



Alexander SCRIBIN

Piano Concerto in F-sharp minor, Op. 20

Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin (6 January 1872 – 27 April 1915) was a Russian composer and pianist. His mother, Lyubov was a concert pianist, but died when Scriabin was only a year old. Shortly after, Scriabin's father, Nikolai, joined the military – as all of his relatives followed a military path – and was deployed to Turkey. Left in the custody of his grandmother, great aunt, and aunt, Scriabin was exposed to piano at an early age as his aunt was an amateur pianist herself. Scriabin began studying with disciplinarian Nikolai Zverev, and even began constructing his own pianos. Despite his keen intelligence, he was unsociable and not liked by many of his peers, often being teased for his small stature. Later, Scriabin studied at the Moscow Conservatory, where he became a notable pianist in spite of his small figure and hands, which could barely stretch a ninth interval. Even with such physical limitations, he would graduate with a Gold Medal in piano performance, but without a degree in composition, as Anton Arensky refused to sign his graduation certificate due to strong differences in personality and musical opinion. Within the next 6 years, Scriabin would gain recognition as a pianist and began teaching at the Moscow Conservatory, after which point he further developed his reputation as a composer. He would leave Russia briefly from 1903 until 1909 to live in Switzerland, Paris, and Brussels, but would return to work on increasingly grandiose projects. As someone that experienced synesthesia, Scriabin worked on a multi-media piece, *Mysterium*, which was to act upon senses other than hearing, such as smell and touch. Unfortunately, his frail nature led to an early death, as Scriabin died of sepsis from a sore on his upper lip in 1915. Upon hearing of his death, Sergei Rachmaninoff toured Russia performing Scriabin's music – marking the first time that Rachmaninoff publicly performed music other than his own.

Piano Concerto in F# minor, Op. 20 (1896) was Scriabin's first work for orchestra, written when he was 24. As his only concerto, Scriabin finished the piece within a few days, but laboured with the orchestration. His publisher, Mitrofan Petrovich Belyayev, urged him to complete the orchestration and paid 600 rubles for the publishing rights (about \$10,000 USD today). This piece was composed in Scriabin's first stylistic period, in which he largely adhered to the Romantic era's conventions of harmony.

The first movement (*Allegro*) begins with a soft opening from the brass, strings, and woodwinds, and leads to the gentle first theme on solo piano with abundant melodic and harmonic ornamentation – almost Chopin-esque in its weaving nature. The orchestra takes over the melody as the pianist begins to display the first hints of virtuosity. This movement stays rather level-headed, swaying into some light-hearted regions which almost resemble the triplet figures of a mazurka, and dropping into more ominous tones. There is no recapitulation as Scriabin chooses rather to end with an emotional flourish that allows him to flash his masterful command of Romantic harmony.

The second movement (*Andante*) is structured in the form of a theme and variations, with the theme being portrayed by muted strings. The hushed, nostalgic tone is set for the first variation, which sees the clarinet take the main melody with a weaving piano providing accompaniment in the treble region. The second variation takes the form of a short scherzo, with the piano blistering through a more dissonant version of the theme, as the orchestra provides accents sporadically. The piano controls the next variation, which slows to a halt, almost resembling a funeral march. The final variation presents a more animated version of the first of the set, with an inverted melody led by the orchestra. The movement is closed out when the theme is revisited in this same styling.

The third movement (*Allegro Moderato*) is in sonata-rondo form with a principal theme featuring a furious arpeggio on the piano, while the lyrical secondary subject provides an almost cinematic respite. Markedly more intense than the first movement, the piano and orchestra seem to be in conflict with each other, as they each take turns developing the theme in increasingly passionate reprises. Finally, an extended coda brings the piece to an ecstatic, emotional culmination, with the orchestra rising to prominence at the very end.