



Alexander SCRIBIN

The Poem of ecstasy

Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin (1872–1915) was a groundbreaking Russian composer and virtuoso pianist whose work significantly impacted the evolution of 20th-century music. Born in Moscow into a distinguished noble family, Scriabin's early life was marked by both privilege and tragedy. His mother, a concert pianist, died when he was just a year old, leaving him under the care of his grandmother and aunt. His father, Nikolai, a military attaché and a prominent figure in Russian society, was largely absent during Scriabin's formative years. Despite this, Scriabin showed remarkable musical aptitude early on, constructing his own pianos and performing with local children. His formal education in music began with Nikolai Zverev, a stern teacher who also mentored future luminaries like Sergei Rachmaninoff. Scriabin's early compositions were deeply influenced by Frédéric Chopin, and his music adhered to a relatively tonal, late-Romantic idiom. He studied at the Moscow Conservatory under Anton Arensky, Sergei Taneyev, and Vasily Safonov, gaining recognition for his pianistic skills despite his small hands, which struggled with large intervals. An injury to his right hand during a demanding practice session could have ended his career, but Scriabin's recovery and subsequent works, including his Piano Sonata No. 1, reflected a profound personal and artistic resilience.

By the early 20th century, Scriabin's music began to reflect a radical departure from traditional tonality. Influenced by his studies in metaphysics and theosophy, he developed a new, dissonant harmonic language that transcended conventional tonality without fully embracing atonality. This evolution is evident in works such as his late piano sonatas and the ambitious "Mysterium," a planned multimedia work that would have incorporated music, color, and scent. Scriabin's concept of synesthesia, where he associated specific colors with musical keys, and his color-coded circle of fifths, highlighted his desire to blend sensory experiences with musical composition. Despite his innovative approach, Scriabin faced criticism and controversy during his lifetime. His complex and often dissonant music was not universally appreciated, and his early works, though admired, did not achieve widespread acclaim until later. Scriabin's impact was notably diminished after his death, but his music has experienced a resurgence of interest since the 1970s. Contemporary evaluations of his oeuvre recognize his significant influence on modern music, noting his pioneering role in the transition from Romanticism to 20th-century avant-garde. Scriabin's legacy endures through his ten published piano sonatas and other works, which continue to be celebrated for their originality and depth. His vision of music as a synesthetic and metaphysical experience remains a profound aspect of his artistic identity, ensuring his place as a major figure in the Russian Silver Age and a key influence on subsequent generations of composers.

The Poem of Ecstasy ("Poème de l'extase"), composed by Alexander Scriabin in 1908-1909, stands as one of his most ambitious and mystically infused works. It represents a significant turning point in Scriabin's musical evolution, reflecting his shift from late-Romanticism towards his distinctive harmonic language and philosophical ideas. The work is a large, single-movement symphonic poem, lasting about 20 minutes, and it is scored for a large orchestra. It is designed to evoke a profound emotional and spiritual experience, embodying Scriabin's fascination with mysticism, transcendence, and the concept of ecstatic enlightenment. The Poem of Ecstasy is structured in a continuous flow, with thematic and harmonic development that strives to represent the journey of spiritual and emotional awakening. Scriabin's philosophical and metaphysical interests are integral to the Poem of Ecstasy. He envisioned the work as an embodiment of a transformative spiritual experience, a kind of musical journey that transcends ordinary reality. The influence of Theosophy, a spiritual movement with which Scriabin was deeply engaged, is evident in the work's aspiration to represent cosmic and mystical themes.

The Poem of Ecstasy premiered in Moscow on March 24, 1910, under the baton of the composer himself. Despite some mixed reactions from critics, the work has since been recognized for its visionary qualities and its role in the development of early 20th-century music. It represents a crucial moment in Scriabin's career, bridging his romantic past with his more radical, later innovations. The Poem of Ecstasy remains a powerful testament to Scriabin's unique artistic vision, blending intricate musical techniques with profound spiritual exploration. Its legacy endures in the repertoire as a landmark of Scriabin's creative output and a significant example of early 20th-century symphonic innovation.