’ the procreative act, sex and magic, sorrow and passion” and continue elaborating on the music saying, “Man [then] reasserts himself in a broad section of ‘self-realization’ dubbed ‘Ego’ by the composer – a piano development of the ‘Creative Principle’. The Poem ends in a vertiginous dance of atoms, a delirious fragmentation of the world’s wisdom.”⁷² All these themes and descriptions are heavily entangled with his mystic view of philosophy. In fact, Steen claims that the work is “the most densely Theosophical piece of music ever written. Its symbolism is endless.”⁷³

The influence of this mysticism also extends far past *Prometheus* and is apparent in the titles and his own descriptions of the piano works of his late period, which he mostly refers to as “poems.” His seventh and ninth sonatas are respectively titled “White Mass” and “Black Mass.”⁷⁴ Throughout his late period, his descriptions of his music became increasingly eccentric. Of his Tenth Sonata Op. 70 (1913) he said, “Here is blinding light as if the sun has come close. Here is the suffocation one feels in the moment of ecstasy.”⁷⁵ His final work *Five Preludes Op. 74*

⁷² Ibid 113.

⁷³ Steen. *The Lives and Times of The Great Composers*, 832.

⁷⁴ Gillespie, *Five Centuries Of Keyboard Music*, 273.

⁷⁵ Steen. *The Lives and Times of The Great Composers*. 832.

(1914) can only be described as “highly intense, characteristic, late Scriabin-esque harmonies, everything dependent on the initial sonorities.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

From the time of his Chopin style salon pieces to the mystical poems of his late works, Scriabin’s work evolves at a rapid and unyielding pace. In terms of harmony, which Scriabin considered the stimulus for all other aspects of his music; the development of the “Mystic Chord” is the pinnacle of his musical achievement. Its structure, sonority, and numerous potential drives create a language unto its own. In 1965, Gillespie wrote “his chromatic harmony and mystical enigmas puzzled contemporaries, on the other hand his unorthodox approach pointed the way to unexplored regions; therefore he must be recognized as an early proponent of some basic contemporary techniques.”⁷⁷ By the end of his career, Scriabin is writing music using techniques that are more common to composers today than to the music that was written in the years immediately after him.

Unfortunately, just after reaching the peak of his musical development, Scriabin died in 1915 from an infected pimple on his lip that became septic. At the time, he was working on *Mysterium*, a work that he intended to have première in the foothills of the Himalayas, and would have been, according to him, followed by the apocalypse.⁷⁸ Rachmaninoff was one of the pallbearers at his funeral and

⁷⁶ Friskin and Freundlich. *Music For the Piano*, 242.

⁷⁷ Gillespie, *Five Centuries Of Keyboard Music*. 278.

⁷⁸ Steen. *The Lives and Times of The Great Composers*, 832.

immediately after went on a tour of Scriabin's music; he donated the proceeds of these concerts to Scriabin's family.⁷⁹

While Scriabin's music may only span thirty-one years, his seventy-four published works including: ten piano sonatas, a piano concerto, five symphonies, and numerous smaller piano works, made a major impact in both Russian culture and music, and 20th Century western art music as a whole. In 1961, Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy Op.56* (1907) was played on Soviet Radio as Yuri Gargarin made his first flight into space.⁸⁰ Among his contemporaries, Scriabin's music was a major focal point for future development of chromatic harmony in Russian music.⁸¹ Salzman considers him one of the first Russian composers to influence the course of western music.⁸² Most notable among the composers he directly influenced is French composer Oliver Messiaen.⁸³

⁷⁹ Ibid 832.

⁸⁰ Ibid 832.

⁸¹ Gillespie, *Five Centuries Of Keyboard Music*. 278.

⁸² Salzman. *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction* 4th ed., 26.

⁸³ Ibid 28-29.

Bibliography

- Bowers, Faubion. Program notes for: *Alexander Scriabin "Poem of Ecstasy" and "Prometheus: Poem of Fire."* Mineola: Dover Publications Inc. 1995.
- Bowers, Faubion. *Scriabin: A Biography* New York: Dover Publications Inc. 1996.
- Friskin, James and Irwin Freundlich. *Music For the Piano*, New York: Dover Publications Inc. 1974.
- Gillespie, John. *Five Centuries Of Keyboard Music*. New York: Dover Publications Inc. 1965.
- Kallis, Vasilis. "Principles of Pitch Organization in Scriabin's Early Post-tonal Period: The Piano Miniatures" *MTO* XIV/3. 2008. N.p.
- Sabbagh, Peter. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin's Works*, USA: Universal Publishers. 2003.
- Salzman, Eric. *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction* 4th ed., Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall. 2002.
- Smith, Kenneth. "'A Science of Tonal Love'? Drive and Desire in Twentieth-Century Harmony: The Erotics of Skryabin" *Music Analysis* XXIX/1-3. 234-263.
- Steen, Michael. *The Lives and Times of The Great Composers*, New York: Oxford University Press. 2004.