

**ICE, COCAINE, AND RAINBOWS**

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## Epiphany

Listen, do we still have that *Poème de l'Exstase*? Put it on, if you can find it. Put it on loud. His music sounds like I think – sometimes. Has that far-off cosmic itch. Divinely fouled up. All fire and air. The first time I heard it I played it over and over. Couldn't shut it off. It was like a bath of ice, cocaine and rainbows. For weeks I went about in a trance. Something had happened to me.<sup>1</sup>

These words, written by Henry Miller more than half a century ago and half a century after the completion of Alexander Scriabin's most well-known work, describe for many the visceral emotional response evoked upon first encountering the scope and grandeur of the *Poem of Ecstasy*, this writer not excluded. It is a work of epic proportions in its ambitions, its sonic density, and its orchestral forces. And one needn't have waited fifty years for the impact of this work to be realized. Indeed, among his contemporaries were some who considered his work to be nothing short of demonic.<sup>2</sup> Scriabin's influence was felt almost immediately by the younger generation of composers in his native Russia. Myaskovsky said of the work, "What can stand comparison with this vortex of titanic force, which in its gust of enthusiasm captivates everybody?"<sup>3</sup> And Sergei Prokofiev, then at the impressionable age of eighteen, stated, "If you could only imagine how interesting Scriabin's late works are – his sonatas, *The Divine Poem*, *Ecstasy*..."<sup>4</sup> But for all of the stretching of tonality and innovation, for all the ravishing newness demonstrated within the *Poem of Ecstasy*, Scriabin's great work stands at the nexus of two eras – that of the prior century's Romanticism *and* the new century's Modernism.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Miller, *Nexus: The Rosy Crucifixion, Book 3* (New York, NY: Grove Press, Inc. 1965), 307

<sup>2</sup> Lincoln Ballard. "Defining Moments: Vicissitudes in Alexander Scriabin's Twentieth-Century Reception". (PhD Diss. University of Washington. 2010) Accessed on Feb. 21, 2017 from <http://bit.ly/2ls8uBS>

<sup>3</sup> Ye Rudakova and A.I Kandinsky. Tatyana Chistyakova, trans. *Scriabin: His Life and Times*. (Neptune City, NJ: Paganiniana Publications, Inc. 1984), 124

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 124

In order to demonstrate that Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy* is in fact a culmination of both romantic and modernist ideals, let us first outline the various aspects of each. Of the romantic ideals will be highlighted: individualism, innovation, and a tendency or emphasis towards half-steps which in Scriabin's works often create a sense of ache or longing very reminiscent of Wagner. And of the modernist ideals, we will focus on: maximalism (especially with regards to dynamics, and large performing forces), reaching for the sublime, awe, eroticism, and purposeful blurring of the tonal center within given works.

### **Romantic Roots Run Deep**

Before making specific points about the work in question, it is worth taking a moment to briefly examine Scriabin's influences as a composer. There is a near unanimous consensus among musicologists, including Taruskin<sup>5</sup> and Grout<sup>6</sup>, that Scriabin's influences are a veritable listing of the most romantic of nineteenth century composers, namely Chopin, Liszt, and Wagner. However, one need in fact look no further than a catalogue listing of Scriabin's published works to immediately illuminate his obvious admiration for Chopin and Liszt, the former in particular. The vast majority of Scriabin's output is for the piano and he even composed largely in Chopin's own idiom: nocturnes, preludes, and mazurkas. Later in Scriabin's life, however, we see striking similarities in personality and ambitions to Richard Wagner, one might even say 'Wagner Maximalized'. Just as Wagner sought to create a new kind of synthesis of all the arts, his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, so would Scriabin endeavor to achieve his own über-

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Taruskin. *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Early Twentieth Century*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 224

<sup>6</sup> Peter Burkholder, Donald Grout, and Claude Palisca. *A History of Western Music*. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co. 2010), 801

Wagnerian ambitions. Scriabin was a Theosophist, the ideals of which were outlined thusly by Vyacheslav Ivanov:<sup>7</sup>

Scriabin has expressed in music the most profound ideas of the present day:

1. The vision of surmounting the boundaries of the personal, individual, petty “I” – a musical transcendentalism
2. The vision of universal, communal mingling of all humanity in a single “I” – or the macrocosmic universalism of musical consciousness.
3. The vision of a violent breakthrough into the expanse of a free new plane of being – universal transformation.

The culmination of these collective “visions” was to be a super-work of art entitled *Mysterium*. It was to be performed in the Himalayas, in a specially constructed “temple” (echoes of Wagner’s *Bayreuth*), performed over the course of a week, and the apex of this extra-musical experience was to bring about the end of humanity and usher in a new era, indeed a new “plane of existence”.<sup>8</sup> Scriabin’s ambition was truly Wagner *maximalized*.

Just as Scriabin’s life was, in a macro sense, an amalgam of romantic (individualism, innovation, use of romantic era forms) and modern (reaching for the sublime, awe, altered states, transcendence) ideals, so too can his work *Poème de l’Exstase* be illuminated to be a microcosm of these same traits. Structurally, the work shows a surprising economy of thematic material. Scriabin once stated, according to friend and fellow composer Leonid Sabaneev, “Harmony becomes melody and melody becomes harmony. For me there is no difference between melody and harmony.”<sup>9</sup> This view certainly does describe the apparent construction of his *Poem of Ecstasy*. (Little more than a cursory look at the structural elements is all that is required to make

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<sup>7</sup> Taruskin. *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, 206

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 225

<sup>9</sup> Peter Sabbagh. *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin’s Works*. (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers. 2003), 7

a strong case for the argument presented in this paper, as the harmonic content throughout the work is akin to that of late Wagner and very early Schoenberg – with the exception of the “extasy” chord, to be discussed below.) When examined in the form of a reduction for two pianos, the work can be seen to be structured almost entirely on two motives, each manipulated throughout in the form of augmentation, inversion, sequences, and varied repetitions – all coupled with a remarkably skillful use of orchestration, crafting varied textures which pull the listener forward through the work through to its ultimate conclusory epiphany (beginning at *Maestoso*, Fig. 3 below), at which point Scriabin uses, in part, his “mystical extase” chord.

**Fig. 1**

The image shows a musical score for two pianos. The top system is for Piano I, with a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. It is marked 'Andante. Languido.' and 'par Léon Conus.'. The bottom system is for Piano II, with a bass clef and a 3/4 time signature. It is also marked 'Andante. Languido.' and 'Viol. Viola.'. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'pp' and 'con voglia languido'. The Piano I part features a melodic line with a half-step resolution (A# to B) and a perfect fifth from below, and a 7th from above. The Piano II part features a rhythmic accompaniment.

In Fig. 1 above, we see the main motive of the work presented in bars 2-4 of the Piano I part. There is an emphasis on a half-step resolution (A# to B), and it is embellished by a perfect fifth from below, and 7<sup>th</sup> from above. This motive resolves to a C maj chord in bar 5, foreshadowing the final tonality of the entire work.

Fig. 2



In Fig. 2 above, at *Allegro volando*, we see a climbing motive. As used by Scriabin in this work, it is always leaping then falling by half steps. This motive is used in successions of sequences to create tension and propel the work forward. In its augmented form, it brings about the final climax, which resolves to a grandiose C major chord.

Fig. 3

There is a chord created by Scriabin which is often referred to in texts as the "Extase Chord". (When asked about this chord by Rachmaninov, Scriabin himself referred to this chord as the "pleroma", a reference to a Theosophic concept of a divine realm beyond human experience.<sup>10</sup>) It is a symmetrical chord which mirrors French sixths up and down from a central A, and then adds perfect 5ths above and below (F# above and C below) creating a compound tritone from

<sup>10</sup> Taruskin. *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, 216

bottom to top.<sup>11</sup> This chord is fairly ambiguous diatonically (by design), pulling the ear in no single direction. However, while it does appear in his tone poem *Prometheus*, despite its name it is in fact never used in his *Poem of Ecstasy*. However, at the *Maestoso* which begins the final climax of the work (Fig. 3 above), the chord outlined here is basically the lower half of the famed "Extase Chord". As far as its function in the work, it is the opinion of this researcher that this *half extase chord* is in essence herein a 'pre-tonic' chord. It creates an undulating tonality vaguely pulsating on or at least suggesting a tonic on C (largely due to the C-G perfect fifth in the bass), though weakly. This vagueness does prepare the ear for a sense of finality when the final grand C major chord is reached at the end of the work. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is important to note that the momentary vagueness of tonality effected by this *half extase chord* is a notable aspect of Modernism, the aforementioned blurring of tonality.

### **Conclusions**

So, in what ways does this work clearly demonstrate aspects of Romanticism? It is basically a tone poem, similar in scope to those of Franz Liszt. Harmonically, most of this work is only a step beyond Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, and is akin to the harmonic treatment of Schoenberg's (pre-serialism) work *Verklärte Nacht*, both of these works focus highly on the use of half-steps to create episodes of tension and release. And like Wagner, Scriabin penned his own narrative to accompany this work, in this case taking the form of a 300+ line poem. Interestingly, he refused to publish the poem with the score, insisting that the music must come first, not the text.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 216

<sup>12</sup> Rudakova and Kandinsky. Tatyana Chistyakova, trans. *Scriabin: His Life and Times*.

In what ways can we demonstrate Modernism in Scriabin's *Poème de l'Exstase*? Firstly, with regards to the orchestration which is absolutely massive on a Mahlerian scale: 3 flutes, piccolo, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 5 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, small and large bells, tam-tam, celesta, organ or harmonium, 2 harps and strings. A full string orchestra in this work would mean roughly 120 musicians would be required in order to perform it. Secondly, with regards to dynamic range. Over the last 11 bars alone, the score calls for a crescendo from *pp* to *fff*, and that triple *fff* with eighteen brass players and organ is an absolutely massive volume. But perhaps more than any of these aspects would be the extra-musical elements of the work. It is a work meant to evoke a sense of eroticism, awe, and even transcendence. These are absolutely Modernist ideals.

As this research paper has endeavored to demonstrate, Alexander Scriabin is a composer straddling two worlds, those of Romanticism and Modernism. And his *Poème de l'Exstase*, with its demonstrated Wagnerian and Lisztian influences is clearly born of Scriabin's musical forefathers of the nineteenth century. However, Scriabin's disregard for traditional structures (clearly defined melody vs. harmony), use of massive forces, and striving for altered states of musical experience all point to the future, to Modernism.



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