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**Publication Date**

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Impulse to Apocalypse:

The Late Works of Alexander Nikolayevich Skryabin, 1910-1915

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of  
Philosophy in Musicology

by

Ross Leland Mitchell

2024

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Impulse to Apocalypse:

The Late Works of Alexander Nikolayevich Skryabin, 1910-1915

by

Ross Leland Mitchell

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Mitchell Bryan Morris, Chair

Alexander Skryabin was a composer, poet, and mystic philosopher who sought to unify these three endeavors in his artistic works. He sought means of influencing and enlightening the human spirit through multimodal artistic expression, with his ultimate goal being the enactment of an omnisensory performance called *The Mysterium* that was to bring about the apocalypse by raising the spiritual consciousness of all humankind beyond our earthly forms. The music and writings that Skryabin produced have mystified audiences and critics for over a century due to their highly idiosyncratic construction. This dissertation seeks to bring the music and mysticism closer together, and explore their complex interrelationships.

Skryabin's philosophical outlook is difficult to discuss due to its ever-shifting nature; Skryabin frequently wrote and stated contradictory beliefs in sometimes shockingly close proximity. This dissertation argues in favor of understanding Skryabin's philosophy as an ongoing work-in-progress that is nonetheless structured by a handful of core ideas that underpin all of the changing superstructure.

This dissertation seeks to understand Skryabin's music and mysticism by analyzing it through the lens of phenomenology, as this methodology allows for analysis of far more musical characteristics than only looking at harmony or form. The phenomenological method outlined here focuses particularly on the experience of musical time, musical space, and the embodied motions of the pianistic performer. Skryabin was a pianist-composer who primarily wrote for and at the piano, and this dissertation finds myriad connections between Skryabin's philosophical outlook and the ways that he encourages a pianist to move.

A recurrent theme throughout this dissertation is a distinction between the exoteric and esoteric, which is most readily apparent in the two primary musical analyses – *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (1910) and *Piano Sonata No. 10* (1913). *Prometheus* is a grand, exoteric expression of Skryabin's philosophy intended to communicate outward with the masses, while in contrast, *Piano Sonata No. 10* is an inwardly-focused esoteric expression of hierophantic ritual.

The dissertation of Ross Leland Mitchell is approved.

Raymond L. Knapp

Elizabeth Randell Upton

Simon Morrison

Mitchell Bryan Morris, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

Dedicated to Cecile Gelinas

Thank you for setting me on the path of lifelong learning.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am fortunate to have so many people who have supported me on this journey. I'd like to thank Mitchell Morris, who lit the spark of my intellectual curiosity about Skryabin and has since been an invaluable mentor and friend. I can't ever seem to walk out of his office without at least three new books in my arms, and this dissertation wouldn't have been half of what it is without his guidance.

The faculty of the UCLA Musicology department have each imparted crucial skills in my time there. My musical analysis tends to 'dive deep into the notes,' and Raymond Knapp taught me how to come up for air every now and then. Elizabeth Upton has a gift for explaining unfamiliar systems like medieval music theory by relating them to more familiar knowledge, and I have tried to imitate her methods as best I can. Nina Sun Eidsheim pushed me to think abstractly and metaphorically while staying grounded in clear writing. Robert Fink expanded my analytical toolkit to include ways of talking about tone, timbre, and audio engineering, while Cesar Favila encouraged thoroughness and academic rigor through his teaching that is always polished to a mirror sheen.

A number of my esteemed colleagues at UCLA have helped me along the way, either by acting as engaging interlocutors, reading draft material of this dissertation, or inspiring me with their own brilliant work. Thank you to Hyeonjin Park, Jordan Hugh Sam, Pheaross Graham, and Kacie Morgan. I would also like to give special thanks to Sergey Nesterov and his parents, Tatiana Nesterova and Yuri Nesterov, who procured the *Research Notes* source for me by visiting the Skryabin Museum in Moscow and shipping it to the US.

I have also had the privilege to study music with brilliant musicians and teachers. Wayne Bethanis, Kanae Matsumoto, and Carissa Kim have been my pianistic guides who gave me the

ability to play Skryabin's music in the first place. Adam Gilberti has been my music theory and orchestration extraordinaire who opened my eyes to the endless, beautiful depth of music analysis.

My family and friends have been a constant source of support throughout this entire process. I couldn't have done this without the encouragement of my parents, Barbara, Larry, and Anna Mitchell, as well as my loving and supportive Aunt Co, who have always instilled in me the belief that I can accomplish anything I set my mind to.

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| “Fifty Shades of White?:” <i>The Witcher 3</i> ’s Pa(ga)n-Slavism  | LUDO2021   | 2021 |
| “The Pulse of Combat: Rethinking Diatonic Rhythm through RPG Battle Music”                                 | North American Conference on Video Game Music                        | 2021 |
| “ <i>Shovel Knight</i> : 80s Retro-Synths and Hyperreal NES-talgia”  | Nostalgia, Music and Music Studies                                   | 2022 |
| “Changing Times: The Diatonic and Propulsive Rhythms of Nobuo Uematsu’s <i>Final Fantasy</i> Battle Music” | <i>The Music of Nobuo Uematsu in the Final Fantasy Series</i>        | 2022 |

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| UCLA Excellence in Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies Award | 2018 |
| UCLA Friends of Musicology Best Seminar Paper Award                 | 2021 |

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*“Scriabin was the first creative artist to develop the magical principle of art into a systematic doctrine and use it as an aesthetic foundation for his own compositions. It was to him not a speculative hypothesis, a superstructure on his artistic activity – its appendix, as it were – but an integral part of his work, an earnest endeavor to rationalize his intuitive previsions. Indeed, he regarded himself as an Orpheus, wielding power through his art over both the psychic and physical worlds.”* – Boris de Schloezer.<sup>1</sup>

*“Skryabin’s frame of mind was absolutely monogamous: for his entire life, he loved one idea, and everything else was for him only framing, context, and accessories to this fundamental principle.”* – Leonid Sabaneev.<sup>2</sup>

Alexander Nikolayevich Skryabin as a composer has mystified audiences, critics, listeners, and musicologists for over a century. From a “famous singer” asking “what happened, did his stomach seize?” in disbelief at the abrupt conclusion of his *Piano Sonata No. 5*, to his own biographer dismissing the majority of his ideas as ‘crazy,’ Skryabin’s music and ideas have proven opaque to many.<sup>3</sup> Yet, to a dedicated few, Skryabin’s music and ideas have proven as compelling as they are mystifying. Indeed, when writing that Skryabin wished to trigger the apocalypse through the enactment of the ultimate *Gesamtkunstwerk*, one can realize just how outlandish even quite conservative claims about the composer can seem. Furthermore, hermeneutic work that attempts to bridge this philosophy with Skryabin’s music is always burdened by the methodological difficulty of determining just how literal or explicit these connections may be. In this dissertation, I intend to demystify these connections between

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<sup>1</sup> Schloezer, Boris de, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 235.

<sup>2</sup> Sabaneev, Leonid, *Reminiscences on Skryabin (Воспоминания о Скрябине)* (2000), 58. Author’s translation here and elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

Skryabin's mystic philosophy and his idiosyncratic music as much as possible, but I embark on this task knowing from the outset that the results can only ever be partial.

Compounding the mystery is the fact that Skryabin's mystic beliefs changed frequently. As his brother-in-common-law Boris de Schloezer poetically articulates, "Skryabin never concluded his sentences with a period, so to speak. A theory expressed in definitive terms on one day could be followed by a question mark on the next, debated anew, and assume an unexpected or novel formulation, gradually deepening and broadening in response to searching questions."<sup>4</sup> For this reason, a primary goal of this dissertation will be a focus on radical specificity that is guided by the generalizable principles that remain constant in Skryabin's belief system. I contend that, while the surface may have been constantly shifting, at the core of Skryabin's mysticism was an intuitive *feeling* that guided his thinking, speaking, and composing. Skryabin would adopt and then discard techniques, arguments, and even entire cosmogonies based on how well he felt they suited this core feeling, but the intuition itself was the sole constant.

Skryabin's core intuition that guided his musical and philosophical work stemmed from a fervent desire to trigger "the union of humanity with divinity and the return of the world to oneness."<sup>5</sup> By oneness, Skryabin meant a state of consciousness in which all of the disparate individual souls of humanity united as one larger consciousness, absolute unity in which there would be no division. Furthermore, Skryabin believed that it was his personal destiny to enact the *Mysterium*, a 7-day *Gesamtkunstwerk* involving music, light, dance, aromas, and eroticism that would trigger this dissolution of the barriers between people and unify us all. For Skryabin,

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<sup>4</sup> Schloezer, 236.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 67.

this moment would be both apocalypse and transcendence, the destruction of all that presently is for the purpose of bringing about something greater.

Separate from his mysticism, music-theoretical scholarship on Skryabin has featured approximately a century of fierce debate over how his late music functions. Proposals that have been put forward have included octatonicism, an intensive focus on his own invented “Mystic Chord,” and discussions of the acoustic scale interacting with other sources of pitch material, but little broad consensus has been reached.<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Smith also puts forward an intriguing hypothesis centered around Neo-Riemannian *Funktionstheorie* and minor-third matrices in his article “Skryabin’s Revolving Harmonies, Lacanian Desire, and Riemannian *Funktionstheorie*,” and this perspective will prove important when discussing *Piano Sonata No. 10* in chapter 5 of this dissertation. This lack of consensus has been furthered by the linguistic barrier (as well as the Iron Curtain) that separated Anglophone and Russophone scholarship on Skryabin until the late 1970s. Even Varvara Dernova’s magnum opus “Harmony of Skryabin” (“Гармония Скрябина”) has been criticized relentlessly, now on both sides of the linguistic divide.<sup>7</sup> Broadly, I identify two primary problems with the current literature on Skryabin’s idiosyncratic music theory: first, an impulse to systematize his works, and secondly, the impulse to ignore his mystic philosophy and focus on only ‘the music itself.’

I take the position that Skryabin’s music and mystical intent cannot be separated without doing serious harm to an understanding of both. Skryabin’s brother-in-common-law describes how pervasive the composer’s thoughts on philosophy were, claiming that “unlike most

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<sup>6</sup> See Wai-Ling, “Scriabin’s Octatonic Sonata,” Perle, “Scriabin’s Self-Analyses,” and Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* for octatonicism. See Dernova, “Harmony of Skryabin” (Гармония Скрябина) for the Mystic Chord. See Kallis, Vasilis, “Pitch Organization in Scriabin’s Tenth Sonata” for an exploration of interactions between the acoustic, octatonic, and hyper-hexatonic scales.

<sup>7</sup> See Ewell, Philip, “Scriabin’s Seventh Piano Sonata: Three Analytical Approaches,” and Gawboy, Anna, “Alexander Scriabin’s Theurgy in Blue.”

specialists, who regard philosophy merely as a professional occupation separate from everyday life, Scriabin was constantly immersed in philosophical speculation. Whatever he was doing or saying, an intense inner process of reasoning accompanied his actions.”<sup>8</sup> Skryabin’s mystic thoughts were pervasive, but as cited above, they were also flexible and subject to change upon reflection. The same was true for his music, as Schloezer remarks that, while in the process of writing music, for Skryabin, “each work was to him an act of perfection; each was unexcelled,” but “as soon as a sonata or a symphony was finished, he immediately noticed its inadequacies.”<sup>9</sup> I intend to take this sense of imperfection seriously and position Skryabin’s music as a series of experiments of varying success that each develop a technique or harmony to be used in the *Mysterium*. Each piece is a fresh attempt at expressing some facet of Skryabin’s core intuition – that all humanity must return to oneness – and most of them tell quite similar narratives, but do so through heterogenous means. I view Skryabin’s oeuvre as having been a constantly evolving work-in-progress filled with hypotheses that each worked towards the same goal.

While harmony is a crucial component of Skryabin’s music and mystical intent, my core contention in this dissertation is that it is just that – a *component*. I argue that, in communicating Skryabin’s mystic intent, musical elements such as rhythm and meter, texture, register, timbre, and the embodied motions of the performer are equally important, if not more so. Skryabin’s daring harmonies have captivated the musicological community, but his late piano works, especially *Piano Sonata No. 10*, are striking in their balance of highly contrapuntal textures paired with pervasive trills, tremolos, and other flourishes ordinarily relegated to the designation of ‘ornament.’

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<sup>8</sup> Schloezer, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 91.

In accounting for these non-harmonic aspects of Skryabin's music, I turn to phenomenology as an analytical method. Phenomenology can often become an overwhelming methodology due to the way one can feel obligated to account for *all* aspects of a work, a task that is ultimately impossible. Yet, for the purposes of this dissertation, and the examination of Skryabin's music in general, I see this 'analysis of everything' aspect of phenomenology as a strength because it opens the doors to analyze so many of the aspects of Skryabin's music that have thus far been neglected.

My phenomenological method, outlined in Chapter 3, is primarily modeled on the work of Thomas Clifton in his book *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology*. Clifton's preliminary exploration into creating a musicological phenomenology offers a solid foundation from which to build, especially his analytical techniques regarding musical time and musical space.

In exploring the phenomenology of Skryabin's music, I intend to move beyond the experience of the listener and into the seat of the performer. Skryabin was a pianist who primarily wrote for the piano, after all, and I contend that the embodied experience of performing his works forms a crucial aspect of his mystic project. In order to conceptualize the pianistic body, I draw on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and perform autoethnographic analysis of my own experiences playing Skryabin's works. Some readers may object that my personal experiences playing Skryabin's music could be drastically different from Skryabin's own experiences or intentions. In response to this possibility, I offer several counterarguments. The first is that, while of course different pianists can approach the same music in multitudinous ways, the notes on the page *encourage* particular embodied motions in order to execute them. There is also the fact that Skryabin's scores abound with detailed performance indications, many

of which directly call for particular kinds of motion, such as “*caressando*” (*4 Pieces, Op. 56*) and “*avec une grace capricieuse*” (*Poem-Nocturne, Op. 61*). Finally, although this is the weakest of my counterarguments, I cannot fail to mention that I can trace my piano teaching lineage back to Skryabin himself. Two of the most important teachers in my pianistic studies were Dr. Kanae Matsumoto and Dr. Carissa Kim, both of whom studied under Dr. Vitaly Margulis, who “received his first piano lessons from his father, whose teacher, Alexander Horowitz, studied with the composer Alexander Scriabin.”<sup>10</sup> While it is of course impossible to attribute specific aspects of my own piano instruction to Skryabin’s influence, there is at least the seed of possibility that my training prepared me to interpret music in a manner similar to him.

### **Literature Review:**

While there is not a dearth of scholarship on Skryabin, there is also not an abundance. Furthermore, as the late Richard Taruskin frequently lamented, a significant portion of the writing deals either exclusively with the technical means of Skryabin’s music or with his ideas, but only occasionally do the two meet.<sup>11</sup> The literature has also been limited for quite some time by the work of Faubion Bowers, who commanded authority due to being the author of the only English-language full biography, as well as the (for a time) definitive translator of works like the poetry to accompany *The Poem of Ecstasy* (1906 poem, 1908 music). While Bowers’ archival work is pristine and offers a detailed look at the practicalities of Scriabin’s life and finances, he is highly dismissive of Skryabin’s mysticism, regarding it as something ‘crazy’ and not worth discussing.

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<sup>10</sup> Margulis, Vitaly, “Bio” in [www.vitalymargulis.com](http://www.vitalymargulis.com), September 2011, accessed via web.archive.org.

<sup>11</sup> Taruskin, Richard. “Review of James M. Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* and Boris de Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*.”

The history of music-theoretical scholarship on Skryabin's late works is one of fierce debate. Vasilis Kallis and Kenneth Smith provide a detailed meta-critical analysis of the extant literature in their chapter "Scriabin and Music Analysis: The Search for the Holy Grail" in the edited volume *Demystifying Scriabin* (2022). They find that early accounts primarily focused on the resemblance that Skryabin's famed 'Mystic Chord' has to the whole-tone scale, before the publication of Varvara Dernova's seminal "Harmony of Skryabin" ("Гармония Скрябина," 1968) created "the main structural junction in Scriabin's analytical historiography."<sup>12</sup> Dernova's system holds that Skryabin's late works center around a handful of variations on his "Mystic Chord" (C-D-E-F#-A-Bb) that always exist in a "tritone-link," in which the piece primarily modulates between two Mystic Chords separated by a tritone. This system is most clearly apparent in *Prometheus*, which uses the F# Mystic Chord as the tonic during the exposition, switches to the C Mystic Chord as the primary tonic for the development, and returns to F# for the moment of recapitulation and the final chord. However, the functional framing of these two poles remains a point of contention. As Philip Ewell explains in his article "Scriabin's Seventh Sonata: Three Analytical Approaches" (2002), Dernova views the poles of the tritone-link as *dominant* functioned, with corresponding "tonics that sound only in the imagination," whereas Russian scholar Yuri Kholopov hears them as *tonics* in their own right.<sup>13</sup> Ewell chooses to side with Kholopov, drawing on the Sabaneev to cite Skryabin's own insistence that this chord is a consonance, and demonstrates the usefulness of approaching Skryabin's *Piano Sonata No. 7* from this perspective.

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<sup>12</sup> Kallis, Vasilis and Smith, Kenneth, "Scriabin and Music Analysis: The Search for the Holy Grail" in *Demystifying Scriabin*, 271.

<sup>13</sup> Ewell, Philip. "Scriabin's Seventh Sonata: Three analytical Approaches," 51.

Kallis and Smith identify that “the year 1983 marks the beginning of a period of more intense and focused analytical inquiry into Scriabin’s compositional methods,” and focus on a wide variety of approaches adopted by scholars in this period, continuing to today.<sup>14</sup> One major focus in Anglophone scholarship has been on the Octatonic scale, which can be found in works such as “Scriabin’s Octatonic Sonata” (1996) by Cheong Wai-Ling, “Scriabin’s Self-Analyses” (1984) by George Perle, as well as Taruskin’s chapter “Scriabin and the Superhuman” in *Defining Russia Musically* (1997). Kallis and Smith wryly note that Skryabin’s ‘Mystic Chord’ could either be “a whole-tone scale with a wrong note” or “an octatonic scale with one wrong note,” and that in either case it could be “any wrong note.”<sup>15</sup> They also note that recent scholars have identified the acoustic scale, hexatonic, acoustic-octatonic, and hyper-hexatonic scale in Skryabin’s late works.<sup>16</sup>

In writing about Skryabin’s ideas, most scholars have rightly focused on his *Mysterium*. There is a literature in literary fields such as comparative literature and Slavic studies that focuses on his poetry, beginning with works by his close relations, such as Leonid Sabaneev’s “Scriabin and the Idea of Religious Art” (1931), with a few scholarly works including Ralph Matlaw’s “Scriabin and Russian Symbolism” (1979), which unpacks portions of the poetry to his unfinished *Prefatory Act* (*Предварительное Действо*), and Louis Marvick’s “Two Versions of the Symbolist Apocalypse: Mallarme’s *Livre* and Scriabin’s *Mysterium*” (1986), which draws comparisons between the composer and poet to make larger points about the eschatological air of

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<sup>14</sup> Kallis and Smith, 273.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 278.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 276.

the *fin-de-siecle*. However, in general, literature that focuses exclusively on Skryabin's ideas is less common than that which focuses exclusively on his music.

Mitchell Morris' dissertation "Musical Eroticism and the Transcendent Strain: The Works of A. N. Skryabin, 1898-1908" (1998) is a seminal work that ties the Kantian and Nietzschean aspects of Skryabin's thought to his middle-period works, and will form an important base for my own dissertation. In many ways, my goal is to continue Morris' project beyond the 1908 endpoint that he chose for his work. More recently, Anna Gawboy's dissertation "Alexander Scriabin's Theurgy in Blue: Esotericism and the Analysis of 'Prometheus: Poem of Fire'" (2010) explores Skryabin's fascination with India, as well as the music-theoretical and symbolic basis for the synesthetic colors of *Prometheus*, ultimately producing a detailed program of the piece. The fourth chapter of this dissertation will interface deeply with Gawboy's work and add to her reading of the piece by drawing on the sheet music cover art – a picture of Apollo rather than the titular Prometheus – to provide an extra layer of interpretation that I argue recontextualizes the entire piece.

Kenneth Smith takes a differing approach rooted in Lacan's psychoanalytic method and eroticism in his monograph *Skryabin, Philosophy, and the Music of Desire* (2013), and while I do find some portions of this work compelling when applied to Skryabin's middle-period works, such as the *Poeme* Opus 32, No. 1 and *Le Poeme de l'Extase*, it is less applicable to Skryabin's late period due to a shift in his way of thinking about eroticism. Where Skryabin's earlier writings focused on the physical experiences of eroticism as a means towards ecstasy and transcendence, in his later thought eroticism takes a more structured and spiritual form informed by Theosophy.

The edited volume *Demystifying Scriabin* contains a plethora of interesting works in addition to the chapter by Kallis and Smith cited above. Marina Frolova-Walker's chapter "Playing Scriabin: Reality and Enchantment" constructs an image of Skryabin the pianist, and compares descriptions of his playing to extant recordings. Antonio Grande explores Skryabin's unusual and, sometimes more interestingly, quite quotidian structuring of musical time in his chapter "Temporal Perspectives in Scriabin's Late Music," and analyzes *Piano Sonata No. 9* (1913) to find that the piece uses structural rhythm to produce a recapitulation that is not the place of resolution, but "a further phase of thematic transformation...which...can be grasped on a level we will call *transfigurative*."<sup>17</sup> Maintaining the theme of temporality, Kenneth Smith's chapter "Scriabin's Multi-Dimensional Accelerative Sonata Forms" conceptualizes the normal-yet-abnormal sonata-allegro form structures of the late sonatas through a layering of different formal structures.

## **Outline**

Chapter 2 will focus on Skryabin's mysticism. Drawing on the three richest sources – Skryabin's personal notebooks, Sabaneev's *Reminiscences on Skryabin*, and Schloezer's *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* – the chapter uses metatextual analysis to draw out the stable aspects of Skryabin's thought. I draw on the philosophy of Ole Koksvik to create a distinction between 'belief' and 'intuition,' and advocate for viewing Skryabin's mysticism through the lens of intuition rather than belief.

Chapter 3 works towards developing a phenomenological vocabulary for discussing Skryabin's music. A major pillar of this vocabulary is the system of Russian 'verbs of motion,' which involve a combinatorial system in which every verb is constructed ad-hoc out of three

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<sup>17</sup> Grande, Antonio, "Temporal Perspectives in Scriabin's Late Music," in *Demystifying Scriabin*, 169.

different parameters, each parameter having between two and two dozen options, resulting in hundreds of potential ways of describing motion. Additionally, this phenomenological method draws on the work of musicologist Thomas Clifton in his book *Music as Heard*. Musical analyses demonstrate the applicability of Clifton's methods to analyzing the ways that Skryabin's music moves through musical time and musical space. Additionally, I draw on the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his concept of the 'body schema' to explore the way that the movement of the pianistic body can serve as a site of interpretive opportunity.

Chapter 4 explores Skryabin's most exoteric musical expression of his mystic intuitions – *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (1910) – which is, crucially, a tone poem crossed with a piano concerto. The chapter discusses the theosophical influences on the symphonic poem, the significance of its synesthetic counterpoint, and Skryabin's famed 'Mystic Chord,' before moving into a detailed phenomenological analysis. My prevailing argument is that *Prometheus* does not have one definite program focused on the titular Titan, but is instead flexible in its referents. *Prometheus* points towards Apollo, Orpheus, and, due to the importance of the piano soloist, Skryabin himself to make a statement about the inevitable cyclicity of Skryabin's theosophically-influenced cosmogony.

Chapter 5 turns away from the exoteric grandiosity of *Prometheus* towards the esoteric interiority of Skryabin's final piano sonata, *Piano Sonata No. 10* (1913). My phenomenological analysis considers the piece from two perspectives – listener and performer – by drawing on my own experience of playing the work. I argue for a reframing of the common interpretive lens of the work, which is to describe it as *representing* spiritual enlightenment. In place of this hermeneutic framework, I advocate for a view of the piece *as* a mystic experience. By using a modular set of thematic fragments that cross and intersect, like multiple dimensions crossing into

each other, Skryabin strains the pianist's cerebral and aural skills while simultaneously pushing athletic virtuosity to the extreme. The work becomes an exercise for Skryabin and those initiates who can understand and execute it to perform spiritual work, bettering themselves through a hierophantic pedagogy.

## Chapter 2

### Skryabin's Notebooks: An Intuitive Perspective

*“Everything is my creation. But it itself also exists only in its creations, it is completely identical with them. I am nothing. I am only what I create. Everything that exists exists only in my consciousness. Everything is my activity, which in its turn is only what it produces. Therefore it is impossible to say that the world exists.”*<sup>18</sup>

The meandering, overwrought, and radically self-centered epigraph to this chapter is a rather typical quotation from Skryabin's personal notebooks, one of the three core sources for understanding Skryabin's own meandering, overwrought, and radically self-centered philosophical outlook. Skryabin himself never intended for these notebooks to be published, and in fact, tried to hide their contents from even his closest of confidants.<sup>19</sup> The notebooks only saw publication after Skryabin's death in 1919 as part of Mikhail Gershenzon's *Russian Propylaeum* (*Русские Пропилеи*), a 'thick journal' devoted to the publication of notebooks, sketches, and other works-in-progress by major cultural figures. Skryabin had the honor of sharing his issue of *Russian Propylaeum* with none other than the great Alexander of Russian literature – Pushkin himself – whose posthumous contribution was an unpublished notebook from his time at the Imperial Lyceum. While few will debate which of the two was the greater poet, the inclusion of Skryabin's writings with the work of the 'Father of Russian Literature' certainly demonstrates the mystic hold that his works had on the imaginations of the public at the time.

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<sup>18</sup> Skryabin, Alexander in *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin*, trans. Simon Nicholls and Michael Pushkin, 65.

<sup>19</sup> Schloezer, "A Note by Boris de Schloezer on the *Preliminary Action*" in *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin*, 34.

Strange, then, is the fact that the notebooks seem so wildly incomprehensible that they have inspired all manner of posthumous psychiatric diagnoses of the composer behind them.<sup>20</sup> In attempting to remedy this disconnect, one might feel inclined to turn to Skryabin's closest confidants to see if they can make sense of the muddle. While Skryabin discussed his philosophy with nearly anyone who would listen, the three people with whom he discussed it most frequently and in the most depth were his common-law wife, Tatiana Skryabina *née* Schloezer, his brother-in-common-law Boris de Schloezer, and his friend Leonid Sabaneev. Of these three, Boris de Schloezer and Sabaneev are the two who chose to pursue the unenviable goal of proselytizing on behalf of an understanding of Skryabin's music through the fragmentary and seemingly contradictory beliefs that the composer espoused. Schloezer was instrumental in assembling the materials for Gershenzon's *Russian Propylaeum*, Sabaneev published his *Reminiscences on Skryabin* in 1925, and Schloezer returned to the project multiple times from 1923-1970, ultimately compiling his writings into *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, published in French in 1970 and English in 1987. These three texts offer a look at Skryabin's mysticism from the closest possible remove, and will form the core of the understanding put forward in this dissertation.

However, in spite of their advantageous positions of proximity, these three texts each come with their own issues. Sabaneev's *Reminiscences* were published in the USSR 1925, a time when Soviet censorship was intense, but not quite as heavy-handed as what would come in the period of Socialist Realism. One presentation of this censorship comes in the form of absolutely bizarre sentences, such as "repainting Scriabin in a revolutionary color, making him into the

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<sup>20</sup> See Starcevic, "The Life and Music of Alexander Scriabin: Megalomania Revisited" and Witztum and Lerner, "Alexander Nikolaevich Scriabin (1872-1915): Enlightenment or Illness?"

unexpected and impossible in his time “face of the proletariat” - although inappropriate, even backwards, has a place in his time.”<sup>21</sup> Sentences like this, mere scraps of ideology tossed carelessly in the direction of the censors, can easily be dismissed out of hand. More pervasive, and frankly impossible to disentangle, is a general air of skepticism and incredulity that permeates Sabaneev’s text. Skryabin’s philosophy, as mystical, noumenal, and concerned with “heavenly forms and feelings” as it is, stands resolutely opposed to the kind of dialectical materialism that the Soviets dogmatically enforced.<sup>22</sup> As such, Sabaneev must present Skryabin’s *ideas* as absurd, but his *communication* of them as charismatic and intoxicating. This leads to a portrait of Skryabin that paints him as a man with near-supernatural powers of persuasion and charm, one who could convince even a man of science such as Sabaneev to, for a time, consider the possibility of spiritual realms and transcendence. This general air of skepticism does not seem to do too much damage to the presentation of Skryabin’s ideas and statements themselves – Soviet censorship had not yet reached such critical mass of dogmatism – but I am able to make that claim only by cross-referencing Sabaneev’s work with the uncensored writings in the notebooks and Schloezer’s *Artist and Mystic*.

*Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* comes with its own faults of bias, but some minor issues do not prevent it from being the account of Skryabin’s philosophy that most fully resembles the conclusions I draw in this dissertation. Schloezer’s work has a drawback of distance, having been written and published decades after Skryabin’s death, and it also has a nearly opposite problem to Sabaneev’s condescending skepticism. *Artist and Mystic* is written from a perspective that toes the line between adoring biography and hagiography; while it does adopt some critical

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<sup>21</sup> Sabaneev (2000), *Reminiscences*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Skryabin, *The Poem of Ecstasy*, trans. Faubion Bowers.

perspectives and framings, its stance is overwhelmingly an attempt to proselytize on behalf of the deceased composer. In trying to make Skryabin's mysticism palatable to a general audience, Schloezer pulls some of the punches, but at the same time he makes several brilliant insights that structure a cohesive and reasonable view of the topic.

Finally, returning to Skryabin's notebooks, we encounter the twin problems of audience and drafting. Nobody reading the notebooks belongs to their intended audience, that audience being Skryabin himself and Skryabin alone. Throughout the notebooks, Skryabin casually treats intensely debatable statements, such as "the world is the result of my activity, of my creation, of *my* (free) [sic] *volition*," as if they are plainly true, when a text directed at another audience would almost certainly make efforts to establish and explain such phrases (as Skryabin does in his conversations with Sabaneev).<sup>23</sup> The issue of drafting is even more pressing, because, with the sole exception of the final text of "The Poem of Ecstasy," all of the writings within the published 'text' are works-in-progress. These notebooks are not Skryabin simply recording his mystic ideas in a coherent and cohesive text – in these notebooks, one can see Skryabin working out *what he believes* in real time as arguments, conjectures, and even entire cosmogonies are introduced, developed, and discarded. The fragmentary and evolving nature of these writings necessitates that the historian acknowledge that much of the expressed belief was temporary at best, and only hypothetically entertained at least.

Given the issues with all three of the core texts that communicate Skryabin's mysticism, one can begin to wonder if there even *is* a system at play here. Yet, a handful of core refrains continue to reappear, sometimes in a different key, sometimes inverted, but always recognizable. Like the themes of a sonata, these core refrains structure the 'work' in its unfolding across time,

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<sup>23</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 62.

providing a background structure that organizes what can, at times, seem to be unrestrained chaos. I will name these refrains in due time, but before I do, some philosophical groundwork must be established. This chapter argues for a zoomed-out view of Skryabin's mysticism, less preoccupied with semiotic specifics or the particularities of the Theosophic cosmogony, and more concerned with the structuring principles that guided this composer. At the core of this new perspective is a philosophical distinction between *belief* and *intuition*. When discussing Skryabin's mysticism, many in the secondary literature refer variously to Skryabin's mystic 'beliefs,' mystic 'intentions,' mystic 'experiences,' and other similar terms in relatively interchangeable ways. There has been a long-term debate in philosophy about the boundary between intuition and belief, and if they are interchangeable or truly separate classes of experience. In making this distinction, I draw on the philosophy of Ole Koksvik to claim that intuition is a fully separate class of experience from belief, and to demonstrate that the core refrains of Skryabin's mysticism better fit Koksvik's definition of intuition than they do his definition of belief. Ultimately, I argue for a view of Skryabin's philosophy that prioritizes *intuition over belief*.

In the debate over the distinction (or lack thereof) between intuition and belief, philosophers such as David Lewis and Alvin Plantinga have argued that intuition is simply belief, while Timothy Williamson and Ernest Sosa have put forward the idea that intuition is only a disposition to believe. In this dissertation, I adopt the stance of Ole Koksvik, who argues against such views, and instead puts forward the claim that intuition is its own "psychological kind" separate from but related to belief, and not simply an inclination to believe.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Koksvik, "Intuition," 15.

Koksvik characterizes intuition as an unignorable invader that pushes the mind to accept particular ideas or argumentative positions without question. Intuition “must not represent the content *neutrally*, as a possibility for her or his consideration. It must ‘push’ the subject of the experience to accept its content.”<sup>25</sup> For example, when reading the sentence “murdering innocent children is wrong,” one hopefully has the intuition that this sentence is true. There is no chain of reasoning or conscious thought that comes to this conclusion, it just ‘seems’ true. Of course, one could list innumerable reasons why the sentence is true, but these are unnecessary; one’s intuition pushes one to believe the sentence. This kind of ‘seeming’ is what I mean by intuition; an intuition is an experience that something outside of one’s own rational thought process pushes one to believe, a seeming that seems self-evident and impossible to ignore.

In this dissertation, I argue that making clear distinctions between Skryabin’s mystic intuitions and his stated mystic beliefs is crucial to understanding the ways that his mysticism influenced his music and thought. The reason that this distinction is so crucial is because of the sharp difference between belief and intuition. Furthermore, my metatextual analysis of Skryabin’s writings and recorded conversations with Schloezer and Sabaneev suggests that he himself was somewhat confused about this distinction, and in fact often attempted to explain what I read as intuitive experiences in the incompatible language of rational belief. I contend that this incongruity between the experiences that Skryabin was trying to communicate and the means with which he attempted to communicate them is a fundamental confounding factor in the difficulties that the secondary literature has encountered when trying to understand Skryabin’s mysticism. Furthermore, I put forward Skryabin’s *music* as the missing link in explaining these fantastical phenomenal experiences.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 175.

## The Notebooks

Skryabin's surviving notebooks were published posthumously by Tatiana Skryabina, in the journal *Russkie Propilei* (*Русские Пропилеи*) in 1919 to a reception of understandable confusion. Skryabin had never intended these diaries to be seen by anyone else, and in fact, according to Boris de Schloezer, while Skryabin "gladly shared his thoughts, even read to friends fragments which had already been written down...[he] hid his notebooks so that no one would accidentally peep into them."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, due to the circular, repetitive nature of the notebooks, complete with occasional marks in the margins calling some passages "mistakes," they present his thoughts in a manner that is necessarily confused and inconsistent as he develops his ideas over time. Confounding this confusion is "Skryabin's characteristic habit of writing in several notebooks at the same time, sometimes beginning in the middle and completely disregarding the order of the pages."<sup>27</sup> When reading these notebooks, it becomes quite clear that different passages that may be directly adjacent to one another comprise fundamentally different types of work. I have identified five primary categories of writing in Skryabin's notebooks, each marked by specific topical material and their own unique writer's voice, as follows in order of most to least common:

1. Chains of logical deduction in which Skryabin explores his beliefs. These passages typically begin with a new perspective on consciousness or creation, and then spin out with it until either abruptly ending midsentence or reaching a conclusion.
2. Expressions of god-like knowledge and ability delivered in the first person.
3. Wide-ranging declarations about the human condition, delivered in a preacher's tone reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.
4. Draft material for the text of *The Poem of Ecstasy*, frequently in prose, occasionally in poetry, and in outline once.
5. Personal emotional outbursts, typically negative.

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<sup>26</sup> Schloezer, "A Note," 34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

These conflicting styles of writing make discerning Skryabin's true beliefs difficult, and have understandably led to some misunderstandings. The passages that express god-like knowledge and ability are particularly problematic due to their dizzying grandiosity. Many of these passages contain variations on the phrase "I am God," a statement that as recently as 2012 and 2016 led certain psychologists to speculate on the possibility that Skryabin was psychotic.<sup>28</sup> However, I argue that the dramatically different tones of Skryabin's writing throughout the diaries reflect a stark difference between writings that more clearly represent his own beliefs, or his attempts to decide what his beliefs are, and more grandiose and performative passages. I label these passages 'performative' because I do not believe them to be entirely sincere; I view them as fantastical and imaginative moments of play-acting, the trying-on of characters and perspectives that Skryabin wished to embody. These performative passages primarily feature Skryabin trying on a *character* that I call the 'world soul,' a kind of meta-consciousness that contains all of humankind, while one brief but telling passage is an obvious imitation of Zarathustra, or, at the very least, the archetype of the half-mad yet infinitely wise prophet. I argue that one cannot take everything Skryabin says in these passages at face value, and must instead look for the common refrains that he toys with in his "godlike play."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, both the quasi-scientific and performative passages echo the same themes – that struggle is the ultimate joy in life, that there is unity in multiplicity, with an overwhelming focus on *creation*; thereby reinforcing each other by moving towards the same arguments using differing means. To draw yet another comparison

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<sup>28</sup> See Starcevic, "The Life and Music of Alexander Scriabin: Megalomania Revisited" and Witztum and Lerner, "Alexander Nikolaevich Scriabin (1872-1915): Enlightenment or Illness?"

<sup>29</sup> Skryabin, *The Poem of Ecstasy*, trans. Bowers, Fabuion.

to Nietzsche; the performative passages are *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, the quasi-scientific bits are an attempt at *Beyond Good and Evil*.

Skryabin's tamer writings mostly follow a similar structure: they begin with an observation or claim that many would find objectionable, such as "the world is the result of my activity, of my creation, of *my* (free) [sic] *volition*," and Skryabin then proceeds to justify this statement through deductive reasoning.<sup>30</sup> There is a somewhat jarring disconnect between the starting points of these musings, which are nearly always fantastical and based in intuition, and the matter-of-fact tone and air of reasonableness that Skryabin adopts immediately following them. I will quote the passage following the above quotation at length in order to convey the tone:

Why, then, is this world, created by me, not as I would like to have it? Why do I, as an individual, find myself in a situation so unpleasant to me? Why am I discontented and why do I suffer, why do I so agonizingly desire to leave this situation and find myself in some other one? And why at the same time do I so love life and am I so attached to it that the mere thought of death horrifies me? These propositions seem from the first clearly to contradict my previous conclusion.

In order to explain that there is no such contradiction I will have recourse to several methods in succession. In the first place I will imagine that everything which makes me suffer is removed. The world is as I desire to see it, I myself as an individual am in the most advantageous situation. *Nothing remains* for me to wish for. And in this situation I will remain *eternally*. Is it possible to imagine anything more horrible than this torpor of contentment? And is not the most horrible of sufferings, are not all the torments of the Inquisition better, less agonizing, than this eternal sensation of contentment? Of course they are. I doubt that anyone would ponder over the choice, apart from the exhausted and the weakest, for whom life has almost no value. And thus the (apparent) disadvantageousness of my situation in the world by no means contradicts the fact that I am the author of it, because, even if I consider it an evil, between two (evils) I have chosen the lesser. Furthermore. [sic] If the world is my own unified and absolutely free activity, then what is a truth which I do not sense within myself and because of which I have suffered so much and which for so long I have sought and wished? The whole history of mankind consists in the search for it. If I do not sense it within myself, and if, on the other hand, I can affirm only that which I myself create, *then it does not exist!* There is no truth! That in whose service so many geniuses spent their lives, because of

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<sup>30</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 62.

which so much blood was spilt, so many lives squandered? What, then, is our whole life? It is only that which I experience, only that which I wish for and seek to obtain, it is play, my free play. It is for me the absolute value. However, why do I not feel this freedom? Why, if the world is the play of my creative imagination, can I not arbitrarily change the conditions in which I am situated, why do I suffer the compulsion of time and space? To this question and a host of similar ones an answer may be found only by studying the nature of free creation. If the world is my creation, then the question of the *cognition* of the world comes down to the question of the cognition of the nature of free creation. How do I create – of before that – what does it mean to say that I am creating? In what does the process of my creation consist?

*At the present moment* I am sitting at the table and writing. I am thinking about the nature of free creation. From time to time I break off from this work and look at the lake, which is beautiful; I admire the colour of the water, the play of tones. I look at the people passing, for some reason paying more attention to some than to others. Then once again I return to my writing and to thoughts about free creation. I am thirsty and ask for lemonade. I look at the clock and notice that it will soon be time for breakfast, of which I am also reminded by the feeling of hunger. I must soon go back home from Belotte, where I am.

I am conscious of all this, *distinguish* all this. But at every given moment I am conscious of some single thing. When I think about the nature of free creation, I stop admiring the charm of the lake, and vice versa; when I look at the passers-by, I am distracted from work; when I am completely immersed in it, then I don't notice at all who is there. Sometimes it seems to me that I am conscious of several things at once. Thus, at the present time I often lift my eyes to the lake, and, although somewhat inattentively, I look at it, and at the same time I think and write. But the work suffers from this division of attention. So I have completely immersed myself in thought about creation, not distracted by anything, and have spent some time in this way; this has tired me and evoked a painful sensation. I should like to change the conditions. To walk a little, to ride in a boat. I should like to stop thinking about creation. But it is difficult for me to do so, despite fatigue. Something is thinking apart from my will. I try to overcome myself and stop working. I walk away. I am so tired that my thoughts become confused, the letters jump about, I *distinguish* objects *unclearly*. When I have rested, I will return afresh to work and draw conclusions from self-observation.

First of all, in the whole mass of sensations and thoughts I have experienced I notice something general which connects them, namely, the very fact that it is *I* who experience them. It is *I* who am conscious of all this. 2ndly, in order to be conscious of all this I *act*, I exert myself, I make an effort, I expend a larger or smaller quantity of *attention*. 3rdly. If I were to cease *being conscious* of all this, i.e., if my activity were to cease, then with its ceasing *everything* would vanish for me. And thus it emerges that seemingly I am the *author* of everything that is experienced, I am the creator of the world.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 62-63.

Of particular note in this passage is the way that Skryabin projects a quasi-scientific tone in order to reject a contradiction between his belief, that the world is his creation, and the reality that the world is not exactly as he wishes it. He attempts to present a building up of ideas from first principles, with no assumptions, as when he asks the reader to imagine a world in which there is nothing left to desire. This hypothetical extreme then becomes evidence for his initial claim by presenting a supposed alternative that would (in his thinking) be impossible, or at the very least, unbearable. He then claims to have chosen the lesser evil, thereby resolving the contradiction. Naturally, most people would not be convinced by this explanation. Skryabin's claim that the necessity of struggle explains why the world is not exactly as he wishes it is only logical if one is *operating on the assumption* that his initial observation is the default which must be disproven, rather than a daring idea that must be proven. Later in the quoted passage, Skryabin again attempts to adopt a scientific tone by isolating his concept of "creation," and then uses his own personal observations as material from which to make further deductions. Ultimately, he adopts a list of principles that are presented as undeniable truths, and which lead to his final conclusion, that he is the "creator of the world."

This passage, which is right at the beginning of the earliest diary (Summer 1904), reveals the blueprint from which most of the other similar writings spring. Skryabin attempts to use (his own image of) scientific rationalism in order to justify feelings and ideas – *intuitions* – that he very likely did not use logic to reach. His initial observations are a mix of intuitive sentiments and things that he *wishes* were true, and he adopts this veneer of rationalism in order to justify them. Boris de Schloezer and Leonid Sabaneev both relay their observations that Skryabin's fundamental beliefs about the world took the form of a priori assumptions, but that in dialogue

with others he resorted to all kinds of rational exoskeleton to justify these assumptions.<sup>32</sup> These passages of the diaries then represent a kind of double-image of Skryabin's thoughts: on the one hand, they communicate his underlying beliefs clearly and honestly, while at the same time they act as a performative series of deductions that serve to rationalize these beliefs so that he could convince others (and possibly even himself) of their veracity. While these passages should absolutely not be taken entirely at face value, they do offer the least obfuscation of Skryabin's ideas out of all of the surviving sources.

Far more performative are the grandiose Zarathustran passages, which communicate similar ideas to the tame passages but in the tone of an all-knowing prophet. Skryabin's love of Nietzsche is well-documented, as Sabaneev even claimed that Skryabin viewed himself as having attained "almost the status of true philosopher, who could figure into the history of knowledge in the same category as Kant and Schopenhauer, or at least Nietzsche."<sup>33</sup> Skryabin owned copies of both *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and frequently told others that he sought to become the musical Nietzsche.

Skryabin's love of Nietzsche's philosophy is quite logical, as the two thinkers share much in their beliefs. *The Birth of Tragedy* focuses so intently on the power of music to transform the human soul that parts of it seem as if they could have been written by Skryabin himself, especially the famed quote about Wagner: "can [one] imagine a person capable of perceiving the third act of *Tristan und Isolde* purely as an immense symphonic movement, getting no help from words and images, without suffocating from a convulsive spreading of all the wings of the

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<sup>32</sup> See the epigraph to Chapter 1 of this dissertation from Sabaneev (2000), 58, and Schloezer, *Scriabin*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 6.

soul?”<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche’s focus on the balance of Dionysian music with Apollonian imagery creating the perfect *Gesamtkunstwerk* also aligns closely with Skryabin’s conception of the *Mysterium*, as well as the program for *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (see Chapter 4).

Skryabin’s thought also seems to take much influence from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, especially the way that both authors focus on struggle, upward striving, and creation as the ultimate sources of pleasure. Nietzsche’s “Will to Power” shares a marked similarity to the passage quoted at length above, as he proclaims:

To be sure, you call it will to procreation, impulse towards a goal, towards the higher, remoter, more manifold: but all that is one and the same secret.

Rather would I succumb than disown this one thing; and truly, where there is succumbing and leaf-falling, behold, there does Life sacrifice itself – for power!

That I have to be struggle, and becoming, and purpose, and cross-purpose – ah, he who divines my will, divines well also on what crooked paths it has to tread!

Whatever I create, and however much I love it, - soon must I be adverse to it, and to my love: so wills my will.

...

But a stronger power grows out of your values, and a new surpassing: by it breaks egg and egg-shell.

And he who has to be a creator in good and evil – truly, he has first to be a destroyer, and break values in pieces.

Thus does the greatest evil pertain to the greatest good: that, however, is the creating good.<sup>35</sup>

Both authors focus on the struggle between pleasure and torment, the mystic power of creation, and the joy that comes with overcoming. This resonance in their thinking echoes down into the

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<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 73.

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 94.

deepest layers of their ideologies, down to the prevailing attitudes that direct their philosophical systems.

Beyond the core characteristics of their worldviews, the very narrative of Zarathustra provides an idealized model of Skryabin's own ambitions. Zarathustra emerges from his solitude to share his wisdom in hopes of creating the *Übermensch*, struggles against disbelievers, and though he does not create the *Übermensch*, he does ultimately create "higher men."<sup>36</sup> Given his taste for struggle and overcoming, Skryabin would likely have been enamored with such a narrative and seen in it an allegory for his own apocalyptic ambitions.

There is also an interesting resonance in how the two 'prophets' became wise in 'exile.' Zarathustra gleans his wisdom from spending 10 years as a hermit, accompanied only by an eagle and a snake. Skryabin began the intensive development of his mysticism during his 6-year social 'exile' from Russia, sampling the mystic circles of Paris and Brussels before returning to Russia to proselytize on behalf of his *Mysterium*.

The character of Zarathustra also offers an attractive figure with which Skryabin could identify. Zarathustra's easy confidence in his knowledge, the way he is "weary with wisdom" and "need[s] hands outstretched to take it," presents an authority that contrasts with Skryabin's seeming insecurity and uncertainty.<sup>37</sup> Although Skryabin often speaks with confidence in Sabaneev's *Reminiscences*, Sabaneev notes that this confidence seems to evaporate when in company with people who doubted his mysticism. One such person was Sergei Koussevitsky, the nouveau riche bassist-turned-conductor who was a generous patron of Skryabin, but seemed far

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 254.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 11. Sabaneev's reminiscences often show Skryabin speaking with confidence, but I interpret much of this confidence as covering up an underlying insecurity.

more interested in the multi-media and spectacular aspects of his work than the mysticism. When the three were together in Koussevitsky's house, Sabaneev began questioning Skryabin about his mysticism, only to be met with the statement "stop by to visit me sometime, Leonid Leonidovich, I will tell you all in detail."<sup>38</sup> Skryabin's reasonable reticence with explicating his mysticism to disbelievers stands in stark contrast to Zarathustra's unabashed preaching, and creates room for the possibility of a hopeful identification with the character.

The most dramatic of these Zarathustran passages is entitled "Love and Struggle!," located in the notebook that Schloezer dates to 1904-1905. Drawing on an aphoristic style reminiscent of Nietzsche's work, most of the paragraphs begin with either a command or an if-statement following the form "if you are \_\_\_, and this oppresses you," followed by a command.<sup>39</sup> The opening paragraph reads as if it could have been plucked directly from Nietzsche's cantankerous prophet:

Love life with all your being, and you will always be happy. Do not be afraid to be what you want to be, do not fear your desires. Do not fear life, do not fear sufferings, for there is nothing higher than victory over despair. You must always be radiant.<sup>40</sup>

In fact, this paragraph's foci on desire, loving life, and the radiance of the sun resonate powerfully with Nietzsche's concept of "Immaculate Perception," outlined in Part 2, Section 15:

And now is your spirit ashamed... "That would be the highest thing for me" – so says your lying spirit to itself – "to gaze upon life without desire, and not like the dog, with hanging-out tongue..."

And this do I call immaculate perception of all things: to want nothing else from them, but to be allowed to lie before them as a mirror with a hundred facets...

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<sup>38</sup> Skryabin via Sabaneev (2000), 45.

<sup>39</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 87.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

But it shall be your curse, you immaculate ones, you pure discerners, that you shall never bring forth, even though you lie broad and teeming on the horizon!...

For already she comes, the glowing one, - her love to the earth comes! Innocence, and creative desire, is all solar love!

Truly, like the sun do I love life, and all the deep seas.  
And this means to me knowledge: all that is deep shall ascend – to my height!

Thus spoke Zarathustra.<sup>41</sup>

While one cannot definitively say that Skryabin based his own passage on Nietzsche's, the similarities in tone, argument, and even symbolism make for a compelling case of influence.

The if-statements that predominate in the remainder of this passage also draw on the air of a prophetic command, while furthering the ideological emphasis on struggle that both Skryabin and Nietzsche hold. Skryabin's first command is "if you are unlovely, and this oppresses you – struggle, and you will overcome this *illness* [sic]."<sup>42</sup> He also advises that one "*look upon every oppression merely as an obstacle,*" and proclaims the victory of the 'weak' by claiming that "those who were strong and conquered easily became weak, and the weak, tempered in the eternal struggle, became strong."<sup>43</sup> This passage repeatedly emphasizes the benefits of 'struggle,' while also tying it to the ideas of love and desire, engendering a sense that the *very act of desiring* is an act of struggle. This intensive focus on struggle is summarized quite well in a note that Skryabin made in the margins of his copy of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*: "Not will, but striving."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 99-101.

<sup>42</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 87.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 87. Italics in original.

<sup>44</sup> Skryabin quoted in Zelenina, Elvira, "The Personal Library of A. N. Skryabin as a Reflection of the Artistic Aims of the Composer" (Личная Библиотека А. Н. Скрябина как Отражение Творческих Поисков Композитора) in *Research Notes*, Issue 7, Book 1 (Ученые Записки, Выпуск 7, Книга 1), 228. Author's Translation.

This unification of struggle, desire, and love finds expression in Skryabin's *Piano Sonata No. 4*, written in 1903, shortly before the period to which Schloezer assigns this notebook. Along with *Le Poeme de l'Extase*, *Sonata 4* is a rare example of Skryabin writing poetry to accompany an instrumental piece of music. The poem fixates on "A star gleam[ing] softly" that "Endlessly with no other goal than longing / I would desire," and contains a narrative of the subject (likely Skryabin) "tak[ing] wing" to pursue the star. In the midst of "Mad dance, godlike play," and "the maelstrom that carries [him]," Skryabin repeatedly makes reference to his overpowering desire for the star, before ultimately "swallow[ing]" and "engulf[ing]" it, thus achieving his goal of uniting with the object of his desire. The erotic allusions made throughout combine with the focus on traversing the great distance between him and the star to create a rather clean example of the tripartite focus on desire, love, and struggle.

Skryabin's musical evocation of this theme uses a variety of techniques typical for his middle-period. The harmony is overwhelmingly focused on dominant-charged dissonances, especially the French Augmented Sixth and other Whole Tone Scale derivatives. The first movement, more of a sonata-form introduction than a standalone movement, begins by presenting a deliciously yearning theme over a slithering haze of chromatic voice-leading. In an attempt to match Skryabin's own naming conventions for themes in *The Divine Poem* and *Le Poeme de l'Extase*, I will refer to this theme as the 'Theme of Desire.' The theme begins by prominently featuring a lone D# that rings for nearly an entire measure, twinkling in the distance like the star of the poem. The theme progresses through a mix of large, commanding leaps and voluptuous chromatic slides before reaching its conclusion on the D#, now the leading tone of a chord approximating a B Dominant 7 (See m. 8 in Example 2.1). The placement of the melody note as the leading tone of a dominant-adjacent chord charges it with desire, making its

resolution into a core conceit of the piece. The majority of the second movement (the sonata form portion of the piece) continually teases this theme, hijacking the focus away from the ‘primary theme’ established at the start of the movement and producing an effective moment of frustrated desire when the theme *nearly* reaches its apogee at the end of the development, only to be thwarted and replaced with a more standard recapitulation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement theme. The true moment when desire is sated must come in the coda, which presents the 1<sup>st</sup> movement theme *fortississimo, focolosamente, giubiloso*, over powerful chordal accompaniment in both hands. The attainment of the desired object, a moment Skryabin described as a “Sea of Light,” creates a moment of rapture that finally resolves the tensions set up in the first movement. Skryabin has achieved the object of his desire, and has done so with glory.

There is a strange resonance between Skryabin’s treatment of the Theme of Desire and Koksvik’s characterization of intuitions as ‘invaders’ that ‘push’ themselves on the mind. The sonata’s second movement presents all the components of a sonata form itself, while the first movement is seemingly arbitrarily bracketed off in spite of the dominant 9<sup>th</sup> chord and *attacca* marking at its conclusion. The interruption posed by the opening of the second movement leaves the tension of the first unresolved, and try as the new movement might to produce its own self-contained sonata form, the Theme of Desire breaks through and asserts itself at the crucial structural junctures of retransition and coda. Even as the subject occasionally “forgets” the star “in this play / Sheer caprice,” the Theme of Desire presses itself on the subject to structure the entirety of the work from ‘behind the scenes.’ Much like Skryabin’s beliefs shifted yet remained guided by his core intuitions, *Piano Sonata No. 4* remains dedicated to its underlying goal in spite of the chaos of its fluctuations.

Op. 30 (1903)

Andante ♩ = 63

Example 2.1 Piano Sonata No. 4, mm. 1-9.

## Drawing out Skryabin's Intuitions

I now turn to the task of identifying Skryabin's core intuitions, which, in proper mystical fashion, I distill according to the 'rule of three.' In my estimation, these are the core intuitions that guided all of Skryabin's beliefs:

1. There is another plane of spiritual life that is "higher" than our day-to-day experiences
2. Humanity once was, will be, and should be united in a universal consciousness
3. Skryabin himself will lead humanity in a coming spiritual transformation

The first would have been quite uncontroversial in Skryabin's own time, given that the vast majority of Europe followed some form of Christianity. The primary distinction in Skryabin's case is that his spiritual beliefs were of the occult variety, rather than the Christian, but on an intuitional level, such specificities of content are relatively trivial. Perhaps the most important distinction between Skryabin and many of his fellow Russians was that he categorically rejected *one* belief system – Christianity – but not the *concept* of higher spiritual planes.

The second of these intuitions is where Skryabin begins to distinguish himself from many of his peers. Skryabin's notebooks abound with statements regarding "*the multiplicity of individual consciousnesses*," portraying the human population as a mass of individualized spheres of experience and consciousness.<sup>45</sup> However, he theorizes that each of these individual consciousnesses is only one facet of a larger meta-consciousness that encapsulates all of humankind. One particular passage stands out for the dimensional metaphors used, as well as the erasure of the boundaries between individuals:

It is clear that it is not a question of a multiplicity of consciousnesses but of one and *the same* consciousness, i.e., entirely of a consciousness which experiences a multiplicity of states vertically (in time) and horizontally (in space). We would not be at all surprised by such a state of affairs, in which one and the same consciousness experiences *first* one thing and *then* another. It is far more mysterious for us that one and the same consciousness experiences John *here* and Peter *a little further on*....By 'individuality,' i.e., by the experience of anything, I create not an imagined but a real multiplicity of centres, which is the play of one and the same creative source, identically experiencing all individualities.<sup>46</sup>

In the cosmogony of the soul that Skryabin puts forward here and elsewhere, each human being is a shard broken off from one universal 'world soul' that is experiencing itself in a million different ways at a million different times and from a million angles.

The multidimensional perspective that Skryabin attributes to the universal soul has a startling resonance with contemporaneous discussions of the 'fourth dimension,' especially in relation to cubist art. Linda Dalrymple Henderson's book *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* tells a convincing narrative regarding the way that the idea of a 'fourth dimension' came to grip much of Europe, but especially Paris. Beginning with mathematicians' highly specialized speculations about the appearance that *n*-dimensional

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<sup>45</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 95.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

geometry would take, Edwin Abbot's novella *Flatland* (1884) became the popular source for understandings of a hypothetical 'fourth dimension.'<sup>47</sup> Taking as its basis the idea that 3-dimensional objects cast 2-dimensional shadows, the novella ponders what kind of object would cast a 3-dimensional shadow. This concept of representing a higher reality, made quite easily conceivable through the metaphor of a 2-dimensional "being" that is raised to the status of 3 dimensions, gripped the European public throughout this period.<sup>48</sup>

Although the connection with Cubist art became deeply embedded in the discourse surrounding the new style, it was actually a post-facto justification created after the formation of Cubism. As Henderson claims, "the sources of Cubism are to be found within art itself, primarily in African sculpture and the paintings of Cezanne," and that "when Cubism began to attract the attention of other artists around 1910...a rationale was sought by its advocates, the idealist goal of depicting a true reality, more in the mind than in nature, was officially bestowed upon Cubism."<sup>49</sup> The similarities between the fractured realms of Cubist paintings and visual attempts at representing  $n$ -dimensional geometry are plain to the eye, (Figures 2.2 and 2.3), and this ex-post-facto explanation lent these paintings the cultural capital of representing a higher, noumenal dimension.<sup>50</sup> The primary means of conceptualizing the link between fourth-dimensional geometry and Cubist art was summarized by Guillaume Apollinaire as "represent[ing] the immensity of space eternalizing itself in all directions at any given moment," essentially viewing

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<sup>47</sup> Henderson, Linda, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, 105, 118.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 159-162.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

the same object or vista from an infinite number of angles and times.<sup>51</sup> In this way of thinking, a Cubist painting was a two-dimensional cross-section of an infinitely larger, and infinitely more real, object.

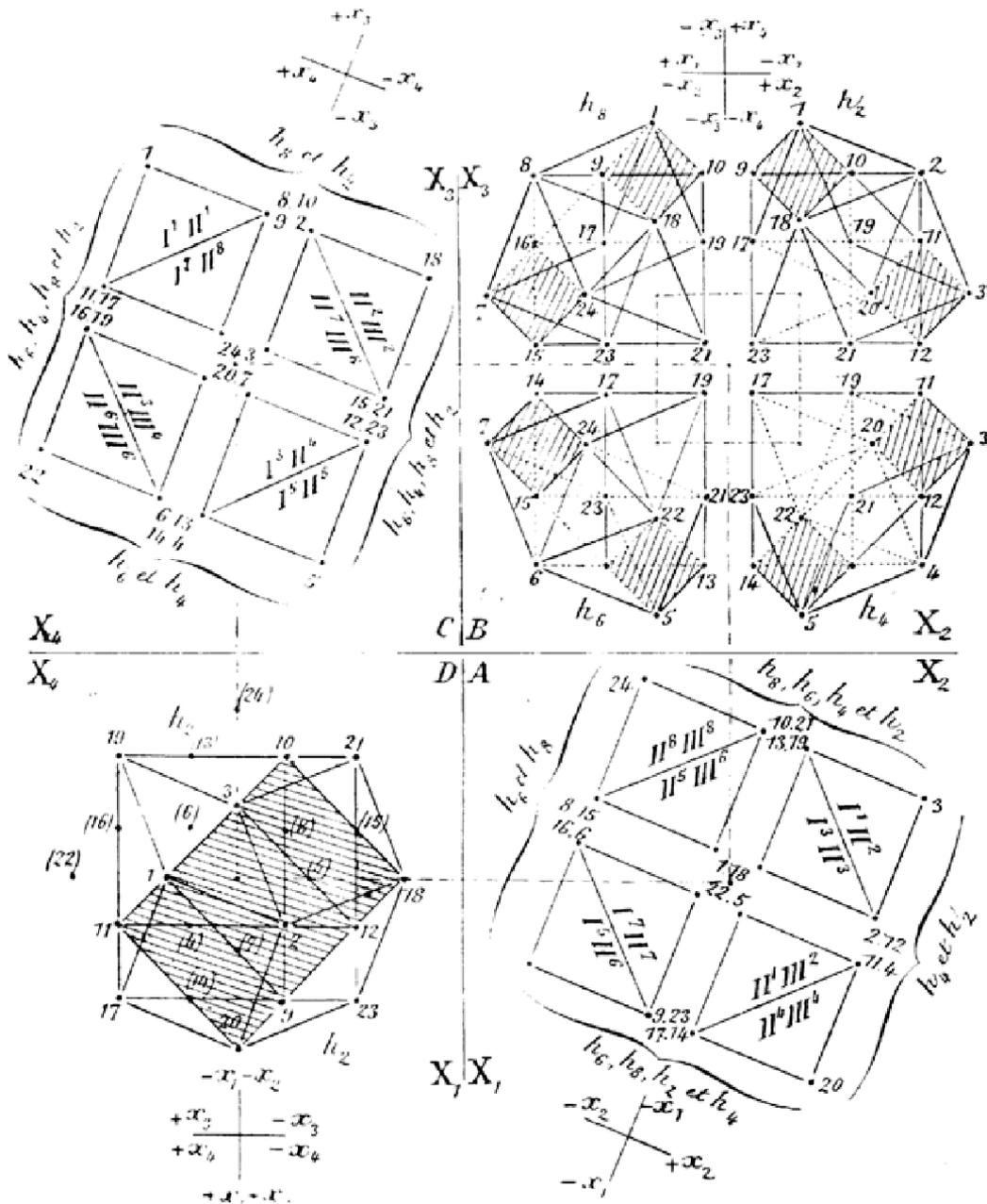
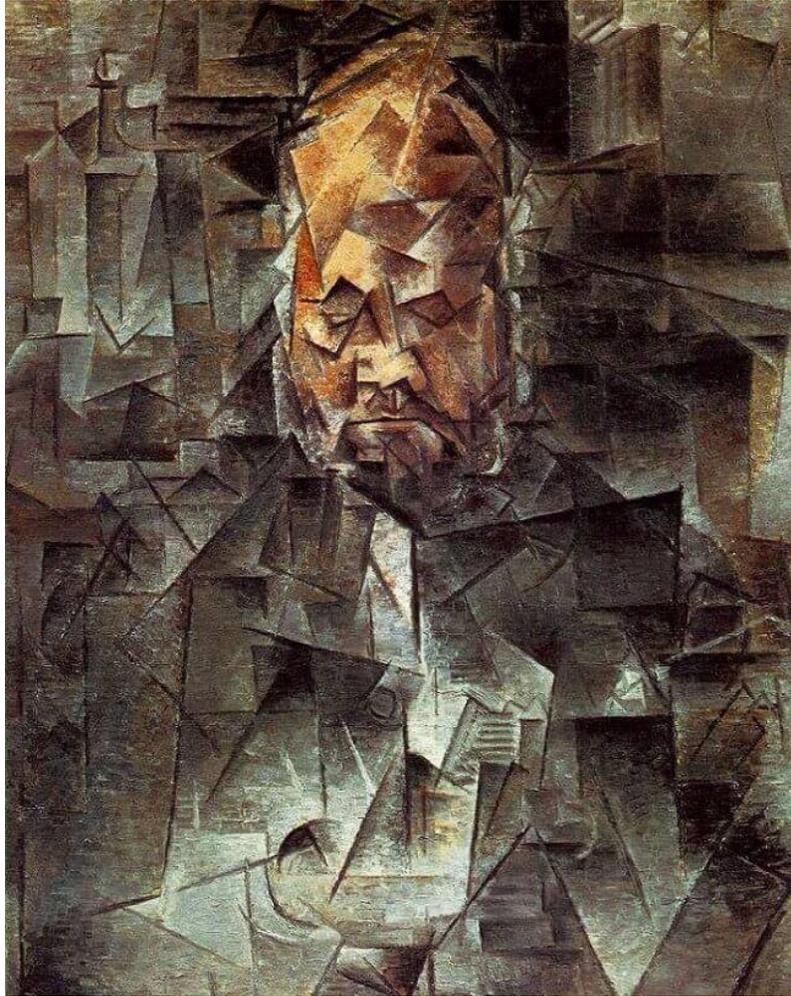


Figure 2.1 "Plane Projections of the Sixteen Fundamental Octahedrons of an ikosatetrahedroid" by Esprit Jouffret

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 179.



*Figure 2.2 – Pablo Picasso, 'Portrait of Ambroise Vollard,' 1910*

Skryabin was absolutely not pushed towards this speculation by the discourse surrounding Cubism, as he wrote the passages quoted above in 1904-1905, long before the 1910 date that Henderson provides for the linkage between fourth-dimensional theorizing and Cubism. However, the resonance between Skryabin's fractured shards of a greater soul and the infinite perspectives of a Cubist painting are difficult to ignore. Both speak to larger trends in the culture

of Europe's Avant-Garde at the time - a focus on meta-reality and a yearning to reach a state of apprehending such reality.

The linkage between art, higher reality, and the heroic artist who elevates humankind finds perhaps no clearer expression than Vasily Kandinsky's "spiritual triangle," which forms a primary focus in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911). Kandinsky writes:

The life of the spirit may be fairly represented in diagram as a large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost.

The lower the segment the greater it is in breadth, depth, and area.

The whole triangle is moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upwards. Where the apex was today the second segment is tomorrow; what today can be understood only by the apex and to the rest of the triangle is an incomprehensible gibberish, forms tomorrow the true thought and feeling of the second segment.

At the apex of the top segment stands often one man, and only one. His joyful vision cloaks a vast sorrow. Even those who are nearest to him in sympathy do not understand him. Angrily they abuse him as charlatan or madman. So in his lifetime stood Beethoven, solitary and insulted.<sup>52</sup>

This passage assumes that there is greater knowledge and spiritual enlightenment to be had that we do not have now, that some individuals are more enlightened than others, and that the best of these individuals can elevate the rest. Art becomes more than mere entertainment or edification, it is the nourishment of the soul that will bring humanity to previously unimaginable heights. Ultimately, when Kandinsky names the artists who he feels reside at the peak of the spiritual triangle, he names two - Arnold Schoenberg and Alexander Skryabin.<sup>53</sup>

Skryabin himself would likely largely agree with Kandinsky's conclusion that he is raising the spiritual consciousness of humankind simply by creating his art, which leads us to the

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<sup>52</sup> Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Trans. Michael T. H. Sadler, 13.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 21-22.

third intuition. One can easily point to the ways that Skryabin spoke of his *Mysterium* to demonstrate that he believed it his duty or destiny (or perhaps both) to bring humanity to higher enlightenment. However, there is also a subtler way to see this - the elisions that Skryabin makes in his notebooks. Animating all of this is an assumption that connects the final portion of I2, that a unified consciousness is desirable, with I3, the belief that Skryabin himself is destined to cause such a union.

Firstly, throughout the notebooks, Skryabin takes for granted the fact that reunification of all in the one is inevitable *and* desirable. He never attempts to justify this position, but instead proposes various means to “[strive] towards *absolute being*,” which he also defines as “ecstasy.”<sup>54</sup> Skryabin’s sublimation of the concept of ecstasy with the metaphysical absolute has been explored in depth by Mitchell Morris, who claims that “although his music and his poetry will work hard to make reference to the physical characteristics of erotic experience, and indeed to evoke them in its audiences, the reasons for their doing so will be to turn such energy towards metaphysical purposes.”<sup>55</sup> The elision of the ecstatic with the universal recurs throughout the notebooks, and makes the prospect of arguing against Skryabin’s desire for unification seem impossible. For, if the erotic pleasures of ecstasy and communing with the ‘world soul’ are one and the same process, who could possibly fight this urge?

Secondly, an unstated and unquestioned assumption throughout the notebooks is that Skryabin has discovered, or is in the process of discovering, the mechanism(s) of producing such a unified consciousness. This is evident in the quasi-scientific tone explored above, in which Skryabin treats the entire cosmos as an object for him to study at his desk. However, this

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<sup>54</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 97.

<sup>55</sup> Morris, 248.

intuition takes on a more emotive character in some of the more outlandish passages. There are passages throughout the notebooks in which Skryabin seems to take on the character of the world soul itself, with constant use of “I” as a referent. For a smattering of examples:

I have come to save the world from tyrannical rulers, as also from a tyrannical people. I have brought boundless freedom and justice, have brought full flourishing, the divine joy of creation. The world has always thirsted for freedom but has always feared it, for at the same time it thirsted for truth, as a support. Naive world!...Do not fear, I will console you.<sup>56</sup>

I want. My wanting is undefined, and I distinguish nothing apart from this desire. And I distinguish it only because earlier I did not desire. Earlier! But did I distinguish time when I did not want? For when I began to desire, then it began to seem to me that I had always desired, and that there was no end to my desire in the past.<sup>57</sup>

You will say to me: I too am God, because I too will experience the same thing; no, because *this consciousness of yours I have created* by the force of my free creation (you did not derive what is in your consciousness from within yourself). By saying that you are God, *you are making my confession*. But you will not be God, you will only be *like God*, you will be my reflection. *I have engendered you*.<sup>58</sup>

When Skryabin writes from this perspective, there is a slippage between his own identity and that of the world soul that is difficult to resolve. While the easy answer is to call him a delusional narcissist, I offer what I feel is a more compelling alternative. In a similar manner to the way that Skryabin seems to try on the archetype of Zarathustra, these passages have a performative air to them that is difficult to ignore. This raises the obvious question: for whom is Skryabin performing?

I contend that the intended audience for these performances is Skryabin himself. Per I3, Skryabin felt that he was destined to transform the world, not just of music, poetry, or the arts, but of the condition of the human soul. In a period of discourse dominated by ‘Great Men’

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<sup>56</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 82.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

(Beethoven, Wagner, etc.), the desire to make one's eternal mark on history loomed large for many in the arts. By inhabiting these characters of Zarathustra and the world soul, Skryabin could entertain the *feeling* of being able to accomplish his goals, to entertain his intuitions for a time. The pseudo-science backing it up is little more than set-dressing to provide an Apollonian veneer to the part that Skryabin actually cared about - the Dionysian abandon of allowing himself to dream of transfiguring the world.

## Chapter 3

### Towards a Phenomenology of the Infinite

*“Isn’t the theory of harmony at least in part phenomenology and therefore grammar?”<sup>59</sup>*

A musical performance necessarily exists across time, as a series of musical events, however defined, presented in a more or less fixed order.<sup>60</sup> However, for a listener, the experience of time during this period can vary drastically from one piece of music to another. Of course, if one is bored by a performance, then it can seem to drag on for quite a bit longer than if one is pleased by it, but I do not refer to this type of elongation or shrinking of time. Instead, I wish to begin this chapter by focusing on the way that a piece of music demands one’s attention across time.

When listening to an aria by Handel, there are a handful of conventions that an informed listener can use to delineate time. They know that it will likely follow the ABA’ da capo aria form, that the A section will likely be faster in tempo compared with the slower B section, and that the A’ section will feature the singer heavily ornamenting the notes on the page with runs and trills. If this listener were to stop paying attention for a minute, perhaps in order to say hello to a friend who just joined them in the opera box, then when they resume their listening, any of the aforementioned conventions could help them to determine where they are in the form and resume their enjoyment of the piece. There is also the help of harmony, as even an uninformed listener with western-enculturated ears can detect the tension of a dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord resolving into a tonic, thus creating a new phrase or section. Music that follows such strict conventions

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<sup>59</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Remarks*, 53.

<sup>60</sup> “Less fixed” here encompasses works like John Cage’s *4’33”* and Pauline Oliveros’ *Sonic Meditations*, which can present radically unfixed musical events.

encourages distracted listening, and can allow the listener to mentally break the performance into various chunks that can be understood and enjoyed in isolation with relative ease.<sup>61</sup>

This is not so in Skryabin's music, in spite of his occasionally dogmatic adherence to classical structures like sonata-allegro form. Even for a well-educated listener, defining formal boundaries in the late sonatas and orchestral works can be a significant challenge (and has inspired a spirited scholarly discourse), and phrases that are excised from context appear more as incomplete fragments than standalone segments.<sup>62</sup> Dr. Carissa Kim, my former piano teacher and a great admirer of Skryabin's works, once said of performing Skryabin's *Piano Sonata No. 10* that "it requires such intense focus and memorization, there is nothing to hold on to, you just float."<sup>63</sup> When floating in the sonata's soundscapes, fragmentary motives seem to swirl around the listener, pulling one forwards not through a linear development of theme or harmony, but through a continuum of tension and intensity. Skryabin's music develops across time in a more fundamental way than many other musics; as I will argue in this dissertation, Skryabin's music *is* development across time.

There is a well-developed language for the former, chunkable kind of music. Antecedent phrases lead to consequents, secondary dominants can modulate to the relative major, choruses alternate with verses, and expositions present the work's core material. Relatively less developed is a vocabulary for describing music like Skryabin's, music that may contain expositions or dominants, but which has an experiential character rooted far more in its continuous unfolding in

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<sup>61</sup> Similar principles apply to most commonly encountered musical forms, such as the verse-chorus pop song form.

<sup>62</sup> See Morris, Mitchell "Musical Eroticism" and Smith, Kenneth, "Scriabin's Multi-Dimensional Accelerative Sonata Forms."

<sup>63</sup> Kim, Carissa, Personal Communication, March 2018. This was after her final recital for the achievement of a DMA in Piano Performance from the University of Southern California. She performed Skryabin's *Piano Sonata No. 5* in the recital, and I asked if she thought I was capable of playing *Sonata 10*.

time. For this reason, I advocate an approach to Skryabin's music that is rooted in phenomenology rather than traditional music theory or symbolism.

The late musicologist Thomas Clifton outlines a rich approach to musical phenomenology in his book *Music as Heard: A Study of Applied Phenomenology*, and I will be adopting many of his structures in this dissertation. Clifton adopts philosophical outlooks from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to focus on subjective experiences of the music that nonetheless arise from "the music itself," drawing heavily on metaphors of space, time, and movement to explore the lived experience of various pieces of music. Some may object to the subjective nature of phenomenological research, but Clifton argues that:

Phenomenological description is subjective in the sense that its terms are subject-dependent and subject-related. If it is true that the world has meaning only for an indwelling self, it is also true that the self achieves individuality only by the relations it forms with the world. Thus the distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective' is a prejudice of the common-sense attitude which is neutralized by phenomenological reflection. By going beyond this prejudice, we do not thereby enter a mystical inner world; rather, the removal of this and other prejudices also removes the anonymity of mediate (presupposed) judgments about the world we know.<sup>64</sup>

For Clifton, all things that can be experienced are necessarily subjective because one can only know them by relating to them as a subject. The choice to label pitch class set theory 'objective' but other experiential aspects of the music as 'subjective' is therefore a subjective choice, and can be done away with. Phenomenological music criticism does not seek to offer the one objective answer to what a piece of music 'means' or how it 'works'; this method of analysis rejects the possibility of such answers and instead offers the opportunity of rich and varied analyses based on a diversity of lived experiences.

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<sup>64</sup> Clifton, Thomas. *Music as Heard*, 42.

Phenomenological analysis can very easily become overwhelming because, theoretically, *all* aspects of the experience are open to analysis. For this reason, many phenomenologists choose to bracket certain aspects of the experience and leave them untouched in order to prevent the analysis from ballooning to an unwieldy size. Clifton chooses to bracket instrumentation and the experiences of the performer, which is an understandable choice given the magnitude of his project. However, as I am a pianist studying a *pianist*-composer who primarily wrote *at the piano*, I simply cannot make this same choice. Many of the confusing idiosyncrasies of Skryabin's music become significantly simpler to understand after playing his pieces at the piano, whether they be odd key changes that are exceedingly comfortable in the hands or motives that mimic physical gestures such as caresses. For this reason, I will frequently cross-reference my phenomenological experiences of listening to Skryabin's music with the experiences I have playing it, as I find that both perspectives help to shed light on the arcane mysteries of his music.

In contrast to the vast majority of writing on Skryabin, I will intentionally bracket harmony in much of my analysis, though it will certainly have a place of importance in certain regards. I make this choice not because I do not believe that harmony matters in Skryabin (it is crucial), but because "Skryabin's Harmony" is such well-trodden ground that I feel it is time to pay attention to other aspects of Skryabin's music.<sup>65</sup> Antonio Grande remarks that the "temporal dimension" in Skryabin's music "comes to depend on parameters such as virtuosity in the writing, a richer weight of sound, an increase in the prominence of agogics (with accelerations and meter changes), figurations with dynamic gestures, etc."<sup>66</sup> I concur with his conclusions, and argue that musical aspects like texture, register, rhythm, and the motions that a body makes when

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<sup>65</sup> E.g., Dernova, Varvara. "Skryabin's Harmony" ("Гармония Скрябина").

<sup>66</sup> Grande, Antonio, "Temporal Perspectives in Scriabin's Late Music" in *Demystifying Scriabin*, 160.

performing the music contribute as much or more to the phenomenal experience as harmony, and it is these elements that I seek to bring to the fore.

A crucial element of my phenomenological method will be ‘musical space,’ another concept drawn from Clifton’s work. Spatial metaphors are exceedingly common in musical discourse, extending far beyond the western designation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ pitches. In agreement with Clifton, I conceptualize musical space as a realm of phenomenological experience that one enters when listening to music; an imaginative internal soundscape that fills and empties, draws near and pulls away, widens and narrows, rises and falls. I contend that Skryabin’s music has an idiosyncratic relationship with musical space, it seems to move on multiple planes at once, producing a complex,  $n$ -dimensional space.

The phenomenological method outlined in this chapter stands on these three pillars – musical time, musical space, and the embodied experience of playing Skryabin’s works – and in order to communicate the complex ways that Skryabin’s music moves through musical space, I propose to create a phenomenological vocabulary based in a unique linguistic grammar. Skryabin was a native speaker of Russian, and as any new learner of the Russian language will likely bemoan, Russian contains hundreds of potential ‘verbs of motion’ that each carry their own implications. I say ‘potential’ here because individual Russian verbs of motion derive from an intersection of three qualities – prefix, mode of travel, and verbal aspect – that each present between two and two dozen options, resulting in a myriad of combinatorial possibilities that speakers produce during conversation. Few languages provide as rich of a vocabulary for expressing motion as Russian can, and this ready-made stock of words can prove useful in developing a terminology for describing the embodied motion of music in time. This usefulness

is compounded by the fact that it is taken from Skryabin's own native language, better able to simulate the way that he would describe the musical world of movement that he created.

### **A Phenomenology of Verbs**

Skryabin is frequently identified as a "Symbolist" composer, and while that term has merit, I find that it obfuscates crucial aspects of his artistic project. "Symbols" typically take the form of objects or nouns that metaphorically communicate information beyond the literal. The snake has long been a symbol of duplicity, and many young maidens have stood in for the Virgin Mary. Symbols can add shades of meaning to a narrative that may seem rather plain without them, and this is the approach that many musicologists take to Skryabin's music.

Susanna Garcia's work on "Skryabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype" identifies a set of musical motifs that recur throughout Skryabin's works as symbols with concrete meanings – divine illumination, flight, vertiginous dance – and then plots the set of symbols within a single piece and creates a narrative out of them. These symbols, each a momentary fragment of music, become ossified and abstracted into discrete moments that can be listed and have connections drawn between them, skipping over much of the phenomenological experience of the 'music itself' that lies betwixt each occurrence of a symbol. These musical fragments become a series of nouns with an implied order: first there is the Mystic Chord as symbol of the barrier between material and spiritual realms, then the divine summons, then spiritual light appears, and so on. By abstracting these musical moments into discrete nouns, they lose much of their unique affect, and they especially lose the sense of continuous motion across time that I highlight in this chapter. It is this noun-ification with which I take issue.

Skryabin's works and writings focus far more on actions than on objects, verbs rather than nouns. In the notebook that Schloezer assigns to 1904-5, Skryabin claims that reality hinges

not on fixed objects, which may be represented through nouns, but on actions, phenomena, and consciousness:

Reality is the sphere of our sensations, the sphere of our experiences, of our consciousness. In it lies our direct life, our activity, our creation. This is the only proposition which may be infallibly affirmed...To produce an analysis of reality means to study the nature of my active consciousness, of my free creation.<sup>67</sup>

The motif of “free creation” recurs throughout the notebooks, and seems to refer to a state of constant activity that creates the world around the subject.<sup>68</sup> Skryabin repeatedly fixates on the suffering that comes with languorous states of inactivity, and the joys of “striving” and “creating.” Activity supersedes all other modes of being.

This focus on action and verbs extends to his poetic writings as well, and as I plan to argue in a forthcoming publication, forms a narrative device that complements and possibly even supersedes the semantic meanings of the poetry. To summarize in brief, in the poetic version of “The Poem of Ecstasy,” passages throughout the poetry generally contain varying concentrations of verbs in accordance with how positive their affect is. Passages dominated by nouns tend to be far more negatively charged than the joyous expressions of “free creation” that are dominated by verbs. Compare the following passages:

From mysterious wombs  
The spirit confused  
A Formless host  
Of savage terrors  
Rises stormily  
In menacing waves;  
It threatens  
All to submerge.  
/////

Spirit playing  
Spirit caressing,

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<sup>67</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 88-89.

<sup>68</sup> This subject is the cross between a ‘world soul’ and Skryabin himself discussed in the previous chapter.

Spirit calling hope of joy  
Surrenders to the bliss of love  
Amid the flowers of its creation,  
It lingers with a kiss  
Over a whole world of titillation  
Summons it to ecstasy  
Intoxicating it with beauty  
It is transported, it tiptoes  
Dances and whirls;<sup>69</sup>

This careful apportioning of nouns and verbs is also emphasized by the scansion of the original Russian. Negatively-charged and noun-dominated passages tend to be in short phrases, with stress on the first syllable of each line, creating a sense of being ‘boxed in’ when read aloud. Positively-charged and verb-dominated passages, however, have far more syllables per line, with the stress more freely placed but rarely on the ‘downbeat.’ The resultant sound of the poetry is somewhat paradoxically more relaxed and more active, flowing freely and with seeming ease. To reiterate my argument from the forthcoming publication, Skryabin wrote his poetry like a composer, with harmony and rhythm forming the essential building blocks rather than concrete objects.

Given the importance of verbs to Skryabin’s artistic aims, it seems natural to me that an attempt at developing a phenomenology of his music should be rooted in the verbs of his native language. While this approach will of course potentially alienate readers who do not speak Russian, I will do my best to explain Russian verbal grammar in the clearest and most concise way possible. For the purposes of this project, I will limit myself to strictly using verbs that describe motion, as even with this limitation, there are hundreds of candidates to draw from. As noted above, the Russian system of verbs of motion is extremely complex for learners of the language because every verb of motion exists as an intersection of three different components

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<sup>69</sup> Skryabin, *The Poem of Ecstasy*, trans. Faubion Bowers.

that speakers frequently combine ad-hoc during a conversation. These three components are the ‘verbal aspect,’ ‘mode of travel,’ and ‘prefix,’ each of which I will briefly explore in a subsection below before moving on to combining them.

### **Verbal Aspect and Unidirectionality vs. Multidirectionality**

Verbal aspect is a complex topic that applies to all verbs within the Russian language, though slightly differently with verbs of motion, and has two variants – perfective and imperfective aspect. A perfective verb refers to a specific action that happened or will happen a single time, and can only have past or future tense. If I say “I wrote one page last night,” then “wrote” is in the perfective aspect. An imperfective verb refers to action that happens more than once, or that is, was, or will be ongoing. If I say “I often write at night,” “write” is imperfective, just as it would be if I say “I am currently writing a dissertation.” In the sentence “I was writing my dissertation when the doorbell rang,” “writing” is imperfective because it is an ongoing process in this sentence, and “rang” is perfective because I am referring to a specific event. In general, imperfective verbs refer to processual or habitual events while perfective verbs point to specific instances of an event.

With verbs of motion, the situation is slightly more complex due to an additional distinction between unidirectional and multidirectional verbs. Unidirectional verbs resemble perfective verbs in that they refer to one-time, one-directional motion, but they are considered imperfective due to their ability to be used in the present tense. For example, in the sentence “I am presently walking to the bookstore,” “walking” must be unidirectional because it describes a one-directional movement, but it must be imperfective because it is in the present tense. Multidirectional verbs of motion must always be imperfective, because they describe motion that occurred multiple times, such as “I walked to the store, and then back home.” The complication

that arises is that, when adding prefixes to the verbs of motion (see below), a unidirectional verb becomes perfective, and a multidirectional verb remains imperfective.

### **Mode of Travel**

When producing a verb of motion, directionality combines with mode of travel to produce two phonetically different words that refer to the same kind of motion, but with one being unidirectional and the other multidirectional. Sometimes these pairs are constructed from highly similar phonemes, such as the verbs for “to fly,” “Лететь” (Letyet’, unidirectional) and “Летать” (Letat’, multidirectional), but in some cases are quite different, such as the verbs for “to walk,” “Ходить” (Khadit’, multidirectional) and “Идти” (Idti, unidirectional).

Modes of travel are not limited to specific vehicles or settings, but also ways of moving through the world. For example, “Нести” (Nesti, carrying, unidirectional) refers to motion while carrying an object, whereas “Тянуть” (Tyanut’, pulling, multidirectional) describes pulling on something. The mode of travel in a Russian verb of motion is precisely that – the way that one moves through the world and one’s relations to other objects while doing so. Between the mode of travel and the directionality, there are nearly 30 possible verbs of motion, which are included in Table 3.1 below.

**Table 3.1: Modes of Travel in Russian Verbs of Motion**

| Mode of Travel                        | Multidirectional | Unidirectional   |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Walking                               | Ходить (Khadit’) | Идти (Idti)      |
| Running                               | Бегать (Byegat’) | Бежить (Bezhit’) |
| Moving by Vehicle (Car, Train, Horse) | Ездить (Yezdit’) | Ехать (Yekhat’)  |
| Flying                                | Летать (Letat’)  | Лететь (Letyet’) |

|  |                   |                   |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|
| Swimming/Boating                         | Плавать (Plavat') | Плыть (Plyit')    |
| Pulling                                  | Тянуть (Tyanoot') | Тащить (Tasheet') |
| Carrying                                 | Носить (Nosit')   | Нести (Nesti)     |
| Dragging                                 | Таскать (Taskat') | Тащить (Tasheet') |
| Transporting Object by Vehicle           | Возить (Vozit')   | Везти (Vezti)     |
| Leading                                  | Водить (Vodit')   | Вести (Vesti)     |
| Riding (Recreational, Skis, Skateboards) | Катать (Katat')   | Катить (Kateet')  |
| Wandering                                | Бродить (Brodit') | Брести (Bresti)   |
| Climbing                                 | Лазить (Lazeet')  | Лезть (Lyezt')    |
| Crawling                                 | Ползать (Polzat') | Ползти (Polzti)   |

## Prefixes

The final ingredient in a Russian verb of motion is a prefix, which can be affixed to either a unidirectional or multidirectional verb in order to add context to its meaning. For example, the prefix “По” (Po) adds the connotation of “setting out,” so the verb “пойти” (Poidti, po – setting out, idti – walk, unidirectional and perfective) means that one will, in the future, set out for a particular destination, travelling on foot. “Пере” (Piri) implies “crossing,” so one can use “Перебегать” (Piribyegat', piri – crossing, byegat' – running, multidirectional) to discuss running across a street, bridge, or other place to be crossed. Prefixes offer an efficient way to add direction and intention to a verb of motion, with the meanings they impart ranging from

“around” to “up until” or “through.” I have included the most common Russian verbal prefixes in Table 3.2 below.

**Table 3.2: Common Russian Verbal Prefixes**

| Prefix      | Meaning Imparted         |
|-------------|--------------------------|
| По (Po)     | Setting Out              |
| При (Pri)   | Arriving                 |
| В (V)       | Entering                 |
| Вы (Vy)     | Exiting                  |
| У (U)       | Leaving                  |
| С (S)       | Coming Down              |
| До (Do)     | Right Up To              |
| Об (Ob)     | Around, Encircling       |
| От (Ot)     | Going Away From          |
| Пере (Piri) | Crossing                 |
| Про (Pro)   | Through                  |
| Раз (Raz)   | Separating, Coming Apart |
| За (Za)     | Stopping by              |

In sum, when using a verb of motion, a Russian speaker chooses from approximately 14 modes of travel, 2 types of directionality, and 13 prefixes in free combination. This results in a vocabulary of nearly 400 possible verbs of motion. I believe that this rich vocabulary for

describing movement can prove helpful in outlining a phenomenology of Skryabin's music, as I will demonstrate below throughout the remainder of this chapter.

### **The Body in Motion:**

In this dissertation, I will repeatedly point to the bodily experience of playing Skryabin's piano works as a means of analytical engagement with them. I do this because when writing on music, especially on the phenomenological experience of the listener, it is easy to forget that the tones one hears were produced by a human body in motion. I argue that in the case of Skryabin, this motion is not an arbitrary set of actions required to produce the sonic experience, the "Ding-an-Sich" of the composition, but an integral part of said "Thing-in-Itself."

Skryabin's late music abounds with descriptions of bodily motion. He instructs the pianist to play "*caressando*" (*4 Pieces, Op. 56*) and tells them to imagine they are "*En revant, avec une grande douceur*" (*Two Poems, Op. 71*). A large portion of the expressive markings in Skryabin's late works take on the form of "with" statements, "*avec*," followed by descriptors of motion. When playing these works, the pianist is faced with instructions such as "*avec une subite douceur*" (*Two Poems, Op. 69*), "*avec une etrangete subite*" (*Two Poems, Op. 63*), "*avec une grace capricieuse*" (*Poem-Nocturne, Op. 61*). All of these instructions assume a body in motion, Skryabin is simply guiding the character of its gestures.

Even beyond the verbal indications in the sheet music, Skryabin's music *moves* the body. Skryabin frequently encourages or even demands various kinds of motion on the pianist through the gestural contours of his motives. In *Piano Sonata No. 5*, the mad dash of the 32<sup>nd</sup> note quintuplet figure in the introduction necessitates playing each group of five notes by "ripping" the hand across them in a violent motion, whereas performing the opening of *Piano Sonata No. 9* with proper finger legato (no pedal) requires careful, deliberate, and measured motion that stands

in stark contrast to most of the piece. Many works feature gentle, polyrhythmic undulations that encourage a swaying, rotational motion, such as the *Poeme, Opus 32 No. 1* (below).

When speaking of music as being idiomatic to an instrument, the intended meaning is usually that it is especially comfortable to play or that it takes special sonic advantage of unique aspects of that instrument. Debussy's music is often described as idiomatic to the piano, and the piece *Clair de Lune* is an excellent example of why. The various passages of *Clair* take great advantage of the different ranges of the piano to produce contrast, and Debussy's chord voicings allow him to produce interesting harmonies that are well-suited to each range, with large, booming fifths in the bass and dissonant clusters in the highest range. The piece also *sounds* virtuosic, but is written to split the fast arpeggios between the hands in a way that can present quite a flattering image of an intermediate pianist. Skryabin's piano works are occasionally idiomatic in these ways, but more fundamentally so in the way they force the pianist to move in concert with the forces of tension and expression.

In conceptualizing the movement of the body in Skryabin's works, I turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of "motility as basic intentionality."<sup>70</sup> Merleau-Ponty's action-focused ontology of consciousness resonates quite comfortably with the way Skryabin's own philosophy prioritizes desire, creation, and the attainment of objects. Merleau-Ponty claims that:

Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can.'...Movement is not thought about movement, and bodily space is not space thought of or represented...In the action of the hand which is raised towards an object is contained a reference to the object, not as an object represented, but as that highly specific thing towards which we project ourselves, near which we are, in anticipation, and which we haunt. Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 158-159.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

For Merleau-Ponty, movement orients one towards an object and defines one's relationship with this object.

When discussing a musical performance by an experienced organist, Merleau-Ponty's framing initially seems to describe a musician as a kind of conduit that transforms the noumenal "Thing-in-Itself" of the composition into the phenomenal sound of the instrument. He claims that

Between the musical essence of the piece as it is shown in the score and the notes which actually sound round the organ, so direct a relation is established that the organist's body and his instrument are merely the medium of this relationship. Henceforth the music exists by itself and through it all the rest exists. There is here no place for any 'memory' of the position of the stops, and it is not in objective space that the organist in fact is playing. In reality his movements during rehearsal are consecratory gestures: they draw affective vectors, discover emotional sources, and create a space of expressiveness as the movements of the augur delimit the *templum*.<sup>72</sup>

This perspective certainly has some advantages when analyzing Skryabin's works, especially the quasi-religious significance that Merleau-Ponty bequeaths upon the act of performing music.

However, this framing is also troubling in its lack of focus on the body itself; by reducing the body to a simple conduit for the transmission of the musical "Thing-in-Itself," Merleau-Ponty takes the body back out of the equation. This entire passage raises fundamental questions about the ontology of music: is music a compositional "Thing-in-Itself?"; is it a performance?; is it the score? While these questions are crucial to the phenomenology of music, they fall beyond the purview of this current study, and I plan to address their relationship to the phenomenology of Skryabin's music in a future publication. For the purposes of this project, I will answer these questions as Skryabin himself would likely have – that musical performance is an expressive act intended to influence both the emotions and the 'higher,' mystic faculties.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 168.

For an example of Skryabin’s music using gesture as a tool of expression, one can do little better than the *Poeme-Nocturne, Op. 61*. As a pianist, my experience of this work can best be compared to an erotic séance. Like any well-executed mystic or erotic experience, the piece’s overall trajectory forms an arc of intensity, beginning gently and building to a climactic moment before falling into a languorous calm. Relative to Skryabin’s other works, this particular example is much more subdued in its climax, somewhat more teasing than fulfilling. While the highly chromatic, floating harmonies certainly contribute to this experience, the core of it comes in the way that I must move my body in order to execute the piece. Throughout, a handful of gestures predominate and produce this sensuous experience.

The first of these gestures is a “rocking” motion that pushes me to sway left and right, as each hand alternates arpeggiating away from the center of my body (Example 3.1) The swaying is particularly necessary due to the wide stretches of the arpeggios, which my average-sized hands cannot accomplish without at least some motion, and Skryabin’s own small hands could not have possibly accomplished without an even greater degree of swaying. In the opening bars, this swaying comes in a constant stream of sixteenth notes that pushes and pulls the pianist from side to side with increasing fervor as the ambitus increases, a ritualistic reverie building in anticipation.



Example 3.1 – Skryabin, *Poeme-Nocturne Op. 61*, mm. 6-8

Another recurrent gesture involves an approximately two octave grace note arpeggiation of Skryabin's Mystic Chord, performed with both hands (Example 3.2) The chord is voiced so that all 5 pitches fit comfortably within the range of a sixth, well within even Skryabin's range. To play it, the performer must simply place each finger on a given key and then rotate the wrists left to right in a wave-like motion directed towards the top pitch, lifting fingers from the keys after pressing them. The gesture produced is not dissimilar to a magician flamboyantly lifting a curtain to reveal an object has disappeared, exclaiming "voilà!" in the process. The association with magic is certainly amplified by the similarity that the Mystic Chord holds with the Whole Tone scale, which has consistently been used to create a 'magical' sound in music ranging from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* (1888) to the title theme for *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996). Yet, the gestural component is just as important for creating the impression of magic through the way it acts out a revealing of mystic knowledge. The effect is not only sonic, but embodied and, for the listener especially, visual.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system consists of a treble and bass clef. The right hand part features a wide intervallic leap, marked with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and the word *aigu* (high). The left hand part has a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic. The second system also consists of a treble and bass clef. The right hand part is marked with mezzo-piano (*mp*), *cresc.* (crescendo), and *f* (forte). The left hand part is marked with piano (*p*). The phrase *avec une volupté dormante* (with a voluptuous, dormant) is written above the right hand part. Both systems include a triplet of notes in the right hand.

Example 3.2 – Skryabin, *Poeme-Nocturne*, Op. 61, mm. 16-23.

One final recurrent gesture is a slower, one-handed variation on the magic curtain that takes up an entire measure (Example 3.3). The ambitus is the same as when playing the magic curtain variant, but the two Mystic Chords are played by one hand in a rhythm that begins quickly, slows down in the middle, and concludes with the rolling curtain gesture in only the right hand. The legato sixteenth notes demand a similar rolling technique in the beginning, but the staccato eighth notes imply a more delicate plucking that becomes interrupted by the return to curtain-raising. The result is a sense of capricious movement as the pianist's hand repeatedly *вылетает*, (*Vyletaet*, *Viy* – exiting, outward motion, *Letat'* – flying, multidirectional), a magician's confidence in the spell he has cast over the audience.



Example 3.3 - Skryabin, *Poeme-Nocturne*, Op. 61, m. 24.

All of these gestures are idiomatic to this *Poeme-Nocturne*, but I conclude this section by examining a technique of embodiment that is abundant throughout Skryabin's oeuvre – polyrhythm. Skryabin's piano music is saturated with polyrhythms even as early as the famed “Prelude in D# Minor,” Op. 8, No. 12, and this predilection only grew as his style transformed. Performing a polyrhythm necessarily creates internal tension, the pianist must split their consciousness into two or more parts and feel their hands, arms, and recently-split senses of time push and pull and grind and chafe against one another as they *разходят* (*Razkhodyat*, *Raz* – separating, *khadit'* – walking, multidirectional) or *разбегают* (*Razbyegayoot*, *Raz* – separating, *Byegat'* - running, multidirectional). This tension does not necessarily need to be erotic, but for

Skryabin, it is rarely anything but. In the *Poeme-Nocturne*, the moments of greatest yearning as well as the not-quite-satisfying climax all heavily feature diabolically uncomfortable polyrhythms – 5:6, 5:3, and the slightly easier 4:3 – and the internal tension for the performer is quite significant. Skryabin even marks these passages with clearly erotic performance indications: “*avec une passion naissante*” (m. 77), “*de plus en plus passionne*” (mm. 45, 78), and “*suave, languide*” (m. 91).

### **Musical Space:**

Spatial metaphors for music abound in both vernacular and scholarly discourse, with likely the most commonplace being the description of a melody moving ‘up’ or ‘down.’ While this metaphor may not be a human universal (the languages Farsi and Turkish refer to notes as ‘thin’ or thick’), it is so entrenched in western discourse about music that it seems irreplaceable.<sup>73</sup> Music theorists have a habit of referring to ‘tonal space,’ and Aldwell and Schachter’s textbook *Harmony and Voice Leading* introduces the concept of a ‘tonic’ by stating “the *tonic*, the central tone of the key, forms *the point of departure* from which the other tones move and the *goal* to which they are directed.”<sup>74</sup> In this linguistic realm, a piece of music becomes something of a path to follow, a circuitous one that begins at one point, travels elsewhere, and then circles back to end in the same place it began. We even refer to large-scale modulatory schemes as moving between key ‘areas,’ expounding the reprieve-like qualities of the bVI key area or the instability of a ‘remote’ key like the #IV. Spatial metaphors are intrinsically baked into the way that we in the west talk about music.

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<sup>73</sup> Shayan et al., “The Thickness of Pitch: Crossmodal Metaphors in Farsi, Turkish, and Zapotec.”

<sup>74</sup> Aldwell and Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading*, 5. Italics in original.

Yet, because this vocabulary is rooted in western tonality, much of it begins to fall apart when discussing pre- or post-tonal music. It is foolhardy to speak of key areas in Skryabin the same way one does with Mozart, just as a Gregorian chant occupies space radically differently from Vivaldi. In the case of Skryabin's late works, I contend that notions of space originate far more in texture, tessitura, and dynamics than in tonal processes. These works do contain moments when harmonic processes effect major changes to the musical space (see Chapter 5), yet these are often the exception rather than the rule. However, in order to properly discuss this, I must first establish the boundaries of musical space. Clifton yet again proves helpful in this regard, especially in the ways that he breaks space into dimensions of contour, width, distance, and surface.

However, before exploring this space, we must first determine where it is. Is the musical space the acoustic space of the concert hall? If one is wearing headphones, is it the inside of one's head? Clifton and I agree that musical space exists in the phenomenological realm, 'inside the mind,' so to speak. Before the music begins, the person has a degree of control over their phenomenological realm, choosing where to look, what to touch, and so on. Yet, once the music begins, the horizon of their experience becomes filled with a new sensation that does not simply impose sensorial content, but a new sense of space. Clifton speaks of the listener "manag[ing] to close the distance between his space and musical space...[which] has significance because a person finds himself there, as a place to take up temporary habitation."<sup>75</sup> When fully immersed in a piece of music, a person inhabits musical space with all of their consciousness, ignoring physical space in favor of the musical. Even if one is not immersed in the musical space, one cannot ignore their awareness of the upward and downward motion of the lines, the new tonal

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<sup>75</sup> Clifton, 141.

areas, and other spatial aspects of the music. For example, if I am sitting in a shared office and a colleague is playing quiet music on their laptop speaker across the room, I am unlikely to be immersed in the music's space, but I am aware of it. In this case, the musical space functions like a small pocket dimension that is enveloped in 'real' space. Just as a piece of music *is* its time horizon, it also *is* the space that it creates and imposes on the listener. When I hear a rising theme striving towards a resolution, I cannot simply hear a set of sounds, but am *forced* to understand it as occupying a perceptual spatial plane separate from but overtaking my own. Perhaps this is why many people find on-hold music frustrating: not only must they wait to speak to a representative, but this unchosen (and likely terrible) music is pressing its space into their mind.

When tracking movement in physical space, the 3-dimensionality of the world necessarily means that motions can rarely be understood through only one or even two dimensions. One can draw a 2-dimensional figure on paper, but this is an artificial solution, not to mention the truism that even if the drawing appears flat, it does still have *some* degree of thickness. A similar difficulty of isolating spatial movement applies to music. I have struggled to find examples of musical techniques that *only* change contour, or play with width but maintain the same distance and surface. Take, for example, the famous oboe solo from the recapitulation of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*. After the retransition ends in crashing *fortissimo* chords, the entire orchestra drops away to leave a lone oboe playing a mournful *Adagio* solo. The crashing chords create a sense of massive and densely packed space that is extremely close to the listener, perhaps (if the orchestra is loud enough) even beginning to envelop them. Yet, once the chords die away to reveal the sole oboe, the space narrows to a small, solitary point. At the same time that this narrowing occurs, a distancing seems to take place, the lone oboe echoing from afar in comparison to the forceful chords. It is as if the flat side of a cone was pressed against the

listener's face, and now all but the vertex has melted away. This motion primarily involves both width and distance, but secondarily contour (by nature of pitch changing) and surface (more on this in Chapter 4).

Motion in musical space is a Gestalt experience, isolating motion in particular dimensions necessarily creates artificial distinctions or requires one to ignore salient musical phenomena in much the same way that a drawing of a cube cannot capture the entire object. For this reason, I intend to explore the boundaries of musical space through an analysis that touches on contour, width, distance, and surface in their interrelationships in one piece of music, Skryabin's *Vers la Flamme*, Opus 72. This work is a rich text with much room for various methods of analysis, but in my estimation its most critical aspect is the way that it gradually transforms its musical space.

*Vers la Flamme* begins with long-held, low, and dissonant chords, each with a small anacrusis that provides only the smallest bit of motion (Example 3.4) When played on a grand piano, with damper pedal held down to enable sympathetic vibrations, yet *una corda* pedal softening the already *pianissimo* dynamic, these chords crash and припадают (Pripadayoot, Pri – Arriving, Padat' – falling, multidirectional. In this combination, collapsing, limping) with a dull thud that echoes, implying a deep and cavernous space. This space initially seems to echo at distance, yet as the dynamics of the introduction grow first to *piano* and then to two long-held *sforzandi*, the chords themselves fill out with gradually more pitches, causing the thunderous crashes to draw nearer and nearer. As a listener, I experience these chords as massive footsteps approaching from a deep and echoic cave. As a performer, I feel a need to play each chord with heavy weight, dropping my arms onto the keys in a lumbering manner.

**Allegro moderato.**

Piano.

*pp sombre*  
*con sord.*  
*pociss.*  
*pp*  
*p*  
*mp*  
*p*

Example 3.4 – Scriabin, *Vers la Flamme*, Op. 72 mm. 1-26.

Scriabin teases a third crashing chord, but instead changes the texture dramatically to one of roiling polyrhythm across a slightly wider range (Example 3.5). The surprise of the suddenly quieter dynamic lends this transition a seductive quality to my ear, as if the music has ceased trying to overpower me and has instead decided to draw me in. When playing the work, the cyclical motion of each hand's accompaniment part feels similar to the B section of the *Poeme* Op. 32 (see below), the odd polyrhythm creating a strained circular motion that feels at once habitual and unnatural. I cannot help but sway in gentle circles on the piano bench in an

almost erotic reverie as my hands *разходят* (*Razkhodyat*, Raz – separating, *Khadit'* – walking, multidirectional) and tug at each other. As the passage develops, the tessitura widens to stretch much of the range of the piano, and I as both listener and performer feel myself swallowed in the space of the gentle cacophony.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a piano piece. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The first system is marked with *avec une émotion naissante* and includes dynamic markings *pp* and *p*. The second system is marked with *avec une joie voilée* and includes *pp* and *p*. The third system includes *pp*. The notation features complex textures with overlapping lines and various articulations.

Example 3.5 – Skryabin, *Vers la Flamme*, Op. 72, mm. 38-48.

The next transformation of the space occurs with the introduction of the piece’s famous double-trills, which fill narrow bands of space with extreme amounts of energy (Example 3.6). These double-trills are uniformly dissonant, and often emphasize clusters or seconds – the first such trill alternates G#/A# with B/C# - and are primarily located in the treble staff. Skryabin

himself, and many in the secondary literature, refer to such trills as ‘bright.’ Faubion Bowers describes them as “palpitation...trembling...the vibration in the atmosphere,” and Susanna Garcia went so far as to identify trills such as these as a symbol, the “Motive of Light,” which she claims represents “divine illumination.”<sup>76</sup> Putting aside symbolism for now, the sense of focused and ‘blinding’ light has a spatial element as well as it ‘illuminates’ a narrow portion of the musical space with an intensity that seems to push up against the listener. The musical space that had first been distant and echoic, then diffuse and seductive, narrows and comes to the fore in a flash of brilliant intensity.

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<sup>76</sup> Bowers, Faubion, *The New Scriabin*, 180; Garcia, “Scriabin’s Symbolist Plot Archetype,” 283.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for piano, likely from the piece 'Vers la Flamme' by Alexander Scriabin. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The first system features a treble staff with a trill marked 'm. q.' and a bass staff with wide intervals. The second system shows a treble staff with a trill marked 'm. g.' and a bass staff with wide intervals. The third system shows a treble staff with a trill marked 'm. d.' and a bass staff with wide intervals. The notation is highly complex, with many notes and wide intervals.

Example 3.6 – Scriabin, *Vers la Flamme*, Op. 72, mm. 75-78.

The remainder of *Vers* combines the new bright intensity of the trills with the wide-open spacing of earlier passages to produce a space that is at once wide, close, and full. The trills gradually rise in range through the treble staff into the octave above it, and are joined by *fortissimo* variations on the footfalls from the opening and, eventually, peeling bell-like quartal chords above even the trills. By this point, Scriabin is using nearly the entirety of the piano in a grand cacophony.

Scriabin famously intended for *Vers la Flamme* to be significantly longer, even to be his 11<sup>th</sup> sonata, but cut composition on it short due to financial difficulties and exigencies of

publishing.<sup>77</sup> It is easy to attribute the sudden ending to this change of plans, and I am somewhat convinced by that explanation, yet the ending is nonetheless highly effective in its final manipulation of musical space to solve a compositional “problem.” While speculation on how Skryabin may have originally ‘intended’ for the work to be finished must of course be taken with a hefty dose of salt, as a pianist and composer, I must wonder where Skryabin could have possibly taken the piece from here. *Vers la Flamme* is a progressive development of intensity that never looks back, and even in this shortened version, it is already one of the most difficult pieces in the piano repertoire and pushes the absolute limits of what a single person can do at the piano. One hand is essentially always occupied with a double-trill, and even in world-class recordings like that of Vladimir Horowitz, one can hear moments when he must drop the trill or slow it down in order to accommodate the rest of the cacophony.<sup>78</sup> Skryabin’s compositional problem was quite simple – both hands are completely occupied, as is most of the pitch space of the instrument, so how does one continue the rising intensity? The answer he settled on, at least in the published version, is to deny such a crescendo. In the last five measures of the piece, the trills suddenly drop away to reveal only the quartal chords in the right hand and an E Major arpeggio ascending in individual dotted quarter notes in the left hand. The sudden change to a texture with so little activity and no middle empties out the space, releasing the hyper-charged tension in a moment of abrupt and stark clarity. Rather than an apotheosis, we find a hollow peace. The storm has passed.

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<sup>77</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 255.

<sup>78</sup> Horowitz, Vladimir. *Scriabin: Sonatas, Etudes, Poemes, Feuillet d’album; Vers la Flamme*, 1963.



Example 3.7 – Scriabin, *Vers la Flamme*, Op. 72, mm. 134-137.

### Time as Experienced

Time is a crucial aspect of music, as unlike with the visual arts, one cannot apprehend an entire musical performance in an instant. Phenomenologists use the word “horizon,” or “temporal horizon,” to refer “to the temporal edge of a single field, which itself may enclose a multitude of events interpreted by the experiencer as belonging to this field.”<sup>79</sup> A temporal horizon is a section of time which the experiencer perceives as a discrete period, or *Spanne*, in the terms of Heidegger. When listening to a piece of music, one does not think “I hear a C Major triad” followed by “and now I hear an F Major triad” while thinking of these two events as separate – they are held together within one time horizon by the musical work being experienced. Clifton argues that a musical work “*is* its horizon,” because “I could not experience a melody if it did not also push back the borders of the present to include itself, as a singular event, in a single present.”<sup>80</sup>

For phenomenologists, possibly the most fundamental aspect of music is the way that it develops across time, and Clifton provides a plethora of useful ways to think about the way that

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<sup>79</sup> Clifton, 57.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 58. Clifton’s stance here is similar to my argument that Scriabin’s music *is* development across time, and the difference between the described pieces by Handel and Scriabin is perhaps one of degree rather than one of kind. After all, a Handel aria does necessarily develop across time in ways that benefit from sustained focus. The difference is that while a Handel piece may *benefit* from such focus, it does not always *demand* it the way Scriabin does. As Mitchell Morris is fond of saying, “when listening to Wagner and Scriabin, you must *submit*.”

time moves in music, all of which build, in some way, on the phenomenological concepts of retention, perception, and protention.<sup>81</sup> Perception is the act of taking in the musical events, and consists of the absolute present. Retention is one's immediate memory; if you hear the note C, and then the note D, while perceiving the note D you hold C in retention and it helps you contextualize the D.<sup>82</sup> You might contextualize it as an upwards motion along the C Major scale, or, if in the key of A Minor, the motion from mediant to subdominant, or any number of other relations that these two notes can have. Protention is when you examine the material available in your retention and perception to anticipate what will come next; after the note D, you may expect E to continue the scale, or perhaps Eb if you hear a C Minor tonality, or if the primary theme of the piece consists of a rising whole step followed by a leap of a tritone, you might expect an Ab to come next. The phenomenological perspective of time appreciates that every listener's experience of musical time is one of 'flux,' as events happen that anticipate future events, and the fulfillment or negation of those anticipations produces yet more anticipations as one absorbs gradually more musical material from which to draw.

The edges of a piece of music's time horizon are also not always as clear-cut as one might believe. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony technically begins on the downbeat of the first measure, but as Maynard Solomon and many others have argued, the ethereal open-fifth harmony played in a thin, trembling, tremolo-dominated orchestration gives this passage a sense of somehow preceding 'the beginning.'<sup>83</sup> Clifton agrees, and argues that the piece has two beginnings, with the first beginning "opening" the space which the piece itself will inhabit, and the second

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<sup>81</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 80.

<sup>82</sup> Schutz, "Fragments on the Phenomenology of Music."

<sup>83</sup> Solomon, Maynard, "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: A Search for Order."

beginning penetrating this space to assert itself.<sup>84</sup> Skryabin's pieces frequently develop this idea of two beginnings by using strange harmonies or uncomfortable rhythms to open space for the music to then penetrate or unfold into.

Take, for example, Skryabin's *Poeme in F# Major*, Opus 32. In my personal phenomenal experience, the opening measures are rhythmically confused due to the opening anacrusis sounding like a downbeat. The piece begins in a meter of 9/8, with a dotted quarter note anacrusis preceding measure 1 (Example 3.8).<sup>85</sup> Many pianists, including Vladimir Horowitz and Anya Alexeyev, play the opening B# louder than the D# that comes on the first "downbeat," lending a sense of firmness to the B# that asserts itself as the true "downbeat." The music seems to imply this is the case, especially through the long-held D# that decays while the left hand glides across its twisting, chromatic melody. However, as the opening phrase continues, the meter becomes increasingly unclear by, paradoxically, 'righting' itself. The C# on the downbeat of measure 2 has the sense of having been a true downbeat, especially due to the grace notes leading into it that lend it a fuller texture. This emphasis seems to imply a 12/8 meter beginning with the B#, which would properly align both phenomenal downbeats. Yet, the phrase as a whole comes to an end on the third eighth note of beat 2 of measure 3, an exceedingly odd rhythmic position to end an opening phrase, but one that is just slightly removed from where the phrase would end if it were 3 measures of 9/8 beginning on the anacrusis. Putting aside the irregularity of a 3 bar phrase (far from unheard of at the *fin-de-siècle*), it is the mismatch of notated and phenomenal downbeats that characterizes this passage for me. It is difficult to find one's footing when listening to this – still more difficult to find it when playing the piece – and this complex

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<sup>84</sup> Clifton, 83-88.

<sup>85</sup> Due to the compound meter, I will be referring to each measure in 3 beats that are each 3 eighth notes long.

rhythmic construction leads to the opening sounding like a ‘first’ beginning that opens the space for the ‘second’ or ‘proper’ beginning on the downbeat of measure 4. This second opening is bolstered in perceived importance by beginning with the lowest pitch heard thus far (F#2) as well as the memorable staccato sixteenth note run that presents itself as a main theme. From here until the end of the passage at m. 14, the downbeat undergoes no further confusion, so one can definitively say that the piece has ‘properly’ begun.

Andante cantabile ♩ = 50 Op. 32 Nr. 1

27 *p ben marcato le due voci, ma dolce*

*legato* *rubato*

3 *pp* *pp*

6

9 *pp* *pp* *con affetto cresc.*

Example 3.8 Skryabin, Poeme Op. 32 No. 1, mm. 1-11

Except, the situation is not so simple. The new m. 4 theme continues to the end of m. 5, when an odd transposed repeat occurs. Mm. 6-8 are nearly exact transpositions of mm. 1-3 up by a perfect 4th, but this time the sense of downbeat is quite different. Skryabin has hidden the opening anacrusis in the final beat of m. 5, with the theme's goal of E# taking the same role as the B# from the opening of the piece. This one pitch could become a pivot, both the final note of a phrase *and* the first of the next, yet in this case it loses its sense of a downbeat. All recordings that I have listened to play the G# on the downbeat of m. 6 with the emphasis of the downbeat, far different from the D# in m. 1, and it was not until further reflection that I as a pianist realized that there was the possibility of playing this E#-G# motion the same way I played the opening. However, doing so feels awkward and incorrect, as by this point the meter is too well-established for such undermining to occur. This leads me to a rather different conclusion: there are not two beginnings, only one, but the piece begins mid-thought, *in media res*, so to speak. I have tried playing the piece beginning at m. 1 and m. 4, and find that m. 4 gives a much stronger sense of beginning. This leads me to the view that the piece 'should' begin at the downbeat of m. 4, yet it has started at the (transposed) final beat of measure 5. In addition to the sense of unsteadiness in the beginning, this mid-sentence opening also creates a sound reminiscent of walking into a conversation that is already underway. One needs to spend some time listening and adjusting to the ideas expressed in order to orient oneself, and that sense of thoughtful and disoriented observation is one possible experience of the first part of the piece.

There is another confusing aspect of Skryabin's *Poeme* that can be more easily understood through Clifton's methodology: why does the piece seem to simply trail off without feeling finished, in spite of the unambiguous V – I cadence? Clifton identifies two primary strategies to

concluding a piece of music – “finishing” and “ending.”<sup>86</sup> The crucial distinction comes in the presence or absence of ‘fulfillment,’ another influence from Heidegger. Some music, Beethoven’s Ninth for example, drives towards a conclusion by which the expectations set up by the piece’s tonal plan are fulfilled, therefore giving us a “finished” conclusion. However, in other pieces, such as Skryabin’s *Feuillet d’album*, Op. 58, the music seems to trail off and simply end unfulfilled.

Music of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century frequently plays with the idea of an unfulfilling “ending,” usually through the weakening or abandonment of tonal drive. Conversely, the unfulfilling “ending” has by now become a stock means of ending a piece, especially in atonal music, which creates the possibility of one expecting such an ending and then having their expectation fulfilled. However, this kind of ending is ultimately the exception that proves the rule, because the phenomenal experience of such an ending remains one that is open and inconclusive, regardless of one’s expectations. Experientially, there is a world of difference between the apocalyptic release found at the end of Skryabin’s *Le Poeme de l’Extase* or the peaceful satisfaction at the end of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, in comparison with the open-ended disquiet of Berg’s *Wozzeck* or Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, regardless of whether or not one expects an open ending.

Skryabin’s *Poeme*, on the other hand, frustrates this tendency as there is a conclusive harmonic finale that leads to an unambiguous tonic triad; harmonic analysis will not aid in understanding the effect of this ending, and will in fact thwart attempts at such an understanding. In order to gain such an understanding, I turn to Clifton’s method of “temporal intercut,” which consists of the interruption of one section with another, unrelated section. After the intercut, the

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<sup>86</sup> Clifton, 89.

music can either return to the initial section as if uninterrupted, or it might even be replaced by entirely new material. In understanding the overall phenomenal experience of this *Poeme*, I find temporal intercut to be the most crucial concept. The overall ABA'B' form features two drastically different sections that do not interact with each other at all, and instead exist in some kind of relation other than direct linear narrative. In order to demonstrate this effect, however, I will need to perform a more varied phenomenological analysis of the two sections to show just how drastically different they are.

The A section, beginning with the *in media res* opening, is primarily characterized by its undulating rhythms that move with an erotic tension between the hands. This erotic tension is amplified by Skryabin's insistence on rubato (not that he needed to write that in), but also, from a performer's perspective, by the contortions that the hands must go through. In m. 3, the right hand must hold an E# with the thumb for most of the bar while playing the top melody notes legato. When playing this passage, I find my hand gently tracing an arc that reaches its apex on B (beat 2), before coming to a rest on the following A#. Meanwhile, Skryabin writes for the left hand to hold the first note of each eighth grouping while playing the others, forcing my hand to adopt a stretched posture to reach for the lower pitches. The slow and methodical stretching, along with the downward contour of the line, simulates a lover's yearning caress at the keyboard. Skryabin had a habit of referring to particular pianistic gestures as caresses or kisses, and this measure is a prime example of what he meant. As the A section goes on, the uncomfortable yearning reaches an apogee in the polyrhythmic push and pull of mm. 11-12 before simply fading into nothingness in m. 14, the tension seemingly evaporated in an instant.

After the tense yearning of the A section vanishes, the B section replaces it with a steady and cyclical sequence. This section has a steady pulse that emphasizes every beat of the  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter

and an overall sequential motion downwards that is far more predictable than the unsteadiness of the A section (Example 3.9). In spite of the polyrhythm, the consistency of this entire passage lends it a soothing calm even when playing it. It is easy to fall into a ‘groove’ and simply float through the chord progression.

Just like the A section, the B section trails off to sustained pitches before sliding into A’. The main difference between A and A’ is some occasional sprinkling in of higher pitched countermelodies, a development of the passage that has seemingly no relation to the new material introduced in the B section. It is as if this section has developed itself in complete isolation from the B section, and this lack of acknowledgement of the interceding material is the first instance of “temporal intercut.” The second instance of intercut comes at the end of A’, when it again rises and fades only for the B section to reappear. Yet again, B’ works its way down through the sequence, before ultimately rising back and ending on a root-position tonic triad. Yet, this ending does not feel conclusive, the piece does not “finish,” and the primary reason is the repeated temporal intercut. In essence, this *Poeme* is only two main ideas placed alongside each other, without any real connection between them, that repeats each idea once in variation. The form is not working towards any goals, and neither of the sections do either – both of them simply trail off into long tones before being interrupted by the other. The only difference between this instance of trailing off and the three previous ones is the consonance of the triad, but Skryabin was no stranger to ending a piece of music in dissonance even by this early date. The temporal intercut of the form has established no ready means of discerning the difference between this ending and the other 3, and thus the piece could have quite easily wandered onwards to another conversation. In the absence of a formal reason for the piece to satisfactorily conclude here, it simply ends.

15 *inaferando*  
*pp*

17 *cresc.*

19 *dim.*

21 *p*

23 *pp*  
*legato*  
*p ben marcato le due voci, ma dolce*

Example 3.9 – Scriabin, *Poeme in F# Major, Op. 32 No. 1*, mm. 15-25.

## Chapter 4

### Skryabin's *Prometheus*: The Poem of Illumination

*“In fact, it is not simply Prometheus. Prometheus is the active beginning, the creative principle... it is the abstract symbol. After all, the mythological Prometheus is only the unveiling of this symbol, made for the primitive state of cognition.”*<sup>87</sup>

Skryabin's *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (1910) is one of his most studied works due to its unique status as a “color symphony.” Containing an orchestral part for the *tastiera per luce*, or ‘keyboard for lights,’ the practicalities of performing the work as Skryabin intended have on their own occupied a space in the secondary literature.<sup>88</sup> However, while the symphony's colors are an integral part of the work, it has much more to communicate than “simply” a multisensorial experience.

Anna Gawboy has quite appropriately described *Prometheus* as not simply a musical composition, but “a work of theurgy, an experiment in the composer's lifelong quest to trigger universal apocalypse and human spiritual transcendence through his art.”<sup>89</sup> The use of ‘synesthetic’ color is far more than a simple light show, as the colors hold spiritual significance. Drawing influence from famed theosophist Madame Helena Blavatsky, Skryabin positioned red as the color of the material world around us and deep blue as that of the spiritual world, with an entire rainbow between them that represents various gradations of spirituality. Skryabin even tied each color to a tonic, thus uniting the music and the color in the symphonic poem's large-scale tonal structure. With this performance, Skryabin aimed to create a phenomenological experience that exerted influence on the audience's spiritual faculties through two modalities at once –

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<sup>87</sup> Skryabin, Alexander quoted in Sabaneev (2000), 51.

<sup>88</sup> See Mirka, Danuta, “Colors of a Mystic Fire: Light and Sound in Scriabin's *Prometheus*” and Gawboy, Anna and Townsend, Justin, “Scriabin and the Possible.”

<sup>89</sup> Gawboy, Anna, “Scriabin's Theurgy in Blue,” i.

sound and light – as a step towards the multisensorial *Mysterium*. The audience must not simply be moved – they must be *elevated*.

The issue of Madame Blavatsky’s influence on Skryabin is not entirely clear-cut. Schloezer downplays the influence by claiming that “Scriabin used theosophical terms quite loosely. He adapted them to his own ideas, aspirations, and yearnings and employed theosophical postulates as formulas to describe his own experiences.”<sup>90</sup> This laissez-faire attitude towards theosophy accords with the always-in-progress nature of Skryabin’s thought that I interpret in his notebooks (see chapter 2), and even if Skryabin had at one point been enamored with theosophy, its influence on him certainly waned. However, theosophy was a relatively popular topic of discussion amongst the Russian intelligentsia of this time, including in Skryabin’s circles.

Schloezer also claims that “the doctrine of Seven Races attracted Scriabin with its psychological ramifications, even when he no longer tried to interpret it in a literal sense.”<sup>91</sup> This metaphorical and experiential understanding of theosophy makes it a prime candidate for a work intended to influence the spiritual faculties, especially for an audience that would have likely already been familiar with the philosophy.

Gawboy’s dissertation is a crucial work for understanding *Prometheus*, as she goes into luxurious detail about Skryabin’s fascination with India and the theosophical implications of the symphony. Especially valuable is her discovery that the symphony’s formal structure exists on two primary planes, one being the tripartite sonata-allegro form and the other representing the seven stages of human ‘evolution’ espoused in theosophical texts. However, I contend that even

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<sup>90</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin*, 67.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

Gawboy's extensive research does not fully capture all of the planes on which this piece rotates, and much of the work of this chapter will be to explore further dimensions.

The quotation included in the epigraph to this chapter forms a jumping off point from which I will approach *Prometheus*. I read this statement from the composer as an invitation to abstraction, to read the title *Prometheus* as not referring literally to the Greek titan, but instead to a larger *idea*, which Skryabin refers to in various settings as the "creative principle." *Prometheus* and its narrative of transcendence are not localized to a particular time and place; its referent is intentionally liminal and shifting. *Prometheus* can be anybody who sufficiently embodies the creative principle, any leader who carries the rest of humanity with him (and in Skryabin's view of gender, Prometheus is by necessity a masculine figure) to a brighter new age of enlightenment.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Skryabin's intuition that a single creative leader can trigger the spiritual enlightenment of all humankind, and related it to Vasily Kandinsky's concept of the "spiritual triangle." In fact, it is precisely the synesthetic experiment *Prometheus* that caused Kandinsky to name Skryabin as one of the two residing at the pinnacle of the triangle.<sup>92</sup> Skryabin and Kandinsky also find resonance in the metaphysics of their artistic-philosophical beliefs and a focus on dualist conflicts. Inspired by viewing Monet's painting *Haystack* (1890) and "fail[ing] to see what subject it represented," he nonetheless felt that "this absence of recognizable content made no difference whatsoever to the painting's effect."<sup>93</sup> This realization led him to conceive of painting as representing either material objects (recognizable images) or "the external expression

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<sup>92</sup> Kandinsky, Vasily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Sadler, Michael, 15, 18, 35.

<sup>93</sup> Harrison, Thomas. *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance*, 53.

of inner content,” a duality he perceived as two “warring forces.”<sup>94</sup> Kandinsky believed that the content of modern art should not be “*one* of the two elements in the cosmic antithesis but *the antithesis itself*.”<sup>95</sup> In other words, this argument resembles Nietzsche’s balance of Apollonian and Dionysian by centering artistic creation on the contradictory pulls of the material and spiritual worlds, and this dualist conflict is precisely the narrative at the core of *Prometheus*. Spiritual awakening comes about through the conflict between the material and the spiritual, but how are these forces reconciled? Why, through the genius of the man at the top of the spiritual triangle.

While I argue that *Prometheus* is flexible in its referents, I still contend that Scriabin was pointing to specific figures and people who he believed embodied the creative principle and could lead humanity to its spiritual revelation. Like the multi-dimensional formal structure of the piece, its narrative exists on multiple timelines simultaneously, telling similar stories of transcendences led by different embodiments of the creative principle at different times. While the piece’s title quite clearly points towards the Greek Titan Prometheus as the originating figure, its cover art instead seems to depict the Sun God Apollo (Figure 4.1). This cover art by symbolist painter and theosophist Jean Delville takes the form of an overwhelming collage of mystic symbols radiating outwards from an androgynous, flaming face. Sabaneev relays how

In this ‘Promethean’ season, the question of the cover art for ‘Prometheus’ caused much worry for Scriabin. Alexander Nikolayevich certainly wanted for the cover to not be simple, but instead that it would contain famous mystical symbolism, that the symbolic meaning of ‘Prometheus’ be expressed in it,” and he identifies the most obvious symbols, namely “the face of ‘The Androgyne,’ encircled by the ‘World Lyre.’”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 54. Kandinsky quoted in Harrison.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 56.

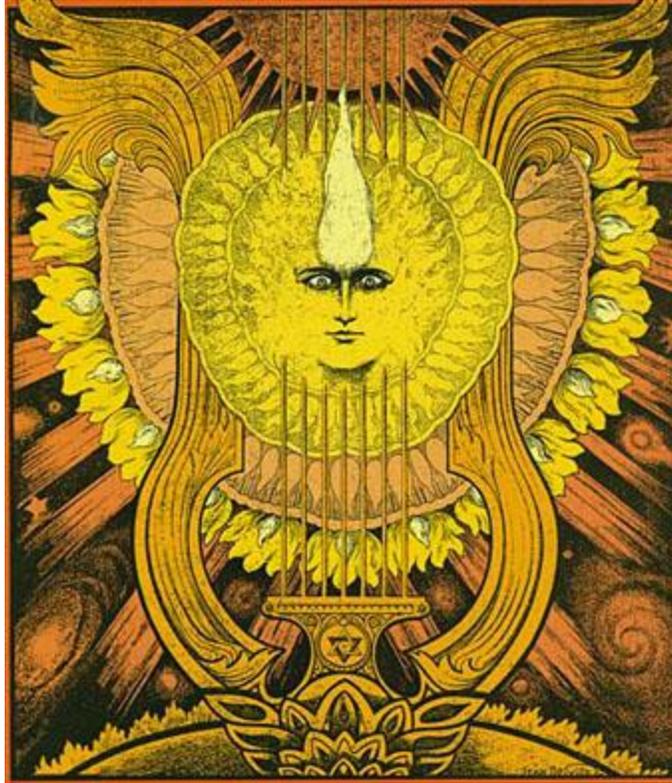
<sup>96</sup> Sabaneev (1925), 78.

Also present is the sun shining downwards from the top, lotus flowers blooming in a semi-circle around ‘the androgyne,’ a miniature representation of the seal of the theosophical society on the bridge of the lyre (Figure 4.1A and 4.2), and celestial bodies like galaxies and stars in the background.<sup>97</sup> These symbols broadly fall into two categories – those associated with Apollo, such as the androgynous and youthful face, the lyre that he gifted to Orpheus, and the sun, and those symbols that bear a more general mystic meaning, such as the lotus flowers, the theosophical seal, and the celestial bodies. According to Sabaneev, Skryabin “was extremely pleased with this composition,” which indicates that it likely corresponded to many of the mystic ideas that he wished to express.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> The theosophical star can be easily misidentified as the Jewish Star of David, due to both of them being six-pointed stars constructed out of two triangles facing 180 degrees away from each other. The distinction is that where the triangles of the Star of David are the same color and typically presented flat, on the same plane, the theosophical star features a light-colored and dark-colored triangle with the intersecting sides ‘covering’ each other to produce the illusion of two 3-dimensional triangles that are wrapped around each other (Figure 4.2). The seal also features an ouroboros surrounding the theosophical star with a swastika (a common symbol in many world religions long before the Nazis adopted it) at the point where the snake’s mouth and tail meet.

<sup>98</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 78.



*Figure 4.1 – Jean Delville's Cover Art for "Prometheus: The Poem of Fire"*



*Figure 4.1A – Seal of Theosophical Society in Delville's Cover Art*



Figure 4.2 – The Seal of the Theosophical Society, featuring Theosophical Star

Delville's cover also bears an undeniable resemblance to his earlier painting *The Death of Orpheus* (1893, Figure 4.2) due to the beautiful, androgyne head emerging from the center of the lyre. In both works, the absent body is replaced by the musical instrument, while the seat of consciousness remains. Music, then, becomes the means by which these figures encounter and interpret the world.



Figure 4.3 – Jean Delville, "The Death of Orpheus," 1893.

The hazy mixture of referential figures – Prometheus, Apollo, Orpheus – is a feature, rather than a bug, of Skryabin’s Symbolist expression in *Prometheus*. Gerould relates how, in Symbolist circles, “mythologies were less valued for their narratives than for their imagery and atmosphere as bearers of ideas and images,” a mode of expression apparent in the epigraph to this chapter.<sup>99</sup> By gesturing at so many figures who embody the “creative principle,” Skryabin amplifies the expression of creative might through hazy allusion and association.

Yet, there is one final figure being represented in this allusion – Skryabin himself, with an Orphic twist. In addition to the visual allusions to Orpheus on the sheet music cover, there is an undeniable Orphic character to the piano in *Prometheus*. Although this piece has typically been labelled a symphonic poem, in both structure and orchestration it far more closely resembles a traditional piano concerto. Throughout *Prometheus*, the piano leads the rest of the orchestra along the journey, at times beckoning with tender allure, at others playfully dancing or forcefully asserting its will. Like the mythological Orpheus charming the animals, Skryabin as the pianist in the “concerto” bends his orchestra to his will and leads, ultimately, to transcendence.

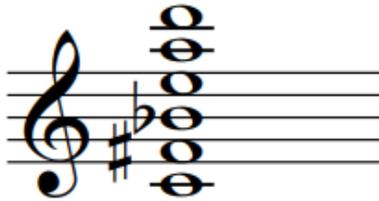
### **The Mystic Chord and Sound-Color:**

Skryabin’s “Mystic Chord” (Example 4A-C) is a hotly debated topic within the secondary literature, despite the harmony seeming at face value like little more than a whole-tone scale with one note altered. Some cannot even seem to agree on how to spell the chord, as Sabaneev proposes it as a quartal chord where most of the fourths are either augmented or diminished (Example 4-A), whereas Varvara Dernova insists that it is built triadically as a dominant 9<sup>th</sup> chord with two fifths, one diminished and the other doubly-augmented (Example 4-

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<sup>99</sup> Gerould, Daniel. “The Symbolist Legacy,” 82.

B).<sup>100</sup> Still others, such as George Perle, analyze the chord through the anachronistic lens of pitch-class-set theory.<sup>101</sup> Due to the spacing of the pitches, one can also interpret them as a hexatonic scale rather than a chord, which produces the most easily legible version (Example 4-C).



Example 4-A



Example 4-B



Example 4-C

*Example 4.A-C – Three different Constructions of the “Mystic Chord”*

Regarding this conflict between the Mystic Chord as a scale or chord, Sabaneev relates how Scriabin carefully positions this chord as a move away from the classical style’s distinction between scale and chord:

For here is the central chord – and he played the *Promethean* hexachord – this for me replaces the triad. In the classical epoch, the triad was the foundation of balance and equilibrium. Whereas now, for me, this has been replaced with this new sonority...Here I have them all in a row – he played a little from a passage of *Prometheus* – this is melody and harmony at once...After all, it should be thus, harmony and melody – these are two facets of one *principle*, one essence, which began to separate in classical music. This is

<sup>100</sup> Dernova, Varvara, “Scriabin’s Harmony.”

<sup>101</sup> Perle, George, “Scriabin’s Self-Analyses.”

the process of differentiation, the fall of the soul into materiality, until it became melody with accompaniment, like in Beethoven. For us now begins a synthesis: harmony becomes melody and melody becomes harmony... And for me there is no distinction between melody and harmony – they are one and the same. Try as you might, you will not find one note out of place.<sup>102</sup>

I find Skryabin's own line of reasoning most convincing in the context of *Prometheus* due to the chord's deployment in the work. Sabaneev's quartal demonstration is not simply somewhat outlandish in its construction, but it also fundamentally ignores Skryabin's voicings throughout this piece and others. Skryabin only occasionally writes a Mystic Chord in a fourths-dominated voicing, instead preferring either thirds-based voicings that resemble traditional triadic chords, or clear scalar iterations as in the "voilà!" motion discussed in the *Poeme-Nocturne*, Op. 61 in Ch. 3 (Example 3.2). While Dernova's triadic basis for the chord is closer to Skryabin's voicings, the doubled and chromatically altered fifth is rather artificial, and this construction also leaves out the scalar aspect.

The Mystic Chord, then, is not so much a chord but a pitch collection not unlike the pitch-class set theory explanation offered by George Perle. The main issue with a traditional set theory approach is the inherent tendency to view sets as lacking a "root" in the traditional sense and organize them according to their Prime form, which for the Mystic Chord produces set-class [013579]. The intervallic spacing of the Prime form places the Minor 2<sup>nd</sup> against the bottom pitch, which in the case of the Mystic Chord in Example 4A-C, reorients the chord with A at the bottom. The problem with this arrangement is that Skryabin continued to think of these sets as having a particular root, and the version in Example 4 is firmly rooted on C, not A. So, set theory's organizing principles muddy the waters when it comes to the roots of this particular pitch set, but the guiding principle that a set can serve the purposes previously filled by both

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<sup>102</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 54.

scales and chords resonates quite harmoniously with Skryabin's own thinking on the chord. Therefore, in order to avoid privileging either chord or scale, I will refer to this collection of pitches as the "Mystic Collection."

One fault-line in the discourse around the Mystic Collection centers on its consonance, or lack thereof. The tritone-heavy sonority contains dominant-esque harmonies such as the French 6<sup>th</sup>, and Skryabin's chordal voicings often emphasize these tritones. This seeming dominant quality is part of what led Dernova to build the chord as an altered dominant 9<sup>th</sup>, which then raises the obvious question of resolution. Skryabin's Mystic Collections rarely, if ever, resolve according to traditional tonality, and many works end with a ringing Mystic Collection (refer again to the *Poeme-Nocturne*, Op. 61). This led Dernova to theorize that these dominants point to "tonics sounding only in the imagination."<sup>103</sup>

This explanation is certainly an interesting one to consider, but it directly conflicts with Skryabin's own claims about the sonority. In the same conversation with Sabaneev where Skryabin positions the Mystic Collection as a move away from the triad-scale system, he claims that "this is not a dominant harmony, but rather a fundamental one, and a consonance. It's true, after all, it rings gently, quite consonant."<sup>104</sup> While calling a harmony with so many tritones a consonance may strike readers as outlandish, it reflects a unique view of consonance and dissonance that is less concerned with acoustics and instead with the teleology of sound. When Skryabin refers to a dissonance, he refers to a chord that доидёт (Doidyot, Do – move up to, Idti – walking, unidirectional, perfective) whereas a consonance either садится (Saditsya, sits, imperfective) or прогуляет (Progulyayet, Pro – Through, Gulyat' – to Stroll, multidirectional. In

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<sup>103</sup> Roy Guenther, "Varvara Dernova's *Garmoniia Skriabina*: A Translation and Critical Commentary," 189-191.

<sup>104</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 54.

this combination, to stroll around freely or aimlessly). To put it another way, a dissonance has an intended goal and must either resolve to that goal or surprise the listener by not doing so; a consonance bears no such obligations and is free to simply linger until it moves onwards. In the musical context of *Prometheus*, his Mystic Sonorities change frequently, but without the catharsis of a dominant-tonic or even a dominant-submediant resolution. If the chord has no obligation to resolve, if it has no telos, then the dissonance is sublimated into a kind of consonance. The only moment that comes close to offering such a resolution is the final cadence, which becomes a major narratological problem for the work.

Returning to the issue of chordal roots, this factor becomes paramount when one begins to consider Skryabin's Mystic Collection in relation to the color system at play in *Prometheus*.

Sabaneev relates Skryabin explaining that:

‘After all, every note corresponds to a color,’ - he said, as if he were expressing a generally accepted axiom. - ‘To be more truthful, not the notes, but the tonalities. Look here at the beginning of my *Prometheus* - there is some sort of overlap between the tonality *A* and the tonality *F#*, therefore here there must be the colors pink and blue.’<sup>105</sup>

Note that Skryabin is also clear to specify that the colors do not line up with particular notes, as in many prior synesthetic systems including Madame Blavatsky's own, but with *tonalities*.<sup>106</sup>

This correspondence between Mystic Collection root and color within the ‘synesthetic’ system is why accurately determining the root of a given Mystic Collection is so crucial – it needs to line up with the color that Skryabin assigns to it.

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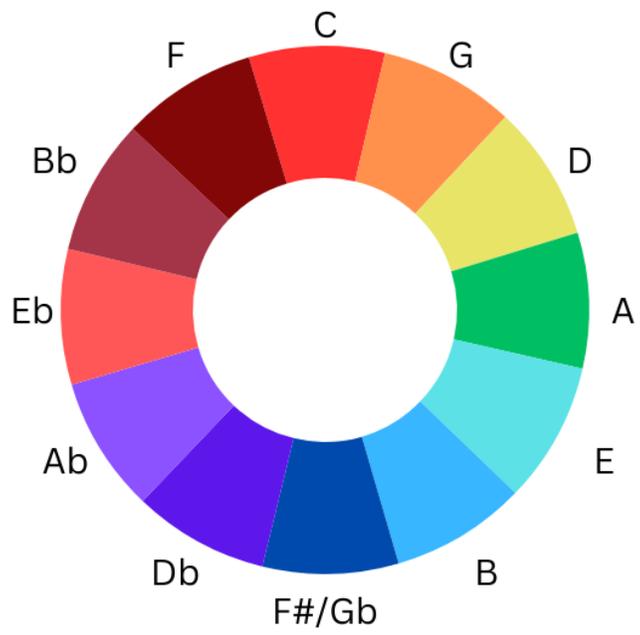
<sup>105</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 53. A note that must be made is that the tonality *A* refers to green in his finalized system, not the pink referred to here. This specific conversation occurred in 1909 during the early stages of development of this system and the composition of *Prometheus*, hence the inconsistency.

<sup>106</sup> See Gawboy, Anna, “Scriabin's Theurgy in Blue” for a discussion of previous sound-color synesthetic systems, including those from Isaac Newton and Madame Helena Blavatsky.

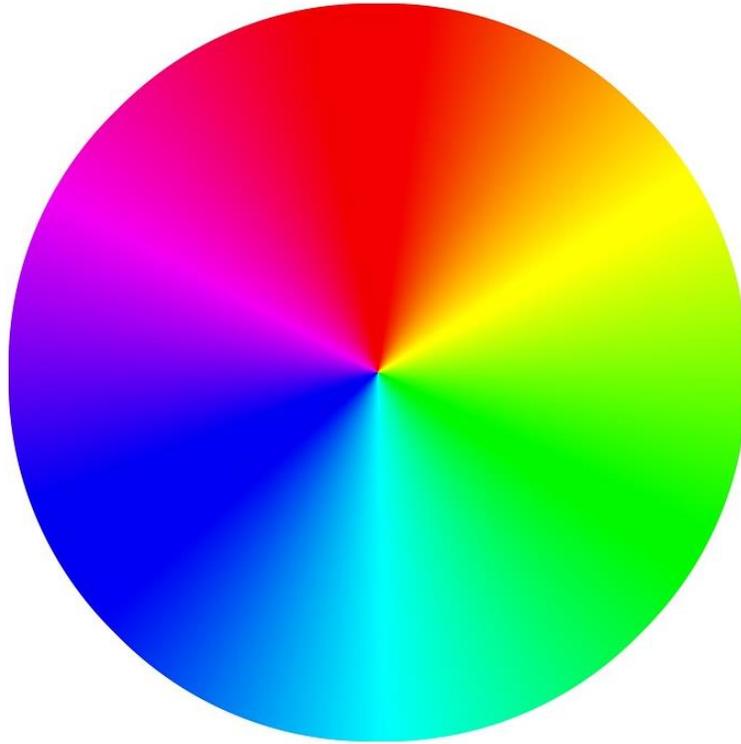
In order to develop this system of correspondences, Skryabin began with “a strong tonal sense of the three primary colors and later preserved these associations as he constructed the rest of his system, mapping the circle of fifths onto an expanded color wheel.”<sup>107</sup> These three colors were C (red), D (yellow), and F# (blue). Figure 4.3 below shows that Skryabin functionally did little more than overlay the circle of fifths with a color spectrum wheel, orienting red with C and blue with its tritone antipode F#. Some inconsistencies arise on the flat side of the circle of fifths due to Skryabin having placed deep blue, which would naturally fall at approximately Ab, on F# in order to make it precisely a tritone away from C (red). For this reason, the red and purple span of the color wheel has been stretched between F, Bb, Eb, Ab, and Db.

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<sup>107</sup> Gawboy, 182.



*Figure 4.4 – Skryabin’s Color-Key Relations Mapped According to the Circle of Fifths*



*Figure 4.5 – The Color Spectrum Presented as a Wheel*

The crucial aspect to understand about Skryabin’s sound-color correspondences is that they do not fall under the umbrella of psychological synesthesia, but are instead a constructed system. This is because, as Bernard notes about synesthesia in general, “it is a distinctly individualized phenomenon, with no very specific correlation between its manifestation in one synaesthete [sic] and that in another,” yet Galeyev and Vanechkina note that Skryabin sought to create a universal system.<sup>108</sup> Skryabin himself claimed that “it cannot be individual...there must be a principle, there must be unity. The play of coincidences creates but a small ripple on the surface, but in the main all should be common. After all, the alternative is madness and chaos, the absence of a principle.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Bernard, Jonathan. “Messiaen’s Synesthesia,” 42. Galeyev and Vanechkina, “Was Scriabin a Synesthete?”.

<sup>109</sup> Sabaneev 1925, 48.

As with his other mystic pursuits, Skryabin sought to “scientifically” discover fundamental principles that guide all of creation, not necessarily to translate his own experience of sound into a visual medium. This distinction matters not only because it explains the inconsistencies between Skryabin’s various color-sound systems over the years (see footnote 105 above), but also because it loops back into the multisensorial spiritual *influence* that Skryabin sought to exert with first *Prometheus*, and later *Mysterium*. Skryabin wanted sound-color synesthesia to follow a logical and universal system so that he could use it as another method of bringing about the spiritual revelation he so deeply desired.

In spite of the constructed nature of Skryabin’s synesthetic system, Galejev and Vanechkina point out that it was likely not entirely artificial. They cite Sabaneev’s claim that “colors, on the one hand, and sounds, on the other hand, engender various moods, often similar to one another,” and speculate that the composer likely associated particular tonalities with concepts like ‘spirituality’ and ‘materialism.’<sup>110</sup> Blavatsky’s identification of red as material and blue as spiritual then formed the basis for the rest of the system. In this interpretation, the relations of sound and color are more about shared affect than a metaphysical concordance.

It may be fruitful to compare Skryabin’s sound-color synesthetic system with composers who are natural synesthetes. I propose two – Olivier Messiaen, and myself. Messiaen provides possibly the richest trove of information on his synesthesia of any composer due to the detailed color descriptions that he wrote into some of his scores, as well as his personal writings on the topic. This concordance must necessarily intersect with Messiaen’s famed “modes of limited

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<sup>110</sup> Sabaneev via Galejev and Vanechkina, 360. The Sabaneev article cited here is titled “On Sound-Color Accordance,” published in the weekly music periodical *Muzyka* on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1911. I have been unable to find an archived copy of this article in either English or Russian archives.

transposition,” to several of which Messiaen assigns a particular colored quality.<sup>111</sup> Bernard finds that pitch-class set interval content appears to be a primary factor in favor of keys, as Messiaen himself states “one really can’t talk of an exact relationship between a key and a color: that would be a rather naïve way of expressing oneself because...colors are complex and are linked to equally complex chords and sounds.”<sup>112</sup> Bernard is careful to note that particular keys do tend to have similar colors, but that this happens only when they are produced through specific transpositions of the modes of limited transposition.<sup>113</sup> Ultimately, one of the largest points of contention between Skryabin and Messiaen’s systems is the importance of tonalities in Skryabin as opposed to the importance of interval class vectors in Messiaen.

The privileging of interval-class content in Messiaen’s color hearing accords quite comfortably with my own color hearing. Although there are few direct concordances between specific colors that Messiaen reports for particular passages with my own hearing of those same passages, the most important concordance is that we both experience total chromaticism as grey or black.<sup>114</sup> For me, the density of dissonances in fully chromatic music, such as Schoenberg’s *String Quartet No. 4*, presents an oppressive dark-grey to black color that fluctuates based on the density of a particular passage. However, I find that varying levels of non-functional dissonance present the appearance of a range of blues, greys, silvers, and in rare cases, whites. For example, Debussy’s *Pagodes* from *Estampes* fluctuates between deep blue, light blue, and a light silver. For me, this sensation is intimately bound up with register, voicing, and texture, because the same set of intervals can sound drastically different if played at the top or bottom of a piano. In

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<sup>111</sup> Bernard, 45.

<sup>112</sup> Messiaen quoted in Samuel, Claude, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 19.

<sup>113</sup> Bernard, 48.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 46. Bernard is quick to point out the irony that full *chromaticism* produces the seeming lack of color.

*Pagodes*, I find that the fuller, primary theme area is a soft blue, the two-voice octave passage following is an even lighter blue, and the ending with a rapid and cyclic pentatonic scale in the upper register is a gently glimmering silver. Skryabin's music offers some of the most diverse coloration of any music I have listened to, and I do not believe this arises from his synesthetic experiment in *Prometheus*, but instead from the diverse harmonic, textural, and timbral effects that he employs.

Ultimately, the sound-color correspondences in *Prometheus* held symbolic significance for Skryabin, but the tissue linking them together is based far more in expressive potential than neurological phenomena.

### **Madame Helena Blavatsky, The Seven Root Races, and Free Associational Philology**

While Blavatsky's influence on Skryabin's thought may have later receded to the level of metaphor, it is undeniable that her conception of the Seven Root Races of humanity held great sway over the creation of *Prometheus*. However, while a full explanation of this evolutionary cosmology proceeds below, I must first explore Blavatsky's methodologies of "scholarship" and her rhetorical strategies, which Mark Bevir tactfully described as "a rather subjective and idiosyncratic approach to her material."<sup>115</sup> I view Blavatsky's writings as a kind of free-associational philology that draws on mythology, science, linguistics, and metaphor to create a philosophical canvas as wide and bewildering as it is evocative and (to the right reader) convincing. At the center of this style is a distinction between exoteric knowledge with which the reader is assumed to be familiar, and an esoteric truth, or *Secret Doctrine*, that Blavatsky is revealing to the world.

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<sup>115</sup> Bevir, Mark. "The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition," 759.

Simply summarizing Blavatsky's philosophical viewpoints, taxonomies, and timelines can acquaint one with her ideas, but robs one of understanding the ways that she performs authority. She herself seems barely focused on such seemingly crucial aspects of an ideology, as she rarely (if ever) lays out any of her concepts in a clear, linear fashion. Instead, the reader is assaulted with a dizzying array of 'facts,' events, personages, and vocabulary that all have a kind of tenuous link from one to the next, but typically fail to cohere into anything concrete. In order to communicate this effect, I present an extended quotation from *The Secret Doctrine I: Cosmogogenesis* that, within the space of a single paragraph, makes reference to the then-cutting-edge science of evolution, physical forces such as magnetism and heat, various possible translations of a single word in Sanskrit, metaphysics, and various Hindu and Buddhist concepts:

The tendency of modern thought is to recur to the archaic idea of a homogenous basis for apparently widely different things – heterogeneity developed from homogeneity. Biologists are now searching for their homogenous protoplasm and chemists for their protyle, while science is looking for the force of which electricity, magnetism, heat, and so forth, are the differentiations. The Secret Doctrine carries this idea into the region of metaphysics and postulates a 'One Form of Existence' as the basis and source of all things. But perhaps the phrase, the 'One Form of Existence,' is not altogether correct. The Sanskrit word is Prabhavapyaya, 'the place, or rather plane, whence emerges the origination, and into which is the resolution of all things,' says a commentator. It is not the 'Mother of the World,' as translated by Wilson (See Book I., Vishnu Purana); for Jagad Yoni (as shown by FitzEdward Hall) is scarcely so much 'The Mother of the World' or 'the Womb of the World' as the 'Material Cause of the Universe.' The Puranic Commentators explain it by Karana – 'Cause' – but the Esoteric philosophy, by the *ideal spirit of that cause*. It is, in its secondary stage, the Svabhavat of the Buddhist philosopher, the plastic Essence and the root of all things, viewed in the same dual light as the Vedantin views his Parabrahm and Mulaprakriti, the one under two aspects. It seems indeed extraordinary to find great scholars speculating on the possibility of the Vedanta, and the Uttara-Mimansa especially, having been 'evoked by the teachings of the Buddhists,' whereas, it is on the contrary Buddhism (of Gautama, the Buddha) that was 'evoked' and entirely upreared on the tenets of the Secret Doctrine, of which a partial sketch is here attempted, and on which, also, the Upanishads are made to rest. The above, according to the teachings of Sri Sankaracharya, is undeniable.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Blavatsky, Helena. *The Secret Doctrine I: Cosmogogenesis*, 46-47.

My personal experience of reading *The Secret Doctrine* is one of constantly battling to continue paying attention and parsing the overwhelming torrent of information. Most paragraphs read similarly to the one above, and are so laden with terminology, conflicting translations, and ideas pulled from seemingly thin air that trying to rationally understand the words on the page becomes an exercise in futility. There is an almost sublime effect produced by the confident and forceful representation of so much information, to the point that one's ability to reason categorically fails to make sense of it. If reason fails when trying to take in *The Secret Doctrine*, then what remains is affect, imagery, and metaphor. A reader is unlikely to remember which of the four translations of Prabhayapyaya Blavatsky claims is true, but they are likely to remember the *idea* that there is *something* that is the one true origin of all, and that the 'truth' is an esoteric secret hidden from the world.

This free-associational philology shares a remarkable resemblance to Skryabin's own freewheeling quasi-scientific writings in his notebooks (see Ch. 2), which is all the more interesting given that Skryabin wrote all or most of that material before encountering Blavatsky's work. While it is not plausible that Blavatsky influenced Skryabin's writing style, it seems hardly surprising that her evocative presentation of metaphysical concepts would be highly appealing to the composer. As I argued in Chapter 2, many of Skryabin's writings sprang from an affective space of intuition, but were communicated via a kind of rational exoskeleton. Blavatsky performs an inverse maneuver by overwhelming the rational mind with so much 'evidence' and 'logic' that she ultimately communicates on an affective and metaphorical level. *The Secret Doctrine* presents not as 'scholarship,' but an artistic work that imparts a vague and foggy ideology of imagery.

One of the relatively more concrete images present in *The Secret Doctrine* is the concept of the Seven Root Races, Blavatsky's proposed cosmogony that charts the evolution of the human spirit over the course of millennia. The use of the term "race" here can be misleading, as it has a complex relation to modern conceptions of race and historical scientific racism. Blavatsky conceived of root races as evolutionary stages through which humans evolves over periods of millions of years. Each root race had a name, she named modern humanity the Aryan race, but in direct contrast to anti-Semites and scientific racists, she included most of modern humanity in this race; "The Aryan races, for instance, now varying from dark brown, almost black, red-brown-yellow, down to the whitest creamy colour, are yet all of one and the same stock."<sup>117</sup> While this appears to be a startlingly progressive viewpoint for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Blavatsky elsewhere claims that certain indigenous tribes, such as "the South Sea Islanders...Bushmen, the Veddhas of Ceylon, and some African Tribes," failed to advance beyond previous root races, and will never reach the same "intellectual level" as Aryans.<sup>118</sup> So, while her 'science' may have included more of humanity than most racists of the time, theosophy ultimately reinscribes scientific racism onto different peoples via different rational.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine II: Anthrogenesis*, 249.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 421.

<sup>119</sup> Volume 2 of *The Secret Doctrine* makes repeated reference to phrenological pseudoscience and reflects an ambivalence towards such 'research' on the part of Blavatsky. Typical for the time, *Anthrogenesis* contains a heavy and repeated focus on the skull sizes of various peoples (most real, some fictional), but she makes repeated critiques of phrenologists by presenting 'evidence' that specific aspects of their claims are false. Her overarching viewpoint seems to be that skull size is at least somewhat irrelevant to a person's intellectual capacity, as she claims that "it is the *quality* and not the *quantity* of the brain that is the cause of intellectual capacity" (522). It is difficult to parse exactly where Blavatsky stood on the issue, because her writings bear an incessant contrarianism in which she nearly always presents claims made by others as either partially or fully wrong, and then steps in with her own esoteric claims about how the situation 'truly is.' Her treatment of phrenological research is so in keeping with her needless contrarianism that it can seem as if sometimes she is attacking a source not out of genuine disagreement, but as a rhetorical means to present herself as sharing knowledge that one can get nowhere else.

Blavatsky adorned most of the root races with names taken from mythology or pop-science, and she leveraged these legends to lend them legitimacy. She says little about the first race, preferring to briefly describe their homeland, “The Imperishable Sacred Land,” about which “very little can be said.”<sup>120</sup> The second race, the “Hyperborean,” are a reference to the Ancient Greek myth of a far northern continent. Blavatsky identifies their homeland as “the whole of what is now known as Northern Asia,” and refers to it as “the favourite abode of Apollo, the god of light, and its inhabitants are his beloved priests and servants.”<sup>121</sup> She claims to draw her information directly from Greek mythology, and in a typical appeal to esotericism, she claims that “this may be regarded as poetized *fiction* now; but it was poetized *truth* then.”<sup>122</sup> In another quintessentially Blavatskian gambit, she immediately turns from Greek Myth to then-cutting-edge science by naming the third root race the “Lemurians,” after a hypothetical lost continent. Blavatsky directly cites the zoologist P. L. Sclater, “who asserted, between 1850 and 1860, on zoological grounds the actual existence, in prehistoric times, of a Continent [sic] which he showed to have extended from Madagascar to Ceylon and Sumatra.”<sup>123</sup> Sclater’s ‘discovery’ captured the public imagination in both Europe and India, leading many to speculate that it may have been the “birthplace of humanity,” and in spite of the theory of plate tectonics eventually disproving the continent’s existence, its mythic intrigue continues to fascinate many who partake in esoteric speculation.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine II: Anthrogenesis*, 6.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Ramaswamy, Smuathi, “Catastrophic Cartographies: Mapping the Lost Continent of Lemura,” 93. See Joseph, Frank, *The Lost Civilization of Lemuria* (2006) and Una Marcotte, *Lemuria: A Civilization Time Forgot* (2018) for more recent ‘histories’ of Lemuria.

Blavatsky rounds out her named root races with the fourth, the “Atlanteans,” and the aforementioned fifth, the “Aryans.” Each of these names would have been well-known in her time, as the myth of Atlantis is somewhat of an evergreen topic in the west, and Blavatsky shows her predilection for philology with the name Aryan, after the Sanskrit word for “comprising the worshippers of the gods of the Brahmins.”<sup>125</sup> By naming each of these four root races after ancient civilizations (real or otherwise) with which most readers would be familiar, Blavatsky draws on the cultural cachet of each of these lost peoples to lend herself a sense of legitimacy in revealing the esoteric truth behind the exoteric legends. Like the rest of her work, this free-ranging admixture of disparate elements communicates more by affect, remembrance, and metaphor than by reason.

The aspect of Blavatsky’s root races that likely most appealed to Skryabin was their polarity between the material and spiritual. Blavatsky creates a sharp distinction between spiritual races and material races, with the 7-race cycle beginning and ending in spirituality. She paints material, mortal existence as inherently about struggle, with the conflicts endured improving the spiritual powers of humanity once they transcend their current limits. The overall path of the human soul begins with humanity as dissipated spirits that gradually accrete into individuals for races 1-3, then races 4-5 take the form of material struggle, before race 6 is the return to spirit and race 7 marks the transcendence to a universal consciousness. The resonances between this cosmogony and Skryabin’s own intuitions about creation, struggle, and the formation of a universal consciousness are quite close. In fact, according to Schloezer, it was precisely this resonance that caused Skryabin to discover Blavatsky’s work, as “a friend told him

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<sup>125</sup> Simpson, John, “Aryan, Arian” in *Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol 1, 672.

that his vision of Mysterium, of the union of humanity with divinity and the return of the world to oneness, had much in common with theosophy.”<sup>126</sup>

*Prometheus* follows a narrative structure that relays this history of the human soul in its entirety by overlaying several formal structures simultaneously, pictured in Figure 4.5. The tripartite sonata-allegro form structure of exposition, development, and recapitulation is married to a division into the 7 root races. Each root race corresponds to a large scale harmonic/color shift that proceeds by whole step, as Sabaneev relays Skryabin explaining “I needed this series of colors to reflect the evolution of the race. One would think there would need to be *seven*. I have 12 within the circle of fifths. Which among these corresponds to the spiritual kind of race? Therefore, I settled upon the whole-tone scale from F# to F#, because it so happens that precisely in the middle of the two spiritual colors falls red – material, which corresponds to the fourth position, as it must. One could say that I performed a kind of algebraic operation.”<sup>127</sup>

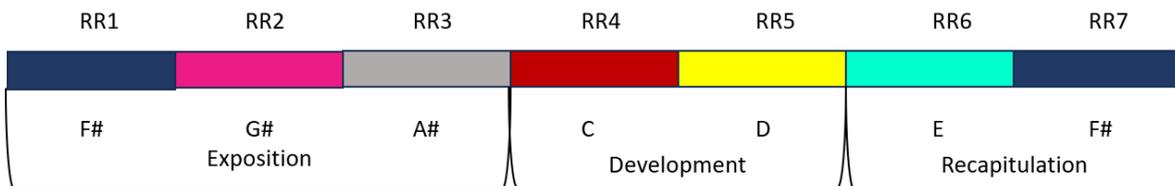


Figure 4.6 – Large-Scale Structure of *Prometheus*

The narrative of *Prometheus* is less an arc than a roundabout swirl, reflected nicely in Figure 4.6. This figure has no direct relation to *Prometheus*, but is instead material used by present-day theosophists to explain the concept of root races. It aptly demonstrates the metaphorical fall from

<sup>126</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin*, 67.

<sup>127</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 261-262.

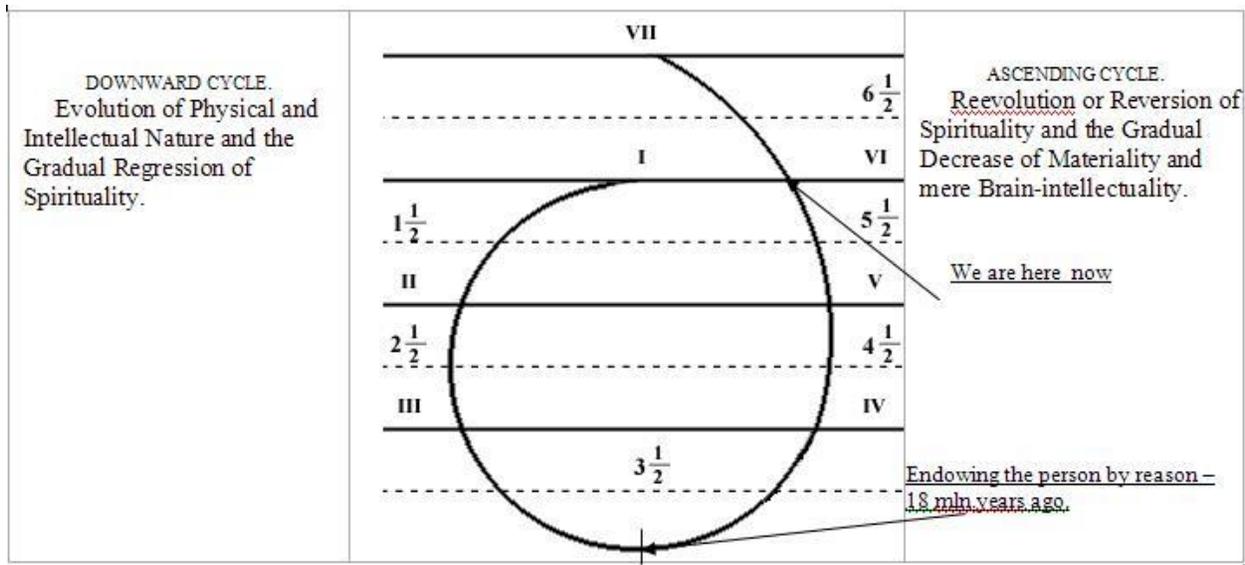


Figure 4.7 Modern Graph of the Root Races, from sacred-texts.com.

spirituality to materiality, and the ensuing climb back up to spiritual form that ends *higher* than the starting point.

### The Poem of Illumination

An Ending...?

I begin my analysis not with the opening notes of *Prometheus*, but with the final ones, because they form a thorny problem that seems to contradict much of what Skryabin himself claims about the piece and the Mystic Collection. Skryabin faced a difficult challenge in concluding the tone poem – after all, he had set upon himself the task of representing the achievement and joy of the ultimate stage of human spiritual evolution, a universal world soul, using naught but notes and colors. Beyond representation, he was seeking to educate and better his audience, to impart upon them a spark of the divine. In approaching this titanic issue, Skryabin made several choices that have multitudinous consequences. In order to understand this finale, I turn again to Clifton’s distinction between “ending” and “finishing” (see Ch. 3). My analysis will also necessarily rely heavily on my own phenomenological experience of this music

in order to deduce whether it “ends” or “finishes,” so there is necessarily a subjective nature to it. Yet, there are certain qualities of this ending that are undeniably strange, whether another listener has my experience of them or not, and they are worth careful discussion.

The most apparent problem is that despite Skryabin’s insistence that the Mystic Collection is a consonance, *Prometheus* concludes with a glaringly bright, harmonically pure F# Major triad. One could hypothetically claim that he was only choosing the pitches he wanted from the Mystic Collection in order to create a Major Triad, as there is a single Major Triad within the Mystic Collection, but this assertion raises even more issues. The Mystic Collection contains a Major Triad on the second degree of the scale, meaning that if Skryabin were justifying this triad in this manner then he would be operating in the E Mystic Collection, not F#, which severely undercuts the narrative as E is the wrong tonality. I feel it is far more likely that Skryabin wanted to end with a bright, ‘shining’ chord while maintaining the F# tonic, and so he therefore abandoned his Mystic Collection in favor of a more traditional harmony.

Yet, does this F# even sound like a tonic? This analysis will necessarily be somewhat subjective, but I do not hear it so. Mitchell Morris claims that he hears it as “some kind of bVI motion,” which I can also hear if I anticipate it.<sup>128</sup> Yet, to me, the phenomenological sound of this resolution more closely resembles a kind of *Tristan* chord resolution. This sense is also borne out in the voice leading of the final chord progression, reduced to just the organ part in Example 4.1. One potential harmonic reading of this final cadence is a tonic triad on F#/Gb with a superimposed D Half-Diminished 7 chord that then resolves outward to F# (Example 4.1). Including the Gb/F# in the pedal voice, every pitch in this harmony is either enharmonically a member of the resolution (Gb/F#, Db/C#, Bb/A#) or it is able to move by enharmonic step to the

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<sup>128</sup> Morris, Mitchell, Personal communication.

final F# chord (Ab-F#, C-C#, F-F#, D-C#). Whether one hears it as a bVI or *Tristan*-esque chromatic slide, this highly abnormal resolution lends this final chord a strange sense of non-tonic-ness that even the tutti bluster cannot overcome. *Prometheus* seems to try to finish, but instead it *ends*.



Example 4.1 – Skryabin, *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, Final Resolution

The question of whether it is more sensible for this piece to end or finish is also problematic. The narrative conclusion of transcendence is an ending from the perspective of a material human, but from the perspective of the human spirit it is really the beginning of a new mode of being. In the Blavatskian cosmogony, the Manvantara is cyclical and eternal, and Skryabin's *Prometheus* represents only one of the 7 rounds that make up a single Manvantara. From this perspective, the narrative not only is far from complete, but also can never truly end. This cyclical nature is one of the reasons that I will also argue below that the piece does not begin, but instead it exists as a kind of background radiation that we as listeners tune into. If one buys into this theosophical reading, then there can be no question that the tone poem must end, as it simply cannot finish conclusively.

A musical representation of this kind of ending would likely be as open and indefinite as the start of the piece, a fade that recedes from our awareness just as the beginning gradually oozes into it. The rounds turn ever onwards, but our awareness of this micro-round can come and go. While this kind of ending makes a kind of logical sense when reading it through the work of Blavatsky, it chafes horribly with Skryabin's penchant for maximalism. The composer who wrote a fanfare for "eight horns" that reminded Sabaneev of "human screams" in *Le Poeme de l'Extase* was exceptionally unlikely to end his titanic symphonic poem on a whisper.<sup>129</sup> Thus, the finale of *Prometheus* is loud, boisterous, and arrives at a glaringly bright *fortississimo* final chord. Skryabin attempts a powerful *finish*, yet this final chord still rings hollow as the music suddenly *ends*.

Although the ending of *Prometheus* arguably does not quite 'work' on a metaphorical or even musical level, much of the piece does effectively portray Skryabin's intended narrative of spiritual evolution. From this point forwards, I will engage in an analysis of *Prometheus* in mostly chronological order. This analysis will contain excursions outside of the piece to its surrounding context, but will be primarily focused on providing a phenomenological account of the color symphony. Skryabin desired for his work of 'theurgy' to influence his audience – I mean to illuminate how this occurs.

### **Stage 1: The Stygian Haze**

Skryabin chooses to begin his color symphony with an oppressive and ambiguous sonority that seems to stretch on for an eternity in its restless stillness. The tessitura is exceedingly low, with the highest pitch being the barely-present B4 in the violins and flutes. The orchestration is also dominated by the bassoon choir, as the three bassoons and contrabassoon

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<sup>129</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 35.

provide an ominous, buzzing tone by playing in close registral proximity in their low range. The first and second bassoon are playing a Major Third between the A and C# at the bottom of the bass clef, verging on or even entering the range in which a Third sounds dissonant. This instability is made even more tenebrous by the Augmented 5th between the contrabassoon and third bassoon, which are playing near the depths of their range. The chord that this bassoon choir is playing is enharmonically a French Augmented 6<sup>th</sup>, a tense and dissonant chord to begin with but made incredibly stygian by both its tessitura and its placement in such a reedy choir. This ambiguity is further strengthened by the complete lack of rhythmic pulse for four entire bars; all pitches are either sustained or played as tremolos.

To understand this texture, I turn again to Clifton's *Music as Heard* and his concept of musical surface. By surface, Clifton refers to the way that various sounds within the sonic mass of a composition distinguish themselves, e.g. are they clear and distinct, as in a "surface with high relief," or do they form an indistinct mass, as in an "undifferentiated surface."<sup>130</sup> The opening of *Prometheus* is a prototypical example of an "undifferentiated surface," which Clifton illustrates through the highly similar example of Ligeti's *Atmospheres*. Clifton's description of the opening bars of *Atmospheres* could have just as easily been describing the reedy, tense stillness of *Prometheus*' opening:

one experiences very little sensation of change. Without change, which is constitutive of rhythm, time itself is suspended. The piece has not 'begun': it might have been there all the time, but now it has encountered us. This dissolution of past, present, and future contributes to the sensation of the surface as being given 'all at once,' as if every pitch in a Mahler symphony were to be collapsed into a single prolonged moment – an infinitely large present.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Clifton, 155, 172.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 155-156. This description also applies well to Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, as discussed in Ch. 3.

Clifton’s observation that the music seems to have always existed, and only just now “encountered us,” holds important metaphorical weight in the case of *Prometheus*. These opening bars take the form of cosmic background noise, the restless fluctuations of the universe that Blavatsky called “Primordial Cosmic Substance.”<sup>132</sup> These opening bars are the timeless, undifferentiated space before time, the beginning and end of all.

Blavatsky claims that the Primordial Cosmic Substance must eventually transform into *Logos*, thus creating the first root race.<sup>133</sup> In turn, from the primordial haze rises the first melodic theme of the piece, the Theme of Ideation, condensing the diffuse surface into a concentrated point on the “tonic” of F# (Example 4.2). The antecedent portion of the theme slithers around the “tonic” F#, falling by minor third then turning upwards by major third to teeter a minor second above the “tonic” before sliding back down to home. The accented, low French Horn sound is assertive and seems to be striving towards some sort of goal before resigning itself to defeat. In the space between antecedent and consequent phrases, the orchestral surface expands in a crescendo to forte, burgeoning with new energy that quickly subsides. The consequent phrase uses similar intervals to outline an arc that rises to a peak on B before faltering and sliding down to D#, the lowest pitch of the phrase. The overall effect is of two failed attempts, this theme may have ideated, but it has not yet achieved its goals.



Example 4.2 – Skryabin, *Prometheus*, Theme of Ideation. (Horns, Concert Pitch)

<sup>132</sup> Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Book 2: *Anthropogenesis*, 24.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

Following swell, the orchestra fixates on sustaining the peak B of the consequent phrase. Skryabin further subdivides the consequent phrase into only its first, rising half, and passes it between various members of the orchestra that dovetail over each other's statements. Some of these attempts have more strength than others, usually due to the tessitura of the instrument that is used. This weakness is especially salient for the bass clarinet, which is primarily playing in its "throat tone" range, and sounds utterly ineffectual. Yet, this is still progress. The soundscape has moved from an undifferentiated surface to a singular point of focus to a multiplicity of 'voices' echoing each other. In theosophical terms, the first root race has arisen from the chaos of non-being.

The following passage bridges the chaotic stillness of the introduction to the entrance of the piano soloist, and is extremely dense thematically. Two themes and one motive are introduced in the span of 10 measures from 21 to 30, and these two themes along with the Theme of Ideation form the core material of the piece. This sudden quickening of narrative pace is directly related to the entrance of the soloist, the Prometheus/Apollo/Orpheus/Skryabin figure (P.A.O.S.), the individual who will lead the masses to their ultimate transcendence.

When the flutes and oboes play the final (for now) statement of this frustrated part of the Theme of Ideation, they reach the peak note like all of the other instruments but instead of gently fading away they are rudely interrupted by the trumpets. The motive that the first three trumpets play is abrupt and staccato; it has far more rhythmic clarity than any motive played thus far. This is the first fanfare motive of *Prometheus*, a portent of change to come. This new activity motivates yet more swells in the orchestra, a roiling sea of waves crashing against yet more fanfares. In the midst of this tumult, the fourth trumpet introduces a new theme, titled the Theme

of Will by Skryabin, but is interrupted by the fanfares and swells (Example 4.3). The human spirit, it appears, is not ready to have a will.



Example 4.3 – Skryabin, *Prometheus*, Theme of Will (Trumpet, Concert Pitch)

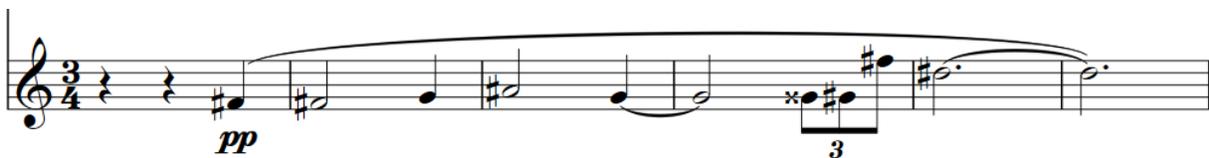
Immediately following this failure of will comes a “contemplatif” theme that carries all the hallmarks of Skryabin’s musical eroticism (Example 4.4). As in my analysis of *Piano Sonata No. 4* in chapter 2, I will refer to this theme as the Theme of Desire. Susanna Garcia denotes this thematic category as “The Eternal Feminine,” identifying it through an “initiating semitone, upward reaching melody, and intense chromaticism.”<sup>134</sup> This motive does greatly resemble erotic moments in other Skryabin works, especially *Le Poeme de l’Extase*, and its slippery chromaticism certainly indexes broader evocations of musical eroticism like Bizet’s “Habanera” from *Carmen*. The motive languorously slides from F# to G, comes to a brief rest on A# before making a languid ascent to D# through a triplet figure of Fx, G#, and F#. This final triplet figure in particular comes across as a sigh of pleasure, made even more palpable by the unequivocal resolution onto the F# Mystic Collection on the downbeat, with the bass note finally reaching the

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<sup>134</sup> Garcia, 281.

F# that it ‘should have been’ for the entirety of the piece so far. Finally, both of the colors of the *luce* are in line, the harmony matches the blue backdrop. It is as if two worlds are colliding.

It is at this moment that the piano suddenly enters with an ascending figure that is a rhythmic variation on the Theme of Will, and the entire affect and focus of the piece changes (Example 4.5). Where the introduction consisted primarily of diffuse instruments with occasional soloists trying and failing to lead the orchestra in a particular direction, the piano takes on a leadership position from the moment it enters with its forceful statements of the Theme of Will. The piano’s first two statements of the Theme of Will conclude with a rising figure of grace notes running upwards, highly similar to the casual magician’s hand wave in the *Poeme Nocturne*, *Op. 61*. Although this incidence is more forceful, the pianist’s right hand is yet again forced to make a similar gesture, and the casual ease with which a pianist rips their hand across the keyboard lends the soloist a sense of divine might.



Example 4.4 – Skryabin, *Prometheus*, Theme of Desire (Flute, Concert Pitch)

A two-staff musical score. The top staff is marked 'imperieux' and the bottom staff is marked 'con sord.'. Both staves feature complex rhythmic patterns with many triplets. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. The notation includes various accidentals, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Example 4.5 – Skryabin, *Prometheus*, Theme of Will (Piano)

The pianist’s Theme of Will alternates with the erotic theme, entwining the two in the listener’s mind. After the first statement of Will, the erotic theme returns in much fuller

orchestration to reinforce the associations between eroticism and the divine savior. As discussed in chapter 2, Skryabin's philosophical outlook hinges on an interrelationship between desire, creation, will, and struggle. This piano entrance condenses that interrelationship into two thematic statements that become indelibly linked for the remainder of the piece – Will is Desire, Desire is Will.

After his dramatic entrance, our pianistic savior assumes his Orphic character by leading the orchestra through a series of playful moments. At times, chromatic appoggiaturas create a sprightly mood (Example 4.6), while at others the Theme of Desire brings delicate and sensuous eroticism. Throughout, the character of the music changes drastically every handful of measures, with phrase lengths being highly abnormal. A 3.5 bar phrase starting at measure 47 leads into a 2.5 bar phrase beginning on beat 3 of m. 50, followed by a series of fragments of various themes without any regularity of length. The abnormal phrase lengths with pianistic interjections in-between each create a sense of capricious play as the piano dances and weaves between the various instruments.



Example 4.6 – Skryabin, *Prometheus*, *Playful Appoggiaturas* (Piano, mm. 47-49)

The statement of Desire in mm. 50-53 is especially enhanced by the rhythmic push and pull created between the piano and the winds and brass that carry the melody. While the main melodic instruments are playing quite squarely on the beat, the piano plays delicate figurations primarily in sixteenth note quintuplets, and it echoes the current melody note on the 4<sup>th</sup>

quintuplet of each beat (Example 4.7). There is a delicate, teasing sensuousness to this irregular rhythm as the piano languorously echoes the other instruments. This effect is similar to the erotic tension of polyrhythms noted in chapter 3, though here it is split between parts of the orchestra. Eventually, the orchestra drops away to focus attention on the piano as both seem to tire out. The sonic space, previously wide and playful, narrows to a singular point in a turn inwards similar to the oboe solo in Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 5* (discussed in ch. 3). In this moment of interiority, the piano slowly plays a series of “*delicat, cristallin*” chords that seem to reflect a moment of rest, having been tired out by the preceding ‘godlike play.’



Example 4.7 – Skryabin, *Prometheus, Theme of Desire Quintuplets* (Piano, Concert Pitch)

## Stage II: The Fleeting Play

Now, it is time for humanity to help the divine. A rapid tremolo swell in the strings and winds provides a catalyst for yet more play, this time faster and more energetic than before. The transition into root race II, evidenced by the slow *luce*’s change to Ab in m. 79, happens in the midst of this new, more active play. It appears that humanity’s spiritual capacity is raising in tandem with its activity.

The piano responds with a “*voluptueux*” caress, with the left hand sliding down the keyboard in apparent recognition of the advancements of humankind. This begins a conversational passage in which soloists from throughout the orchestra seem to come alive, newly aware of their individuality, and each in turn receives a gentle caress from the piano. Eventually, the piano drops out of the texture to allow the various soloists to interact. Some small motivic fragments mix with the Theme of Ideation and lead to a large swell that marks the

transition to root race III with the change to Bb in m. 111, making root race II the shortest lived of any in the color symphony.

### Stage III: Transport

The transition into the third root race begins with a short-lived conflict, ‘trembling presentiments / of dark rhythms,’ so to speak. Marked “*Imperieux*,” a *sforzando* tutti impact interrupts the previous delicate play and makes room for a statement of the Theme of Will in the trumpet. This foreshadowing of the struggle that will be wrought by Will is, for now, only a brief interruption of the peaceful play of humanity with the piano. This playful enlightenment continues with a conversational episode featuring a call and response phrase in which one instrument plays a trill that then dips downwards while the next instrument enters by moving upwards in dovetailing against it. First the oboe is answered by the clarinets, then by the piano, who has now returned to lead humanity through this next stage of spiritual evolution (Example 4.8). Skryabin marks two thematic ideas as “*Joyeux*,” the first being the syncopated figure in mm. 47-49 (Example 4.6) and the second being this new trill-oriented figure. I will refer to the trill-oriented figure in Example 4.8 as “*Joyeux*” instead of the earlier material because this theme recurs throughout the piece, whereas the syncopated motive only recurs once (see below).



Marked “*theme large majestueux*” (majestic wide theme), the music starting at measure 131 presents an orgiastic celebration of enlightenment (Example 4.9). The tempo slightly slows from 92 bpm to 80 while the harmonic rhythm slows significantly compared to the previous passage. When combined with the orchestration gradually filling in, the result is a sweeping broadening of the sound as it swells and engulfs the listener. The piano plays block chords in polyrhythm against irregular arpeggios, lending an erotic tension to its rhythms. Some recordings even take expressive rubato in this passage, a decision which causes the sound to heave to and fro from measure to measure. The piano begins this passage with a statement of the Theme of Ideation in the D Mystic Chord, matching the slower *luce* part to shine through with the yellow light of the sun. After this initial statement, the piano begins playing a chromatically descending line in fuller chords that repeatedly begins to play the Theme of Ideation but stops short. These repeated attempts build tension through a crescendo that peaks in a transcendent rhythmic variation on the beginning of the Theme of Ideation at a Fortissimo dynamic. This piano passage evokes eroticism through the chromatic slippage of its attempts, lending a connotation of orgiastic eroticism to this broad and majestic music. This affect of eroticism is enhanced by the solo cello line that plays a variation on the striving segment of the Theme of Ideation that focuses on the half step between F# and G, lending it a particularly yearning character.

The image shows a musical score for piano, measures 131-134 from Skryabin's Prometheus. The score is in 3/4 time and features a piano part with block chords and arpeggios. The tempo is marked 'accomp. fougueux' and the dynamic is 'p' (piano). The score includes a 'div.' (divisi) marking and a '3' (triple) marking.

Example 4.9 – Skryabin, Prometheus, mm. 131-134 (Piano)

The orgiastic celebration succeeds – the following passage is an extended transition from color stage 3 to 4, marking the beginning of material form, as well as the transition from Exposition to Development. As Gawboy relates, many analysts have disagreed on the exact boundary of the development in *Prometheus*; Kelkel and Von Gleich put the start of development at m. 163, Delson at 131, Baker at 192, and Horst-Lederer as late as 211.<sup>135</sup> Gawboy contends that “trying to make the musical events of *Prometheus* fit a narrow generic/formal mold is a recipe for analytical frustration,” and argues in favor of “a closer musical relationship to Wagnerian leitmotivic technique than to classical architectonics.”<sup>136</sup> She ultimately concludes that “the dramatic function of three main sections may be loosely realigned with a very abstract sonata narrative,” and I agree with this statement.<sup>137</sup> In keeping with this abstraction, I view the sonata-allegro form of the piece as having hazy boundaries between sections. It is more akin to formal boundary *passages* than *points* of formal articulation.

The first of these boundary passages follows the “*theme large majestueux*” section, marked by a significant change in texture. In m. 145, the piano finishes its final, incomplete statement of the Theme of Ideation above rustling strings and is echoed by the harp in a syncopated, anticipatory manner. It is apparent that the orgiastic energies of the previous passage have been spent, and something new must come. This forward-oriented perspective is mirrored in the fast *luce* line, which moves to C (red) to prefigure the transition into materialism. M. 146 interrupts the echoes of the harp with a simple trumpet fanfare of a rising fourth, marked “sourd, menecant.” The violence of this interruption is met with yet more eroticism, as the French Horn

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<sup>135</sup> Gawboy, 214.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 219.

plays a sliding chromatic countermelody against the solo violin's variation on the Theme of Ideation.

The texture narrows to only the piano yet again, marked "*estrange charme*" and "*rhythme brise*," in a moment of tender caress (Example 4.10). The passage begins each measure with both hands in a fairly high register, with the left hand orbiting middle C and the right hand in and above the treble staff. The chords are sparse, played mostly as individual notes in the "*brise*" rhythms. The effect is similar to the "*cristallin*" passage from mm. 65-66, but now it is interspersed with sudden, sweeping downward arpeggios that lead the pianist to caress the keys. The rapid sixteenth-note triplets of these figures give them a lurching quality, as if the pianist is suddenly taken by the beauty of those it beholds and cannot contain his affection. This is a more sensual and sweet counterpart to the overpoweringly erotic majestic theme, and it inspires the oboe to enter with a variation on the erotic primary theme. As the oboe chromatically slides through this theme P.A.O.S. chimes in with delicate trills near the top of the piano, sprinkling humankind with his light. The tonalities and *luce* part for this entire transitory passage are worthy of note; Gawboy describes an "ambivalence between B and C Pleroma in the passage as a whole. Unlike the discrete block-like changes of harmony encountered earlier in the work, the two sonorities are deployed simultaneously, roughly divided between right and left hands in measures 153-154."<sup>138</sup> The tonality B is light blue while C is red, reflecting a meeting or even conflict between the spiritual and material realms. At this point, humanity is on the precipice between spiritual and material forms, the transformation is almost at hand.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 274. Measures 153-154 are part of the piano solo.



Example 4.10 – Scriabin, *Prometheus*, *Etrange charme* (Piano, Concert Pitch)

Materialism begins to gain the upper hand in measure 161, as not only does the *luce* change to red C, but the violins also begin playing an ethereal motive consisting of an appoggiatura in the B Mystic Collection that immediately resolves upwards by half step into the C Mystic Collection (Example 4.11). The ethereal and mysterious nature of this motive comes from its interval content; each section is playing open fourths of D# and G# on the appoggiatura and D and A on the resolution, creating a ghostly Interval Class 5 sound. This mystical sound is bolstered by the slow glissandi in the harp, which has barely been present thus far but now begins to make a major impact on the music. As the rest of the orchestra begins to play an “*onduleux*” (undulating) passage, the harp keeps steady time with an ascending ostinato. The metrical regularity of this harp line contrasts with the intermingling of the rest of the orchestra to bring order to their chaos. The affect produced is mystical and mysterious, but also methodical and forward-moving; this is the actual act of transportation into a new form and realm.

Luce.

Fl. I. II. *I Solo p*

Ob. I. *pp*

Cont. F.

Cor. I. II. *pp dim. pp*

Cor. III. IV. *pp*

Arpa I.

Piano.

V. I. *pp* *div. a 8*

V. II. *pp* *div. a 8*

Viola. *pp* *uniso.*

Celli. *pp*

C. B. *pp*

13 163

Luce.

Fl. I. *Solo p* *ondulenz*

Fl. II. *pp* *ondulenz*

Ob. I. II. *I Solo p* *pp* *ondulenz*

Cl. I. II. *pp*

Fag. I. II. *pp*

Cor. III. IV. *pp*

Cor. V. VI. *pp* *con sord.*

Arpa a 2. *pp*

V. I. *pp* *div.*

V. II. *pp* *div. a 2*

Viola. *pp* *pizz.* *arco* *pizz.*

Celli. *pp* *pizz.*

C. B. *pp* *pizz.*

Example 4.11 – Skryabin, Prometheus, mm. 166-171

This transportation is also reflected in the Mystic Collections used in this passage both harmonically and in the *luce* line - B for the first two measures, then C for two measures, back to B for another two, and finally C for the final four - which reflects the halting, back and forth movement that Scriabin so frequently evokes in this piece. The eroticism associated with transcendence is reinforced through a slow and dramatic statement of the Theme of Desire in the strings, yet again made more sensual by the piano arpeggiating in tandem and playing the melody slightly out of sync. A solo cello melody in the B Mystic Collection, accompanied by the French Horn alluringly sliding downwards in a syncopated chromatic line, enacts a modulation to the C Mystic Chord that is matched by the *luce*. The voicing of the C Mystic Chord in this measure is far more rounded than before, even including chromatic tones in order to soften the effect of the chord. Instead of closely clashing intervals as before, the lower end is dominated by Perfect 5ths between Bb, F, C, and G, with dissonant tones like D, E, and A relegated to the higher voices in order to diminish the effect of their dissonance. This modulation comes as a release of tension; this stage of transfiguration is complete, humanity has finally achieved material form.

#### Stage IV: Materiality, Conflict, and Compression

In the theosophical cosmogony, the material root races IV and V form the central stage of conflict during which the human spirit will temper itself and become more enlightened during the return to spirituality. In Skryabin's thought, this stage is extraordinarily similar to his theme of struggle and all of its relations to the Nietzschean Will to Power. This conflictual nature is also well-suited to the development section of a sonata form, even with the harmonic structure of a development being mostly absent.

The primary battle lines in the conflict of root race IV are thematic and timbral, with one side of the conflict consisting of the woodwinds and strings playing the playful, “*Joyeux*” theme and the other being the brass playing fragments of the themes of Ideation and Will. These two opposing forces each reflect opposed forces in the Skryabinian cosmogony – the gentle multiplicity of play, and the powerful force of individual will. These diametrical forces must ultimately be reconciled for humanity to achieve the ultimate ascension, and the bulk of that work is accomplished here.

There is an undeniable cinematic quality to the interplay of the instruments color stage IV, the back-and-forth nature of the thematic alteration greatly resembles a fight scene in which each character’s theme accompanies moments when they have the upper hand. Somehow, in spite of writing *Prometheus* in the early days of ‘silent’ film, Skryabin made markedly similar choices to those of film composers to come. My analysis of color stage IV will try to capture the phenomenological essence of this conflict while paying special attention to instrumentation, musical space, and time.

The antecedent phrase of the Theme of Ideation heralds the beginning of the conflict, French Horns V-VIII forcefully asserting themselves and darkening the texture that has been so bright for so long. The final A of the theme is sustained as most of the orchestra plays a massive swell on the C Mystic Collection; the force is nearly overwhelming. The trumpets and horns then each take a turn playing the second fanfare motive *con sordino* and at a piano dynamic. In contrast with the wide and full texture of the preceding measure, these horn and bugle calls sound distant, echoic, and as if they are calling for help. P.A.O.S. responds with the most self-assured statement of the Theme of Will that has thus far appeared, utilizing a wide ambitus between the thundering bass octaves and the crashing treble chords to portray strength and

determination. This powerful statement of will causes a minor crisis for the winds, evidenced by their polyrhythmic fluttering, which interrupts the piano. For the first time in the piece, the Theme of Will has a consequent phrase, one that reverses its upward struggle into a cascading descent (Example 4.12). This version of the Theme of Will is nearly perfectly circular, with the bassline rising from F#2 to F#4 before finally falling back to F#2. This circularity is perhaps a metaphor for the strife of material form; P.A.O.S. is demonstrating that the force of Will causes humankind to struggle upwards, but they will inevitably fall, only to rise again later. The piano quickly confirms the continuous nature of this struggle, as the next phrase is the exact same rise and descent figure, transposed from the C Mystic Collection to that on Ab.



Example 4.12 – Skryabin, *Prometheus*, Theme of Will Consequent Phrase (Piano, mm. 197-200)

Repeated statements of Will in muted trumpets eventually melt into the downbeat of m. 215 with a sudden *dolcissimo pianissimo* as the strings and winds resume their playful trill motive from color stage III, now transposed up a Major third. However, while the first presentation of this theme extended for 12 measures in total, this instance lasts for only 8 before being cut off by violent attacks on the timpani and low brass, heralding the return of Will and Ideation in the brass. This shortening of the “joyeux” theme begins a process of thematic alternation and diminution that progressively compresses each theme until they completely overlap. The effect is akin to a downward spiral collapsing in on itself. After the 8 bar “Joyeux” phrase, the interruptive Will/Ideation phrase is 7 bars, followed by two 6-bar phrases. The first of these two 6-bar phrases is preceded by a 1-bar interruption from the piano, and is then further broken down by yet another pianistic interruption that divides it more accurately into 3+1+2.

These awkward and interrupted groupings lend an off-kilter and chaotic sense to the phrase structure; the music moves forward without any of its phrases feeling complete, as the dissatisfied feeling of constant interruptions raises the level of tension. At m. 242, the phrases diminish down to a series of 2-bar fragments that directly alternate between *Joyeux* and Will/Ideation, before the two ideas merge at measure 253. From this point until m. 300, Will/Ideation repeatedly strive upwards in a series of failed attempts, each one beginning one semitone higher than the last, while *Joyeux* adds a fluttering texture with its trills. The massive crescendo produced by the gradually filling orchestration and rising pitch level of the themes fills the sonic space to the brink of bursting, yet even this seeming fusion of play and Will does not end in fulfillment. The cavernous musical space empties to focus on a solo violin and tinkling metallic percussion, before a strange polyrhythmic piano interruption brings us into the fifth root race.

#### Stage V: The Sublimation of the Erotic

The fifth root race begins with a strange sense of *déjà vu*, as the *Joyeux* theme returns at exactly the same pitch level as at the start of root race IV in m. 215. However, this time *Joyeux* is permitted to run through its entire 12-bar length uninterrupted, the prior conflict with Will/Ideation seemingly forgotten. This strange circularity of form resembles Clifton's concept of temporal intercut, discussed in ch. 3. While Clifton does not give a direct definition of the concept, preferring to explain by way of example, I will do my best to fill that gap. A temporal intercut occurs when new musical material or silence interrupts a musical idea that is later continued, and the word 'intercut' refers to the interruptive material. In this case, the downward spiral and thematic collapse that occurs for the entirety of root race IV is the intercut that has

interrupted *Joyeux*, and root race V represents a second start for this material in which it can develop differently and ultimately lead to the return to spirit in root race VI.

As the manvantara turns ever onwards, each new root race must be more enlightened than the previous, and in root race V this presents as a far more playful and sexy conflict than that of root race IV. This is not simply the result of *Joyeux* finishing its 12-bar phrase, but from a series of piquant moments of eroticism. At m. 329, the solo violin makes a tantalizing statement of Ideation, marked “Suave, charme,” as variations on *Joyeux* dance around it in the winds. The often violent theme that had once been almost exclusively played by the blaring brass takes on a new subtler form in the dexterous hands of a solo violinist. The piano responds with yet another series of pianistic caresses, gently encouraging humanity to pursue this new eroticism.

The end of material form begins with the metallic percussion and high winds playing pointillist figures syncopated against each other in an “etincelant” sparkle that echoes throughout the musical space. This transformation of the harp’s mystical ostinato from the transition into materialism has a far more climactic character when compared to its prior incarnation’s methodical forward motion. This musical background of twinkling lights accompanies a series of statements of Will and Ideation that appear in ever more parts of the orchestra until members of all instrumental families are crying out in unison. However, these statements of Will/Ideation differ markedly from in root race IV. In place of constant interruptions by *Joyeux* or pianistic flourishes, the momentum of Will/Ideation carries forward through a gradually increasing density of orchestration that ebbs and flows in powerful waves. What had once been a confused mess of competing objectives, a chaotic tumult of voices shouting to be heard over one another, has now become unified in pursuit of a single goal.

I find it impossible not to remark on the stark similarities of orchestration and thematic motion that this passage shares with the climax of *Le Poeme de l'Extase*. Both passages share the background of sparkling metallic percussion echoing around powerful statements of a rising theme primarily located in the brass (Theme of Self-Affirmation in *l'Extase*, Will/Ideation in *Prometheus*), and the surging waves of orchestration that gradually crescendo to a peak. In *Le Poeme de l'Extase*, the metaphor is explicitly sexual, as this is the moment of erotic rapture that births the universe:

The universe  
Is embraced in flames  
Spirit at the summit of its being  
Feels  
Endless tides  
Of divine power  
Of free will  
Emboldened,  
That which menaced  
Is now seduction  
That which frightened  
Is now pleasure  
And the bites of panther and hyena  
Are new caresses  
And the serpent's sting  
Is but a burning kiss.

And thus the universe resounds  
With a joyful cry  
I AM!<sup>139</sup>

This passage is a perfect example of the tendency to which Mitchell Morris is referring when he argues that “although [Skryabin’s] music and his poetry will work hard to make reference to the

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<sup>139</sup> Skryabin, *The Poem of Ecstasy*, trans. Faubion Bowers.

physical characteristics of erotic experience, and indeed to evoke them in its audiences, the reasons for their doing so will be to turn such energy towards metaphysical purposes.”<sup>140</sup>

Returning to root race V in *Prometheus*, the phenomenological experience of this passage is so similar to the ending of *l'Extase* that I argue it constitutes a clear example of eroticism being sublimated into spiritual transcendence. The waves of desire lead directly into a recapitulation of the intertwined statements of the Theme of Desire and Theme of Will from the piano's entrance. While this may not be the ultimate transformation, it marks the beginning of the return to spirituality while also forming the second sonata-form boundary passage, the extended transition out of the development.

#### Stage VI: The Luminescence of Spirit

This formal boundary passage contains three important formal articulations, the thematic recapitulation of intertwined Will and Desire, the slow *luce*'s transition to E, and the piano soloist's cadenza. The order in which these events take place quite directly follows piano concerto tradition, with the tutti thematic recapitulation preceding the soloist's cadenza. What is unusual in this passage is that the return of Will and Desire is also transposed from their original presentations in the F# and Eb Mystic Sonorities to the D and B Mystic Sonorities, erasing the standard tonal plan of the form. Yet, as a listener, I cannot ignore that this passage phenomenologically *feels* like a recapitulation. I attribute this sense to the way that Skryabin presents each theme in such transparent sections, with long sustained pitches clearly delineating them from the material before; first Desire languorously plays in winds and strings, then Will in piano, then repeat both in similar orchestrations but transposed down a Minor Third. This method of directly portraying the themes only happens at these two points in the piece, linking

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<sup>140</sup> Morris, “Musical Eroticism and the Transcendent Strain,” 248.

them in the listener’s mind. This may not be a recapitulation of harmony, but it is a return to what once was and a chance to start anew.

After the re-exposition of the themes, the piano immediately moves to the playful *Joyeux* passage; after the thematic recapitulation, the piano launches into a madcap cadenza that makes passing reference to *Joyeux*, but is primarily characterized by its fractured phrases and more than doubling of the tempo from 80 bpm to 184.

The grace-note figure from the consequent of Will recurs throughout this passage as a show of casual mastery and confidence (Figure 4.13). At this extreme tempo, the motive can be played only by shifting the hand into a position with fingers on each of the four keys and then ‘ripping’ it across from left to right, using the wrist and elbow as articulatory joints. This kind of articulation leads to the right hand ‘leaping’ off of the keys, which perfectly sets up the pianist to direct their momentum towards landing on the following note, on which Skryabin conveniently placed an accent. This type of motion is more impressive visually and sonically than it is difficult, and the insertion of it throughout the cadenza lends a sense of improvisatory ease to the affair in spite of how carefully worked out the passage is. The way that Skryabin sprinkles this minor moment of showmanship and energy throughout the cadenza creates an interesting mix of divine mastery and frantic motion throughout the cadenza.



Example 4.13 – Skryabin, *Prometheus*, mm. 393-398

One of the musical symbols that Garcia names in Skryabin’s late works is “Vertiginous Dances,” and while I agree that passages exist in Skryabin’s music that match her description of the symbol, I argue that she misidentifies many of the characteristics of a vertiginous dance.

Garcia defines the symbol as “the achievement of ecstasy through intoxicating spinning dances” that were “believed by the symbolists to be part of the Dionysian cult ritual.”<sup>141</sup> Garcia relates that the symbolists claimed the goal of such ritual was “the dancer’s collapse in exhaustion and an enhanced susceptibility to divine influence.”<sup>142</sup> My main contention with Garcia’s framing is her focus on Skryabin’s textual references in the sheet music rather than the actual phenomenological experience of the music. She offers three examples taken from Sonatas 6 and 7, two of which are marked, respectively, “*ailé, tourbillonnant*” and “*en delire*,” which are certainly performance descriptions that suggest such a character (Examples 4.14 and 4.15). However, these two examples chosen fit to Garcia’s definition of “in square meters of 2/8 or 2/4, involve straightforward blocked chords in short phrase units of two and four measures,” which hardly seems like the reckless abandon that she describes. The third example, the ending of *Piano Sonata No. 6*, does not match most of these criteria (Example 4.16).



Example 4.14 – Skryabin, *Piano Sonata No. 6*, mm. 92-95.

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<sup>141</sup> Garcia, 285.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) with a complex, dense chordal texture. A dynamic marking of *sed.* (sordido) is present. The second system continues this texture, with a dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) and a tempo marking of *en délire*. The music features a variety of accidentals and complex rhythmic patterns.

Example 4.15 – Skryabin, Piano Sonata No. 7, mm. 325-334.

The image shows a single system of musical notation for a piano piece, consisting of two staves (treble and bass clef). The music features complex chordal structures and a dynamic marking of *mp* (mezzo-piano). The notation includes various accidentals and rhythmic markings, such as a *tr* (trill) and a *4* (quartic) marking.

Example 4.16 – Skryabin, Piano Sonata No. 6, mm. 380-387.

Putting aside the inconsistency of the third and final example, when listening to and playing these passages, I do not experience the kind of wild abandon that Garcia describes. These passages do convey a sense of power and determination, and in direct contrast to Garcia's argument, they feel far more like representations of power and control than gleeful intoxication.

To me, the vertiginous dances of Skryabin's music come in moments that are chaotic, capricious, and a bit unhinged. Two examples loom larger than any others in my mind – the *Piu vivo* passage of *Piano Sonata No. 10*, and the cadenza of *Prometheus*. These two passages are not unified by such stratifying constraints as meters or the presence of blocked chords, and absolutely do not follow consistent phrasal patterns. In fact, it is the very refusal to adhere to such principles that characterizes these wild dances for me. In *Piano Sonata 10*, the impossibly fast runs, the meter that shifts between 2/8 and 3/16 seemingly at random, and the quintuplet chords that recollect the chittering of insects all combine to form an image of chaotic madness (Example 4.17). In *Prometheus's* cadenza, this sense of madness stems from a combination of the absurd tempo, the syncopated references to mm. 47-49 (Example 4.6), the fragmentary phrases, and the grace-note rips across the keyboard that demonstrate P.A.O.S.'s casual mastery over his domain. That the transition to root race VI occurs in the midst of this cadenza speaks to the enlightening power of P.A.O.S.'s mad dance, and sets the stage for the final transformation.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system consists of two staves. The upper staff features a complex texture of chords and arpeggios, with a dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) and the instruction *Più vivo*. The lower staff has a more rhythmic accompaniment. The second system also has two staves. The upper staff has a fermata over a measure, and the lower staff has a '5' fingering indicated. The music is in a key with one flat and a 2/4 time signature.

Example 4.17 – Skryabin, *Piano Sonata No. 10*, mm. 305-313

After the transition to root race VI, *Prometheus* quickly moves towards its ending, and this analysis has now finally returned to this problematic conclusion. The final chord is not the only seeming misfit in the ending, as much of the recapitulation strikes me as unfocused. I contend that a primary reason for this is acoustic – parts of this ending approach the sublime power of the finale to *l'Extase*, yet the most important soloist this time is not a trumpet, but the far quieter piano. While a piano can obviously produce a significant amount of sound, in comparison to the massive orchestra assembled here (“eight horns” yet again), it is like pitting a rifle against a cannon. For the piano to maintain its position of leadership, Skryabin needed to carefully balance the orchestra. Even in the powerful ‘retransition’ passage from 355-369, Skryabin makes sure to leave textural gaps in the brass for the piano, and doubles it with piccolo

and both violin sections to ensure it sticks out. Yet, this passage does not reach the sublime heights of cacophony that Skryabin reached in *l'Extase*, though the final section of *Prometheus* does achieve a similar decibel level in two places – immediately after the piano cadenza, and in the final bars.

The conflicting desires to have the piano as the most important instrument, and also to overwhelm the listener's senses, leads to the recapitulation alternating between sparse soloistic textures that highlight the piano, and passages of monumental sound. These alternations come rather suddenly, and the move to the final cadence strikes me as particularly forced. The piano performs one final vertiginous dance with sprightly confidence, and suddenly lands on an open octave near the top of its range and simply disappears for the rest of the piece. This anticlimactic final 'chord' is a far cry from the definitive, assertive statements that the piano has previously held. P.A.O.S. leaves the 'concerto' not with a triumph, but with a whimper.

Skryabin then moves to the ending by simply writing a sustained chord in strings and winds, before beginning slow statements of Will in the brass. As a composer, this transition is what I would write if I had two sections that I simply could not get to join together smoothly and so I chose brute force instead of subtlety. The sustained chord and then sudden introduction of a theme is the compositional equivalent of an author writing the phrase "several days later," it is an effective but unsubtle glue holding this ending together. From here, the previously discussed attempt at 'finishing' occurs, and the titanic symphonic poem *cum* work of theurgy is complete.

## **Conclusion**

Like many of Skryabin's works, *Prometheus* is paradoxically at once momentous and trivial; its intended narrative covers the entire history of the human species, and yet the work is also but a single building block of the fabled *Mysterium*. It is at once a concert work, an early

experiment in multimedia production, a statement of art's ability to influence the spirit, and a work of theurgy. Of Skryabin's completed theurgic works, its components are best-preserved and most readily translatable into metaphorical and philosophical concepts. This relative clarity, alongside the sheer scale of its performance, make it the most exoteric expression of Skryabin's philosophical outlook.

In the next chapter, I will turn away from the exoteric excesses of *Prometheus* towards the esoteric intricacies of *Piano Sonata No. 10*, Skryabin's final completed work in the genre. Where *Prometheus* is loud, grand, and relatively clear, this final sonata is subtle, mysterious, and introspective.

## Chapter 5

### The Piano Sonata as Ritual

*Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* represents Skryabin's music and philosophy at their most exoteric, a grand symphonic poem designed to influence the audience's spiritual faculties through a multisensory spectacle, with Skryabin himself at the helm of a gargantuan orchestra. It is, at once, a work of theurgy, education, and celebration, directed outwards from Skryabin towards anybody who experiences it. In many ways, it prefigures the never-to-be-completed *Mysterium*, and the partially completed *Prefatory Action*, in the way Skryabin hoped to use it as a means to transform the world, and it remains the grandest of such experiments that Skryabin was able to complete.

In stark contrast, his late piano sonatas, especially *Piano Sonata No. 10*, represent his music and philosophy at their most esoteric. These strange keyboard works have mystified pianists, audiences, and critics throughout the century since their writing due to their non-functional harmony, strange and seemingly multi-dimensional relationships with sonata form, and unique textural effects arising from pervasive trills.<sup>143</sup> These mysterious and opaque sonatas nonetheless convey an expressive intensity that seemingly *begs* to be interpreted. For, how could a composer with such well-known musical-philosophical views write pieces that are so daring and idiosyncratic without imbuing them with some kind of deeper meaning?

Skryabin's designation of *Piano Sonata No. 10* as an "insect sonata" has been widely cited in the secondary literature and in concert program notes as well as album liner notes, even

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<sup>143</sup> See Smith, Kenneth and Kallis, Vasilis, "Scriabin and Music Analysis: The Search for the Holy Grail" for a detailed historiography of music-theoretical thought on Skryabin's music. See Smith, Kenneth, "Scriabin's Multi-Dimensional Accelerative Sonata Forms" for a discussion of multi-dimensional form.

being one of the first pieces of information on the piece’s Wikipedia page.<sup>144</sup> However, it is difficult to find sources that deal with the substance of what Skryabin meant by this unusual claim. The Los Angeles Philharmonic has a page devoted to program notes for the piece that claims the reference to insects corresponds to “the plethora of trills in the piece,” and the liner notes to Yuja Wang’s 2018 recording with *Deutsche Grammophon* simply present an abbreviated portion of his statement about insects, and describes the piece as “culminating in an insane twittering towards the end of the work.”<sup>145</sup> Siegfried Schibli’s 2023 publication on Skryabin’s writings briefly mentions that there are metaphorical aspects to this statement, but does not elaborate.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, it is strange that this quotation is so ubiquitously associated with *Sonata 10*, yet the most common approach to referring to this claim from the composer is to simply present it and leave the reader to make their own conclusions.

This flattening of the insect quote masks the fact that this metaphorical reading from the composer comes from a fascinating discussion recorded in Sabaneev’s *Reminiscences*, in which Skryabin, Tatiana Fyodorovna Skryabina, and Sabaneev are discussing the metaphorical ways that various animals “correspond to the movements of our souls.”<sup>147</sup> Skryabin exclaims that animals are “symbols, but what wonderful symbols!,” and he primarily focuses on the ways that various animals correspond to various kinds of caresses. For example, “birds correspond to

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<sup>144</sup> Schibli, Siegfried, “Normative, Descriptive, Suggestive – the Word in Scriabin’s Instrumental Music” in *Word Art + Gesture Art = Tone Art*, 179. See also Voss, James, “Scriabin in Context”; Grande, Antonio, “Temporal Perspectives in Scriabin’s Late Music” in *Demystifying Scriabin*.

<sup>145</sup> LAPhil.com, “Piano Sonata No. 10, Op. 70.”; Vogt, Mario-Felix, “Warbling Birds and the Din of War,” liner notes for *The Berlin Recital: Rachmaninov, Scriabin, Ligeti, Prokofiev*.

<sup>146</sup> Schibli, Siegfried, “Normative, Descriptive, Suggestive – the Word in Scriabin’s Instrumental Music” in *Word Art + Gesture Art = Tone Art*, 179.

<sup>147</sup> Sabaneev 1925, 232.

elated caresses” whereas “harrowing caresses – these are beasts.”<sup>148</sup> However, the conversation quickly turns from a discussion of erotic symbolism to joking about how mice are bad omens.<sup>149</sup> After Skryabin makes a joke about writing a zoological work from the perspective of a fish, Sabaneev poses another seemingly lighthearted question, “and what about other living creatures, like worms, insects?,” but Skryabin abruptly returns to a serious tone by responding:

Insects, butterflies, moths – they are all living flowers. They are the most subtle caresses, almost without touching... They are all born of the sun and the sun nourishes them... This sunlike caress is the closest to me – take my tenth sonata – it is an entire sonata from insects.<sup>150</sup>

There are certainly aspects of the sonata that bear significant literal resemblance to insects – the pervasive trills buzz and quiver like insect wings, and the madcap *Piu Vivo* section scurries about with nervous, chattering energy – but equally important are the metaphorical levels in which the sonata relates to Skryabin’s image of insects as “living flowers...born of the sun” that deliver “the most subtle caresses.”<sup>151</sup> The insects that Skryabin had in mind while writing this sonata are not simply buzzing busybodies, but sun-kissed and sparkling with a dazzling gleam and an erotic delicacy as they caress with their gentle wingbeats. These insects combine many of Skryabin’s favored philosophical, symbolic, and metaphorical strains – ceaseless activity, fluttering, illumination, seduction – into one potent symbol for enabling spiritual enlightenment.

There is another quality of insects that sets them apart from the other animals discussed by Skryabin – where people of various cultures have long had traditions of anthropomorphizing mammals, birds, and even fish, insects seem to resist such an impulse. Perhaps due to their

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid. The word “elated” is here translated from “Окрылённый,” derived from wing.

<sup>149</sup> Sabaneev 1925, 232.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 233. Ellipses in original.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

evolutionary distance from humans, or from their hard carapaces, there is an impersonal and alien quality to insects that makes them difficult to relate to on an emotional level. Some species, such as ants, bees, locusts, and any swarming insects, also display an uncanny coordination of disparate individuals with no system of communication that is immediately apparent, what some science-fiction authors have called a ‘hive mind.’ Insects, then, are an ideal metaphor for Skryabin’s own ideas of multiplicitous unity, and their impersonality serves only to add to their esoteric mystique.

In this chapter, I will argue for a reframing of the purpose of Skryabin’s late sonatas via a close-grained analysis of *Piano Sonata No. 10*. Traditional hermeneutic and semiotic analysis frequently produce the same kind of answer – that these sonatas *represent* a mystic experience that gradually builds to a moment of enlightenment before receding.<sup>152</sup> I propose instead the view that these sonatas *are* a mystic experience, a form of spiritual work on the part of the performer that is intended to enlighten by challenging the mental and spiritual faculties. Anna Gawboy quite accurately labels *Prometheus* a work of ‘theurgy’ designed to educate and enlighten the masses.<sup>153</sup> Large scale works like *Prometheus* or the planned *Prefatory Action* were exoteric works of theurgy aimed outwards; I contend that the final piano sonatas were a form of esoteric theurgy aimed inwards, towards Skryabin himself and a small number of hierophantic initiates.

In order to support this argument, I must necessarily rely heavily on auto-ethnographic analysis of my own experience playing *Piano Sonata No. 10*. My experience of learning this piece has been instrumental in bringing me to these conclusions, and so this chapter will

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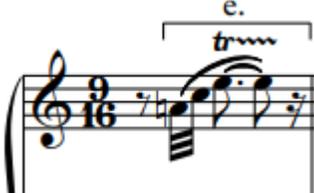
<sup>152</sup> This representational narrative is the “Plot Archetype” to which Susanna Garcia refers in her seminal article “Scriabin’s Symbolist Plot Archetype.”

<sup>153</sup> Gawboy, Anna, “Scriabin’s Theurgy in Blue.”

primarily consist of a chronological, narrativized account of my phenomenological experience of playing the piece, interspersed with critical commentary that analyzes each section in turn.

Crucial features of the sonata to keep in mind as they appear, develop, and fragment are a high degree of contrapuntal complexity, the relentless and eventually all-consuming invasion of trills, a harmonic plan built around systematic transposition by major and minor thirds, the large-scale arc of rising and then falling intensity, highly abnormal sonata-allegro form, and a sudden taste of tonality in the final two pitches of the piece. I have also included a table showing the various themes and motives of the sonata (Table 5.1).

**Table 5.1 – Piano Sonata No. 10 Themes and Motives**

| Sheet Music  | Letter | Theme Name             |
|--|--------|------------------------|
| <p data-bbox="370 968 505 1016"><i>Moderato<br/>tres doux et pur</i></p>         | A      | Opening Motive         |
|  | B      | Chromatic slither      |
|  | C      | Ritual Bells           |
| <p data-bbox="370 1297 570 1325"><i>avec une ardeur profonde et voilee</i></p>  | D      | Rising Chromatic Theme |
|   | E      | Grace-note trill       |

|  |   |                       |
|--|---|-----------------------|
|  | F | Allegro Theme         |
|  | H | Joyeuse               |
|  | I | Falling/Rising Thirds |
|  | J | Untitled Fragment     |
|  | K | Untitled Fragment     |

*I take a deep breath to steel my nerves, place my right hand on the keyboard, and intone the opening gesture with a simple circular motion in my wrist. The bare augmented chord rings with a strange purity and consonance. I repeat the gesture, a third lower and with a narrower ambitus, and this unadorned diminished chord also feels strangely peaceful. Calmed by the gentle resonance, I move on to the slippery chromatic motive and find myself unable to sit still. My body gently sways in concert with the motion of the notes, I unconsciously slow down as I lean into the gesture. My upward motion feels tense, yearning, yet is instantaneously refuted as my hand sinks downwards and my posture slackens. I casually reach to a higher register and wave my hand across the keys as bells gently ring...*

In chapter 3 of this dissertation, I remarked that Skryabin's late works *demand* one's sustained attention as they develop across time. As Mitchell Morris is wont to say, "when listening to Wagner and Skryabin, you must *submit*," and these late sonatas demand one's close attention from the first notes. Yet, when Skryabin desires an obedient listener, he generally prefers to draw one in through gentle seduction rather than arrest one's attention through brute force. Take, for the sake of contrast, the openings of the finale to Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* and Skryabin's *Piano Sonata No. 10*. Beethoven aggressively demands the listener's attention through the "terror fanfare," a tutti explosion of energy that dominates the listener's sense of musical space. The fanfare presses against the listener, grabs their attention by force and refuses to let go.

Skryabin's final sonata, on the other hand, begins so delicately that Sabaneev remarks that "Skryabin had never written with so little sound and so simply."<sup>154</sup> Yet, according to Skryabin, this simplicity is only skin-deep: "here, after all, are few notes, it is the minimum of pitches, but the psychology remains complex."<sup>155</sup> I concur with Skryabin here – in my own phenomenological experience as a listener, there is a kind of intimate intensity to these opening notes, a sense of something profound just out of my range of perception that draws me inwards. The effect is similar to the opening of Schoenberg's *Three Piano Pieces*, Opus 11 or Webern's *String Quartet* (1905); the slow outlining of dissonant harmony in such a bare texture lends the music a sense of focused intentionality. The simple purity of Skryabin's opening motive, "*tres doux et pur*," captures and focuses one's attention in a similar way to a ritual bell summoning a congregation to order.

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<sup>154</sup> Sabaneev 1925, 226.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

*My left hand sinks into the lowest Gb octave on the piano, the bass notes growling as I repeat the opening invocation of an augmented triad. Where I had once felt tense stillness, I now feel a mysterious strength. When the time comes to slither through the chromatic motive again, my sense of yearning is heightened by my newfound confidence. I let ring yet more bells, and float in the mysterious harmony for a moment...*

Skryabin's repetition of the opening motive has a far wider ambitus, placing the bass notes as low as they can possibly go on the piano, and the high grace-note figure as high as it can go. The music's occupation of musical space moves from a small, solitary sound in the center to a deep, cavernous echo. After one has been drawn in by the ritual bell, its repetition envelops the listener in a warm yet tense embrace. When this motive repeats throughout the sonata, it is nearly always a transposition of this wide-ranging variation.

Sabaneev characterizes the piece as a forest in which the "sounds and atmospheres of nature" confront the "human soul."<sup>156</sup> Both Skryabin and Sabaneev fixate on natural and internal metaphors for describing this sonata, and Sabaneev's description of the confrontation between nature and the human soul is quite possibly a reference to Charles Baudelaire's early Symbolist poem "Correspondances":

Nature is a temple whose living colonnades  
Breathe forth a mystic speech in fitful sights;  
Man wanders among the symbols in those glades  
Where all things watch him with familiar eyes

Like dwindling echoes gathered far away  
Into a deep and throning unison  
Huge as the night or as the light of day,  
All scents and sounds and colors meet as one.

Perfumes there are as sweet as the oboe's sound,  
Green as the prairies, fresh as a child's caress,  
-and there are others, rich, corrupt, profound

And an infinite pervasiveness,  
Like myrrh, or musk, or amber, that excite

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 226.

The ecstasies of sense, the soul's delight.<sup>157</sup>

This poem combines many of Skryabin's favorite concepts - infinity, ecstasy, and symbolism - ties them to the soul and senses while wrapping them in the metaphor of a forest which a person must traverse. Skryabin draws in the listener with "the minimum of pitches, but the psychology remains complex" as the pianist gently leads both the listener and themselves into the forest.<sup>158</sup>

*My left hand gently traces a connection between the Ab and Eb in the bass before reaching up to meet my right hand in the center. My left repeatedly reaches downwards in progressively smaller circles, the top pitches sliding down chromatically, as my right hand begins to strive upwards in slow, halting motions. I feel my hands pazoïdym (razoydoot, raz – separating, idti – walking, unidirectional) as they pull away from each other in gentle 2:3 polyrhythm. My progress is interrupted by sudden leaps in both hands, as the chromatic slither from the opening rings out in the top against a now-habitual polyrhythmic accompaniment. As I repeat this figure, my left hand plays a downwards chromatic slide that elongates the rhythm each time, from 6 per measure to 5 to 4 to 3 to 2. Time seems to stretch to the point of standing still as I let one last harmony ring...*

Musicologists have reached many disagreements on the sonata-form thematic structure of *Piano Sonata No. 10*. Garcia sees the opening section as a slow introduction, while Kenneth Smith argues that "it is part of the main sonata space."<sup>159</sup> Smith's reasoning is based on the fact that "this introduction returns and is developed form [sic] at bb. 29, 116, 132, 184, 360," and I concur with his reasoning.<sup>160</sup> While sonata-form introductions do occasionally return throughout a work in some kind of structural way, such as the *Grave* in Beethoven's *Piano Sonata No. 8*, "Pathetique," the opening material of Skryabin's *Sonata 10* is far more pervasive on both a thematic and harmonic level (more on this later). In sum, then, the piece has three sonata-form themes – the opening material, the chromatic rise beginning at m. 9, and the allegro theme.

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<sup>157</sup> Baudelaire, Charles, "Correspondances," translated by Richard Wilbur.

<sup>158</sup> Sabaneev 1925, 227.

<sup>159</sup> Garcia, Susanna, "Scriabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype," 291. Smith, Kenneth, "Scriabin's Multi-Dimensional Accelerative Sonata Forms," 189.

<sup>160</sup> Smith, Kenneth, "Scriabin's Multi-Dimensional Accelerative Sonata Forms," 189.

Skryabin himself said that this passage “should be filled with such *longing*,” and characterized it as “the true dissolution of nature. It is also – *The Mystery* – it is all that is and will be.”<sup>161</sup> Indeed, the halting chromatic rise in the right hand against the chromatic descent in the left, paired with the polyrhythms produce a sense of yearning in both my experiences as performer and listener. This theme is unsettled, it бродит (Brodit – to wander, multidirectional) without settling anywhere. The changing triplets in the left hand act like a form of written-in rubato that dilates time until it seems to stand still.

*I linger on the foggy chord as I mentally prepare myself for the work to come. I intone the ritual bells again while filled with trepidation, knowing this is the last moment of peace I will have for quite some time. Letting the bells ring with the sustain pedal, I prepare my hands for the shock of motion to come. I rip my right hand across the keys while throwing my left hand downwards, careless about rhythm, and my hand begins to flutter between Gb and G natural. The sudden violence of the motion fades as my fluttering slackens. I repeat the same gesture in a lower register, emboldened by my strength. A pause that feels like an eternity, and then a far gentler explosion of energy – an A Minor 7<sup>th</sup> chord with beautiful fluttering trill between E and F, lumineux vibrant...*

Skryabin’s trills form one of the most idiosyncratic and pervasive elements of his late style. All of the major late works feature them to a significant degree, but it is *Piano Sonata No. 10* and *Vers la Flamme* that incorporate them to the greatest degree. In *Sonata 10*, these initial trills come as a sudden burst of energy in what has been a fairly sedate piece up to this point. From this point onwards, they gradually begin to pervade the texture until the climactic moment of 4-note chord tremolos. Yet, these trills do not belong to any of the three sonata-form themes of the piece – on a formal level, they are an invader from outside that comes to dominate the music. Skryabin says of these trills “one must play these trills with special care, *wingedly*.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Sabaneev 1925, 226.

<sup>162</sup> Sabaneev 1925, 226.

On an embodied level, Skryabin gives these trills their ‘winged’ character through the grace-note anacrusis that leads into them. The vast majority of these trills begin by arpeggiating a root-position triad, most often minor, directly into the trill between the fifth of the triad and the pitch a semitone above it (e.g., A-C-E triad, F trill note). When playing them with the right hand, the most efficient and reliable way to do so is to play the triad arpeggiation with fingers 1-2-3 (A-C-E), play the first trill note with finger 4 (F), then shift the hand so that finger 1 is on the fifth (E) and finger 3 on the trill note (F) and begin to flutter. If the fifth of the triad is a black key, then all steps remain the same, except that the trill should be between fingers 2 and 3 instead of 1 and 3. This technique avoids placing the trill between fingers 3 and 4, which, due to the inherent weakness of finger 4, is likely impossible to execute as many times as necessary in this piece.<sup>163</sup> It is also worth noting that piano trills are played with far more of the hand than trills on woodwinds or strings; the standard technique involves rapidly rotating the wrist in conjunction with finger motion to alternate faster than only finger movement would allow, and causes the hand to quiver in place. By playing the trill motive this way, the hand moves in a sudden burst of diagonal motion, briefly disconnects from the keyboard, and then begins to flutter. There is an uncanny resemblance to the flapping of a wing, followed by a trembling dissipation of the initial energy.

*I launch into the Allegro, leaning the weight of my hand to the right in order to emphasize the chromatic sliding theme at the top. I barely pluck the inner keys in the right hand, using the rapid rotation of my hand to simply graze my fingers across them as my upper three fingers negotiate a delicate alternation to ensure legato playing of the melody. My left hand flies down the keyboard in a violent run before reversing course and dissipating its energy just as the theme slides to a halt. I focus on capturing the intensity of this moment, ‘avec emotion,’ while carefully juggling*

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<sup>163</sup> Finger 4, the ring finger, is notoriously weaker than the other fingers on the hand due to structure of tendons within the hand (find a citation). Fingers can always be strengthened, but after 20 years of playing the piano, while I can execute Skryabin’s trill motive using fingers 3 and 4 a small number of times in a row, I find myself becoming fatigued long before the end of only the exposition. No such problems arise with the fingering given above, and given Skryabin’s own injury to his right hand, I cannot imagine that he would use another fingering.

*this intensity with the delicacy of the three-voice counterpoint. The motive repeats many times, polyrhythmically swirling through variations and transpositions that move between F, Db, and A. I fight the urge to smile brought on by the sense of mastery earned through diligent practice as my hands naturally flow through the awkward motions. I reach a brief moment of respite as I crescendo, 'haletant'...*

The odd formal construction of *Sonata 10* continues with its Allegro theme, which has the up-tempo pacing of a typical primary theme yet is the last of the principal themes to be introduced. It is also quite short at only 2 measures in length. All three of the themes in *Sonata 10* are brief, with the opening theme being the longest at 4 measures, if one counts the sustain of measure 3's material into measure 4. The opening theme also breaks into smaller antecedent and consequent phrases, with the arpeggiations being an antecedent and the chromatic slide being the consequent, meaning that the smallest motive consists of only four sixteenth notes. This brevity of thematic material is crucial to Skryabin's method of development for the remainder of the sonata – themes are treated as modular, interlocking parts that appear in combination, sequence, and juxtaposition with each other.

Presentations of the Allegro motive follow a fairly regular harmonic plan, with the first measure presenting an extended harmony based on a major triad, and then the second measure answering with an extended harmony on a major or minor triad located a major third below the first (Example 5.1). The first presentation of the theme in m. 39 moves from F to Db, and after an identical repeat in mm. 41-42, the second version at m. 43 transposes this motion to Db and then A. These three major-third-related chords form a harmonic nexus in which Skryabin's theme moves, and while such a system does allow for harmonic motion that is quite chromatic by the standards of functional tonality, the equal subdivision of the octave entailed by major third transposition or sequencing necessarily limits the possibilities and could lead to the music getting 'stuck' in its major third nexus.



*Example 5.1 – Skryabin, Piano Sonata No. 10, mm. 39-40.*

Interestingly, Skryabin has a systematic solution to this issue. The exit from a major third nexus is typically accomplished via motion by *minor* third, which then shunts the harmony into a new major third nexus. For example, the initial statement of the Allegro theme moves a minor third up from Db to E, briefly states the theme once with oscillation between E and C, and then moves onwards to Eb. This modulatory scheme is at once highly chromatic and elegantly controlled, allowing for harmonic progressions that radiate outwards from their source in mysterious, unpredictable ways that are nonetheless guided by logic. In many ways, it is a musical analogue to the kind of rational exoskeleton that Skryabin used to justify his mysticism. This fixation on a contrast between major and minor thirds is also foreshadowed from the opening notes of the piece, in which the pianist first outlines an augmented triad (entirely major thirds) and then a diminished triad (entirely minor thirds). Throughout the sonata, chord changes on a micro level almost exclusively move their roots by major third, minor third, or tritone, with the tritone being simply a minor third doubled. Skryabin, then, replaces traditional fifth-based tonality with a system of interlocking nexuses of thirds that radiate outwards from their starting point.

The phenomenological character of this Allegro theme is difficult to pin down, as this theme has been a site of significant interpretive difference among pianists. On the one hand, it is a spartan construction with a sliding chromatic scale in the top voice, an arpeggiation in the bass, and figural filler in the middle voice (Example 5.1). On the other, the bass voice outlines a rapid arpeggio of fourths and fifths into a deep register of the piano at such high speed that it encourages being played with much force. Vladimir Ashkenazy does so quite prominently in his 1997 recording, yet many other pianists have abstained from this intensity.<sup>164</sup> Horowitz's 1963 recording takes precisely the opposite approach, hardly grazing the bass notes and barely even touching the pedal.<sup>165</sup> The acoustic difference is drastic, as in Ashkenazy's recording the motive comes as a powerful release of energy that quickly subsides, whereas in Horowitz's recording there is a surgical precision to the rapid execution of bare counterpoint.

Skryabin's own commentary to Sabaneev is difficult to reconcile with the music and extant recordings – "here there must be such joy, joy that brings you over the edge, into frenzy!".<sup>166</sup> My personal phenomenological experience of this passage as a listener is not one of joy, regardless of who plays it or how, and I feel assured that most others would answer similarly. In order to make sense of Skryabin's remark, which is seemingly at odds with the musical evidence, his statement needs to be reframed within his own philosophical outlook, in which activity, motion, and 'free creation' are the ultimate sources of pleasure (see Ch. 2). The first two themes are slow, there is languor in their stillness, every phrase ends by simply trailing off. The Allegro, in contrast, is energetic, its harmonies shift throughout the major third nexus at a far

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<sup>164</sup> Ashkenazy, Vladimir. *Scriabin: The Piano Sonatas*, 1997.

<sup>165</sup> Horowitz, Vladimir. *Scriabin: Sonatas, Etudes, Poemes, Feuillet d'album; Vers la Flamme*, 1963. Pianists Yuja Wang and Andrew Tyson adopt the same approach as Horowitz.

<sup>166</sup> Sabaneev 1925, 226.

quicker pace than earlier passages, and its polyrhythmic rumbling lends it a busy, bustling texture. This Allegro theme does not *represent* joy or seek to *elicit* it in the *listener*, it *enacts* Skryabin's joy of activity and free play for the *pianist*. Performing this passage is difficult, as the high speed, necessity of finger legato for the top line, polyrhythm, and wide spacing make multiple intense demands on the performer at the same time. Yet, I cannot deny that once I learned to play it proficiently, this passage became a joyous moment to perform. It is the joy of activity, the joy of feeling one's body execute precise motions with accustomed ease, the joy of ending a state of languor.

*I break free from the circular Allegro theme, my right hand taking flight with its trill motive as the left forcefully rises from the bass. I strike middle-F to let it ring through my glistening trill, and roll my left hand across the bass register while abandoning my trill to throw my right hand onto the end of the chord begun in my left. The F now slithers downwards in the chromatic slide from the opening as I resume trilling in the right hand. My hands begin trading off the chromatic slide and the trill motive, a cascading tumult punctuated by massive rolled chords every two bars. The sequential polyphony splits my attention and my hands between three different registers at once, the intertwined motives dance and whirl, yet there is a strange regularity to their vertiginous excess...*

The transitional passage following the Allegro theme combines the chromatic slide motive from the opening with the winged trill motive in a harmonic sequence that alternates between the tritone antipodes Eb and A. Each time that the chromatic slide reaches its terminal note, a grace note trill enters and frustrates any possibility of resolution with both the dissonance of the trill and the momentum of its motion.

As a performer, I am struck most by the way that the contrapuntal lines frequently switch between the hands in this passage. In m. 58, the right hand must play the trill motive while the left provides the middle-F that begins the chromatic slide motive. Then, in m. 59, the rolled Eb chord on the downbeat is split between left hand for the bottom 3 notes and right hand for the G at the top (Example 5.2). The chromatic slide moves on from F in the right hand, stretching an

octave above the G to play G and F-flat, but then the left hand takes the terminal Eb so that the right hand can play the trill motive on beat 2. To summarize, in just 2 bars of 3/8 meter, a 4-note motive switches hands twice and a nearly 3-octave chord is rolled between the two hands, while the grace-note trill figure appears twice and is trilling for nearly the entire duration. Furthermore, in mm. 60 and 62, the ideal way to negotiate the left hand trills is to pass off the trill to the right hand partway through, enabling the player to position their left hand several octaves lower to initiate the rolls across a 12<sup>th</sup> that come on the downbeats of m. 61 and 63. The performer must sustain the momentum and energy of the passage, while passing that energy between the hands.

Example 5.2 – Skryabin, Piano Sonata No. 10, mm. 55-72.

This phenomenology of performing this passage, and indeed much of the rest of this piano sonata, shares much in common with a seemingly distant kind of music – Fugues by Johann Sebastian Bach, and highly contrapuntal music in general. The demands that this passage makes on a performer are not simply about speed and distance of leaps, but also in mentally and aurally keeping the contrapuntal lines distinct and following them through to their conclusions.

Most piano music has some degree of independence of voices, but highly contrapuntal music like a Bach Fugue places a special strain on the performer. When playing such a piece of music, each independent line typically needs to occupy its own rank in a dynamic hierarchy, for example, perhaps the bass voice is loudest, the treble second loudest, and center voice the quietest. These dynamic hierarchies need not be fixed, and in fact are typically in a constant state of flux. Common practice for playing a Fugue is to emphasize whichever voice currently holds the subject, but typically a wide array of choices present themselves to the performer. In addition to these dynamic hierarchies, most performers also choose to play each individual line with its own unique dynamic contour within its current place in the hierarchy, which lends the different lines a more melodic and expressive character, distinct from other contrapuntal strands. Naturally, giving each line its own dynamic contour means that sometimes one line will crescendo whilst another performs a diminuendo, and keeping those dynamic contours separate requires the performer to hold both dynamic contours in their mind and ear at once. An illustrative recording is Sviatoslav Richter's classic performance of the Bach Fugue in C# Minor, BWV 849, which features delicately balanced voicings of the 5 voices and an extremely slow tempo that aids in hearing the continuity of counterpoint.<sup>167</sup>

Though Bach's Fugues can absolutely challenge the hands through awkward fingerings and (occasional) fast passages, much of the difficulty of this music is in the mind rather than in more traditional Lisztian virtuosity. The phenomenological experience of playing a Bach Fugue is heavily dependent on the sense of split focus as the performer uses their one mind and two hands to play three, four, or even five parts at once. In my personal experience, the phenomenology of playing a Bach Fugue is cerebral rather than athletic. I hear the individual

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<sup>167</sup> Richter, Sviatoslav. "Prelude and Fugue: No. 4 in C-Sharp Minor, BWV 849" in *J.S. Bach: The Well-Tempered Clavier. Book 1*, 1970.

voices both distinctly and as a totality; it is as if I am viewing the composition from the perspective of each voice on its own and the sum of all of them at once. I become at once individual and multitudinous, a fractured whole experiencing my musical activity from multiple angles at once.

This fractured phenomenology of the musical self resonates not only with Skryabin's compositional style, but also his philosophical writings. I return to a quotation from Skryabin's notebooks that I cited in chapter 2:

It is clear that it is not a question of a multiplicity of consciousnesses but of one and *the same* consciousness, i.e., entirely of a consciousness which experiences a multiplicity of states vertically (in time) and horizontally (in space). We would not be at all surprised by such a state of affairs, in which one and the same consciousness experiences *first* one thing and *then* another. It is far more mysterious for us that one and the same consciousness experiences John *here* and Peter *a little further on*....By 'individuality,' i.e., by the experience of anything, I create not an imagined but a real multiplicity of centres, which is the play of one and the same creative source, identically experiencing all individualities.<sup>168</sup>

As I demonstrated in the analysis of *Prometheus* in Ch. 4, Skryabin was no stranger to representing the multiplicity of human souls in music. While the timbral diversity of the orchestra certainly makes this kind of fractured whole easier to interpret for the listener, I do not see why it cannot also apply when the music is for the piano alone. The key distinction is that, in the case of a piano sonata, the "multiplicity of centres" to which Skryabin refers is entirely contained within one human body and mind. In order to properly perform this music, the pianist must embody the multiplicity, becoming the one in the all.

What separates Skryabin's sonatas from other highly contrapuntal music is the way that he combines this contrapuntal and frequently sequential sensibility with athletic virtuosity, wide pitch space, and the omnipresent textural effect of trills. The passage from mm. 57-65 has only

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<sup>168</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 95.

two primary voices, with emphatic wide-spread chords and trills thickening the texture, and yet it requires the pianist to move both hands back and forth across the keyboard in a swirling, chaotic tumult (Example 5.2). The lower voice begins with the sliding chromatic motive at m. 58, comes to a temporary rest on Eb in m. 59, then continues to slide down chromatically to its terminus on C# with interstitial trill motive on D. As an individual line, this is rather simple. Yet, due to the inverted Eb Major chord on the downbeat of m. 59 and the right hand's trill motive that then moves into imitation of the lower voice, this fragment is repeatedly tossed from one hand to the other, each in turn catching and maintaining its continuity. This passage is relatively spartan compared to later sections, and yet as a performer, my phenomenological experience is akin to juggling several delicate objects at once. My consciousness flits between the multiplicity of centers as my body quickly, occasionally frantically moves across musical space to maintain each shard of the whole.

*Summoning my 'elan,' I launch repeated rising trills as my left hand surges with ever-wider rolled chords. My strength and momentum suddenly dissipate as a new melody enters on A#, long and sustained as both hands dance around it. The A# *дотянутся* (Dotyanootsya, Do – up until, Tyanootsya – pulls (reflexive), multidirectional) like a classical leading tone, and will not be satisfied until the B of the next measure. The tension dissipates in a new rising theme that *разойдём* in uncomfortably syncopated polyrhythms before slackening onto a bare major third. I reach up and gently trill with my right hand as the energy simply fades...*

Continuing the strange formal construction of the sonata, here Skryabin introduces yet another motive that will recur throughout the piece, marked “*avec une Joyeuse exaltation.*” This *Joyeuse* theme combines many of the hallmarks of Skryabin's erotic style, such as the whole-tone character of its opening harmony (in this instance, D, E, F#, A#) that lends the melodic A# a leading-tone sensibility, as well as the syncopated and polyrhythmic pull between the hands. The motive begins with a powerful forward pull as the A# *дотянется* (Dotyanootsya, Do – up until, Tyanootsya – pulls (reflexive), multidirectional) towards its resolution, stretches itself out in

gangly, shuddering rhythms, and then allows the tension to dissipate with a gentle variation on the trill motive, this time between a single note and a major 2<sup>nd</sup>. The eroticism and the gentle trailing off lend this *Joyeuse* motive a sense of frustrated orgasm, a “*joyeuse exaltation*” striven for but not achieved.

...

*I repeat the deep ritual invocation one final time in preparation for the apotheotic moment. “With Sweet Drunkenness” my hands разоудым (Razoydoot, Raz – separating, Idti – walking, unidirectional, perfective) as my right hand takes the rising chromatic theme and my left flits between the chromatic slither, the grace-note trill figure, and rapid arpeggiations that убегаюм (Ubyegayut, U – leaving, Byegat’ – running, multidirectional) down the piano. As my right hand rises ever higher, it begins moving in octaves, the texture thickened by the left hand’s increasing frenzy as it combines motives in new ways, planes intersecting. Octaves give way to dense 4-note chords as I muster my strength in the final approach. I crash on the downbeat, left hand убегаем (Ubyegayet, U – leaving, Byegat’ – running, multidirectional) downwards as my right strikes the first note of the Joyeuse motive. As Joyeuse дотянется (Dotyanootsya, Do – up until, Tyanootsya – pulls (reflexive), multidirectional), I invoke the trill motive, “Puissant, radieux” as my hands crash against each other in the high register of the piano, the dense chordal trill shining with blinding brightness. As I move through this passage, my hands constantly move from one area of the piano to another, one moment playing chordal trills against each other, the next the right reduces the trill to a tremolo over a 9<sup>th</sup> as the left continues the melody. With precise use of the damper pedal, I sustain musical energy in three planes – the chordal trills shining at the top, the running arpeggios in the bass, and Joyeuse and its variations in the center. I navigate these three planes with practiced, divine ease...*

The climactic passage of *Piano Sonata No. 10* is a textbook example of the sublime in music. Skryabin develops his grace-note trill motive into a figure of 4-note chords placed in tremolo against each other (Examples 5.3 and 5.4) while enormous chords and arpeggios crash in the bass and the sonata’s *Joyeuse* theme predominates the middle range. For the listener, the effect is overwhelming, a sensory overload across nearly the entire range of human hearing. For the performer, it is a moment of virtuosic mastery in both contrapuntal and athletic terms that has few equals within the entire concert repertoire. This is the moment when Skryabin makes contact with the divine. Skryabin’s own statement on this passage is illuminating: “here is dazzling light, as if the sun draws near. This is the *gasping* that occurs in the moment of ecstasy. This already

appeared in embryonic form in the fourth sonata, where there is also a gasping from radiance, such elation and light.”<sup>169</sup>

The image shows a musical score for three systems of a piano sonata. Each system consists of a grand staff with three staves: treble, middle, and bass clefs. The first system is marked 'Puissant, radieux' and 'f'. It features complex chords, trills, and slurs. The second and third systems continue the piece with similar intricate textures and dynamic markings like 'f' and 'y'.

Example 5.3 – Skryabin, *Piano Sonata No. 10*, mm. 211-214.

<sup>169</sup> Sabaneev 1925, 226. Emphasis in original. It is also worth noting that the word Skryabin uses for “elation” is “окрылённость” (okrylyonost’), which is derived from “крыло,” (kryilo), which means “wing.” Skryabin had earlier remarked that the trills in Sonata 10 must be played “крылато” (kryilato), “wingedly.” Wings are a recurrent motif throughout Skryabin’s writings, always representing a kind of palpitating, quivering joy.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a piano piece. Each system consists of three staves: a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a separate bass staff. The notation is highly complex, featuring dense chords, rapid sixteenth-note passages, and various dynamic markings such as 'y' (piano) and 's' (sforzando). The first system shows a grand staff with a treble clef staff containing a series of sixteenth-note chords and a bass clef staff with a melodic line. The second system features a grand staff with a treble clef staff containing a series of sixteenth-note chords and a bass clef staff with a melodic line. The third system features a grand staff with a treble clef staff containing a series of sixteenth-note chords and a bass clef staff with a melodic line. The notation is highly complex, featuring dense chords, rapid sixteenth-note passages, and various dynamic markings such as 'y' (piano) and 's' (sforzando).

Example 5.4 – Skryabin, *Piano Sonata No. 10*, mm. 215-217.

The comparison he makes to *Piano Sonata No. 4* is certainly apt, as the climactic moment of that sonata shares some likeness with this one. Referring back to my analysis of *Sonata 4* in

Ch. 2, the apotheotic moment of that sonata comes when the Theme of Desire has its grand recapitulation, “*fortississimo, focolosamente, giubiloso*,” as each hand plays rapid eighth-note chordal accompaniment. Skryabin makes a similar attempt to fill all of musical space at once, with the left hand playing deep bass octaves on downbeats, the middle register filled with chords in both hands, and the right hand slowly pounding out the theme in the upper register as an add-on to some of the chords (Example 5.5). There is also a continuity of the metaphor of light, as the poem to *Piano Sonata No. 4* refers to this passage as a “Sea of Light.”

Example 5.5 – Skryabin, *Piano Sonata No. 4*, mm. 150-153.

So then, in what ways is the climax of *Piano Sonata No. 4* an “embryo” of the climax for *Sonata 10*? I contend that the difference to which Skryabin is pointing lies in the relative contrapuntal complexity of the two passages, and also the intensity of the textural effect produced by the chordal tremolo. *Sonata 4*’s climax is nearly homophonic; the melody at the top rings clearly, the middle voices move in lockstep eighth-notes and lack any prominent lines of their own, and the bassline rarely serves any functions besides punctuating major harmonic shifts. It is certainly a large mass of sound, but it is one with a clear focus on the top melodic voice. In contrast, the climax of *Piano Sonata No. 10* pulls together thematic material from

throughout the sonata in a chaotic but controlled dance. The tremolos are an extension of the grace-note trill motive in every way, including the grace-note lead-in: *Joyeuse* makes two prominent appearances, as do minor motivic details from mm. 75-76 (See Table 5.1, motives J and K); the motive of descending minor third and ascending major third is present, and even the fourths-dominated arpeggio figures from throughout the sonata repeatedly run across the keyboard. This moment is not simply loud or grand – it forms a complex contrapuntal web of references to earlier material brought together in a moment of ecstatic free creation.

In yet another strange turn of formal upending, it is the core sonata form themes (opening, chromatic rise, allegro) that are *excluded* from this climax. Whether it is intentional or not, this is yet another similarity to *Piano Sonata No. 4*, in which the climactic moment presents as the arrival of the Theme of Desire, which had originated in the first movement and should theoretically be separate from the sonata-allegro structure of the second movement. In both sonatas, it is the thematic material at the margins that comes to the fore in their moments of divine inspiration.

Returning to the experience of playing this passage: Skryabin's chordal tremolos are certainly dazzling, but they create a fairly serious problem, since maintaining them requires the constant use of *both* hands. The solution that Skryabin chose is that when the left hand is required to play lower notes, the right hand continues a reduced version of the tremolo that alternates between a major or minor second and the single pitch a minor ninth below (Examples 5.3 and 5.4, mm. 213-217). This continues the tremolo's momentum, if not fully its intensity, as the right hand 'holds down the fort,' so to speak while the left advances the thematic material. I can best describe the phenomenological experience of playing through these switches as akin to

using my right hand to ‘catch’ the energy of the tremolo, splitting my mental and bodily focus to retain as much of it as possible while advancing the other planes of the climax.

Probably the most dramatic of these ‘catches’ happens in mm. 214-215 (Example 5.3). The rising intervals above the bass octave are easiest to play split between the hands, and Skryabin mercifully writes for the right hand to cease its tremolo exactly at this moment, and arrive at the beginning of the descending minor-third, ascending major-third motive in the center staff line. The two-handed tremolo begins but almost immediately the right hand catches the energy so that the left hand can leap downwards to continue the minor/major third motive, then plays two short references to earlier material spread across a range of 2 octaves, and finally at the downbeat of m. 215 must rapidly leap back and forth across the pitches of the bottom two staves to play the A grace note, finish the major/minor third motive with a rolled chord, and play the bass D and treble A. The left hand is repeatedly leaping around within the range of D2-G#4 to sustain three contrapuntal voices, all while the right hand continues to shine with its tremolo. The demands on the player are both athletic and cerebral, the body and mind are pushed into a frenzied level of hyper-activity that well-captures Skryabin’s philosophy of ecstatic creation. This passage does not simply represent the divine radiance drawing near – it also forces the player into a state of spiritual excitation that *is* divine radiance.

Following the *Puissant, Radieux* climax, Skryabin executes a rather strange ‘reverse recapitulation’ that begins with the tertiary Allegro theme, moves through an abbreviated variation on the extended passage from the Allegro to *Puissant*, but then breaks into an entirely new section in place of repeating the climax, before then presenting the secondary rising chromatic theme, and then the primary theme from the opening. While it is not perfectly palindromic, most of the material from the exposition and development is repeated in variation in

the reverse of the order it was first heard. Phenomenologically, there is a strong sense of ‘winding down’ from the excesses of the radiant climax as the piece gradually returns to its tense stillness.

Yet, these repeated passages do contain meaningful differences from their first presentations. Perhaps the most important of these is a greater presence of trills than before, as well as a new quality of pitch-set used in the trills. The first major deviation occurs at measure 260, as Skryabin begins the *Joyeuse* theme but replaces the polyrhythmic push and pull with gentle trills played “*avec élan lumineux vibrant*,” with vibrant luminous momentum. These trills are also distinguished through the quality of the chords outlined by their grace notes. Whereas prior instances had primarily outlined minor triads, and occasionally major, these grace notes outline an augmented triad (Example 5.6). The trill is also a whole step, rather than the usual half step, resulting in a whole-tone derived chord that gently shines above the erotic play beneath. As the recapitulation continues, Skryabin continues to use trills more frequently, especially in conjunction with *Joyeuse*, and also more trills involving the alternation between individual notes and a harmonic second (Examples 5.6 and 5.7). In the wake of drawing near the sun, there appear to be remnants of divine light shining upon all of Skryabin’s activities.

The image shows a musical score for three staves, likely piano. The top staff features a series of trills, each with a grace note. The middle staff has a melodic line with some trills and grace notes. The bottom staff has a bass line with trills and grace notes. The score is marked with dynamics like 'mp' and 'p'. The key signature has one flat, and the time signature is 3/4. The music is characterized by its rhythmic complexity and the use of trills and grace notes.

Example 5.6 – Skryabin, *Piano Sonata No. 10*, mm. 260-262.

Example 5.7 – Skryabin, *Piano Sonata No. 10*, mm. 263-265.

Possibly feeling that a recapitulation must be in a different key area than an exposition, Skryabin, in moving from the Allegro theme to the grace-note trill sequence, exercises an alternative modulation from the exposition. Interestingly, this modulation still fits within the system of major third nexuses connected by minor third transitions detailed above. In the exposition, Skryabin exits the Db-F-A third nexus from Db, landing on E, then after just two bars in the E-Ab-C nexus he exits from C to Eb, thus beginning the chain of suspensions alternating across a tritone discussed above. In the recapitulation, he exits the Db-F-A nexus from A, landing on C, then exiting the E-Ab-C nexus from Ab to land on B and begin the chain of tritone-antipode suspensions from there. Skryabin’s reuse of this modulatory scheme in order to move to different key areas shows that he was likely thinking systematically through this lens.

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*As before, I summon my strength in ever increasing waves, as if I am drawing towards another moment of ecstatic reverie. Yet, this time I find not sublime awe, but the fractured, chittering sounds of insects...*

The *Piu Vivo – Presto* passage of *Sonata 10* is strange from any perspective – listener, performer, analyst. The lead-in to it is a transposed and shortened variation on the lead-in to the

piece's climax, but this time the grandiose sound melts away in a sudden pianissimo chord played "*fremissant, ailé*," "fretting, winged." This passage contains variations on several of the sonata's motives – *Joyeuse*, the grace-note trills, the ritual bells from the opening, and the descending/ascending thirds (Example 5.8) – but they are played so quickly that only the grace-note trills are easily recognizable. Scriabin also introduces a new motive featuring repeated chords in 32<sup>nd</sup> note quintuplets followed by a suspension and resolution, all at extremely high pitch (Example 5.8). This thematic fragmentation combined with the exceedingly fast tempo and microscopic, distorted rhythmic values lends a sense of chaotic frenzy to this passage.

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of two systems of music. The first system shows a transition from a fast, rhythmic passage to a more lyrical section. The second system features a high-pitched quintuplet of chords in the right hand, followed by a melodic line with grace notes and trills. Performance markings include 'Più vivo', 'ff', and 'pp fremissant, ailé'.

Example 5.8 – Scriabin, *Piano Sonata No. 10*, mm. 305-313.

Structurally, this passage has two main ideas that present in an irregularly spaced ABAB structure. The first idea features the rushed *Joyeuse*, chattering chords, grace-note trill, and minor/major third motive in rapid succession and in a meter switching frequently between 3/16

and 2/8. The second idea is in a steady 2/8 meter with 4-bar phrases and strong emphasis of the beats via rapid appoggiatura figures reminiscent of Chopin's *Etude Op. 25 No. 5*. This section is also where the reference to the opening motive appears in the middle voice of mm. 332-333 (Example 5.9). The A section is the more chaotic of the two, while the B section is rhythmically stable enough to have a method to its madness. The overall form moves from a long A section (3 statements of the idea) to a long B section (16 measures, 4 phrases of 4 measures each), to a short A (1 statement) and short B (12 bars) that suddenly melts away into a variation on the moderato theme from the opening.



Example 5.9 – Skryabin, *Piano Sonata No. 10*, mm. 331-335.

Returning to Skryabin's metaphor that this sonata is "an entire sonata from insects," this passage is the one that most readily leaps out in my own phenomenological experience of the piece.<sup>170</sup> While I do not want to reduce the symbolism of gleaming, sun-drenched insects radiating light and divinity by taking recourse to literalism, this passage sonically resembles insects in a multitude of ways. The rapid, fractured motives played in such high register move in abrupt fits and starts, like insects flitting about. Garcia identifies this passage as the appearance

<sup>170</sup> Sabaneev 1925, 233. Ellipses in original.

of her symbol ‘vertiginous dance,’ and this time I agree with her. However, my critiques of her model of vertiginous dance (Ch. 4) sustain, as I feel that her focus on rhythmic regularity misses the wild abandon of this practice. In this case, there is a degree of rhythmic regularity in the B section of this passage due to its consistent 2/8 meter, but the relative stability of this rhythm is only part of the picture. The combination of fractured themes, enormous rolled chords, polyrhythms, and interjections of the A section of this passage give it a phenomenological character that I can only properly describe as ‘inhuman.’ If this is a vertiginous dance, and I believe it is, then it is the dance of insects scurrying about in a mad frenzy.

*My journey ends as it began, a minor third lower but with the same sense of tense stillness. I trace the triads and then intone the ritual bells, letting it all ring. My left hand reaches for the bass, and slowly plays two octaves – F, C. a malevolent grin comes across my face as I feel the tonal urge for the C to resolve, yet it rings out unanswered...*

The conclusion to *Piano Sonata No. 10* is almost a simple transposition of its opening – the ritual ends as it begins. The piece’s intensity has traced an arc, beginning quiet and still, gradually rising to the radiant tremolo passage, and then winding its way down until it has returned to where it began. The ritual bells ring, and the rite is complete.

Except, of course, for the final two bass octaves, two pitches that complicate this tidy ending. Skryabin ends the piece with deep bass octaves on first F, then C, and in my own phenomenological experience of this piece, I cannot hear them as anything other than an unresolved tonic-dominant relationship. After an entire sonata that staunchly ignores functional tonality, with its own systematic set of tonal relationships based on thirds rather than fifths, Skryabin suddenly teases the listener with an implication of the most basic relationship in western tonality. It is devious; when I play this piece, I cannot help but smirk when playing these octaves.

In order to understand this harmonic juxtaposition, I turn once again to Clifton's *Music as Heard*, specifically to his concept of "faceting."<sup>171</sup> Referring to a moment in Schubert's *Sonata in B-Flat Major*, D. 960 in which "a dominant harmony in C-sharp minor resolves to a tonic harmony in C major," Clifton identifies an "instantaneous shift in perspective: the movement suddenly appears from another point of view; it has presented another 'facet' to our auditory gaze."<sup>172</sup> He theorizes this movement to another point of view as existing in "a kind of space not created exclusively by up or down, receding or projecting, or revolving motions, but perhaps by an unnamable combination of all three motions at once."<sup>173</sup>

Clifton's examples of faceting exist within western tonality, and involve highly abnormal motion from one tonal space to another that produces a sense of looking at musical space from a heretofore unconsidered angle, a kind of surprise akin to an epiphany. The conclusion to Skryabin's *Sonata 10* offers perhaps a more radical kind of faceting due to the complete mismatch of tonal systems at play. If Schubert's faceting produces a new perspective, Skryabin's sudden implication of functional tonality acknowledges an entirely different plane of existence from the spinning symmetry of the sonata's harmonic plan.

Kenneth Smith interprets a similar moment of concluding tonality in *Le Poeme de l'Extase* as an expression of Skryabin's philosophical fixation on the concept of a 'split subject.'<sup>174</sup> The notebook that Schloezer assigns to 1904-5 contains the infamous and misunderstood phrase "I am God," and it is Skryabin's true intention behind this statement that is

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<sup>171</sup> Clifton, *Music as Heard*, 202.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Smith, Kenneth, *Skryabin, Philosophy, and the Music of Desire*, 97-133.

operating in Smith's analysis.<sup>175</sup> In Chapter 2, I discussed Skryabin's view of individual human souls as multiplicitous shards broken off from a single larger 'world soul.' Skryabin concludes this notebook by framing this cosmogony through a distinction between the "small *P*" of individual states of consciousness and a "great *P*" that encompasses the totality of creation:

In time and space I am subject to the laws of time and space. The laws, though, of time and space are the creations of my *I*.

I want what I do not have, I want to create. As a link in an ancestral chain, the surrounding conditions are for me a *habit*. It *seems* to me that what is happening is *not what I want*, only because I have in view my small *I*, which *must* subject itself to the laws of time and space – to the creations of my great *I*.

The awakening to life is chaos.

Cognition is creation

Every person creates the world for himself (unconsciously). The world has been created as many times as a human consciousness has created it. Every life rhythmically repeats its creation.

The human being is a rhythmic figure (unitar).

I have created myself in the same way as *not myself*. I have created myself as a unit of rhythm in time and space.

Everything is my creation.

I have created my past as also the future.

God is the sole all-embracing consciousness, is free creation.

If I have *become conscious* that everything is my creation, everything is my free volition, and there is nothing outside me – I am absolute essence.

Everything is phenomena, engendered in the rays of my consciousness.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 95.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, 101-102.

In Skryabin's cosmogony, every human is a 'small *I*' experiencing and creating the world in front of them, and all are but fragments of the 'great *I*' that knows and controls all. Skryabin's conception of spiritual enlightenment is centered around perceiving the world not as his 'small *I*,' but instead to view the world as the 'great *I*.' Doing so would necessarily place Skryabin simultaneously in the positions of 'self' and 'other,' as 'he' is both Skryabin the individual of flesh and blood and also the God experiencing all.

Smith claims that the sudden unadorned C Major triad in the ending of *Le Poeme de l'Extase* following seemingly endless chains of dominant-quality chords eliding their resolutions creates an 'other' perspective from which to view the rest of the piece. If the final resolution had not been so plainly tonal then the exact meaning and function of all of the dominant chords would be far different. In Smith's analysis, this 'other' perspective is akin to the 'great *I*' experiencing the 'small *I*.'<sup>177</sup>

I argue that in *Piano Sonata No. 10*, a similar form of perspectival change is occurring, but that it operates only for particular listeners, creating exoteric and esoteric interpretations. While the tonal urge for the C to resolve to F screams in my ear and likely that of other listeners educated in western tonal harmony, the average listener most likely will not have that theoretical apparatus to aid them in interpretation or expectation. To the uninitiated listener, the final chords may hold a phenomenology closer to "openness," but without a direct teleology expected. The work then, becomes a straightforward rise and fall of intensity that 'finishes' in mystery, like many other 20<sup>th</sup> century works. This is the exoteric understanding of the ending. However, for the listener who can parse the sudden reference to functional harmony, the harmonic faceting provides a new perspective from which to view the entire work. After undergoing the ritual, these

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<sup>177</sup> Smith, Kenneth. *Skryabin, Philosophy, and the Music of Desire*, 97-133.

expert listeners are now shifted to a new plane from which to view the process they have just undergone, and this meta-awareness constitutes a communing with the ‘great *I*’ akin to what Smith identifies in *Le Poeme de l’Extase*. This is the theurgic dimension of the sonata – not only the spiritual work entailed in its performance, but also the meta-reflection that follows and is available only to those initiates who can perceive it.

## Chapter 6

### On Monkhood and Mysticism

Strength of artistic soul,  
Charm of the eyes, sweetness of the ears  
Raising all to the sky,  
I am for all the fountain of pleasures.  
An impetuous life of anxiety  
Being my personal experience,  
It is inevitable,  
Never doubt I will finish my life as a monk.

Силой творческого духа  
К Небесам вздымая всех,  
Радость взора, сладость уха,  
Я для всех – фонтан утех.  
Бурной жизни треволнения  
Испытав как человек,  
Напоследок без сомнения  
Ъ-оманом кончу век.<sup>178</sup>

This poem, written by Skryabin's conservatory teacher Vasily Safonov and recorded by Sabaneev shortly after the 1902 premier of his *Symphony No. 2*, paints a startlingly accurate portrait of the composer.<sup>179</sup> Sabaneev expresses confusion at Safonov's insistence that Skryabin will become a monk, but the following exchange occurs:

[Safonov] "Ah, well, you speak like that because you don't know him. Our Sasha is a holy person, and although it is true that his life is not holy, that may, in all likelihood, make him more of an hieromonk. After all, hieromonks always begin in sin and later walk the path of holiness... No," he laughed "that is just me talking, in truth he is very peculiar. You haven't truly spoken to him, please have a chat with him, not over dinner but in earnest - he will tell you all of his exuberant stories of his life. After all, we have on our hands a Nietzschean and a *mystic*."

"His appearance is not at all mystical," I incredulously said.

"Do you want everything to be done at once?... He will ascend to the hieromonkhood - and his mystical appearance will show," laughed Safonov.<sup>180</sup>

Safonov's prediction that Skryabin would ascend into some kind of monkhood did not quite come true, though not for a lack of effort on the part of the composer. Indeed, the *Prefatory Action* that he left partially completed upon his sudden death is no less than a dramatic sermon

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<sup>178</sup> Safonov, Vasily quoted in Sabaneev, *Reminiscences* (2000), 21. Author's translation.

<sup>179</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 18.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

addressed to all of humanity. This is to say nothing of the *Mysterium*, the dazzling, elusive, impossible, apocalyptic *Gesamtkunstwerk* that haunts Skryabin's oeuvre. Skryabin may not have "end[ed] his life as a monk," but he was well on his way to achieving that goal.<sup>181</sup>

Or did he, perhaps, manage to attain a form of monkhood? While his mystic ideas never coalesced into a system as stable and clear as most world religions, in chapter 2 I demonstrated that despite the seemingly chaotic flux of Skryabin's mysticism, he held tightly to a handful of core tenets. Chief among these tenets are the three mystic 'intuitions' that I deduced from his extant writings, cross-referenced with Sabaneev's *Reminiscences* and Schloezer's *Artist and Mystic*. Skryabin's stated beliefs were often little more than a superstructure, a rational exoskeleton grafted onto his core ideological aims.

Monkhood requires ritual, and for Skryabin, artistic creation fills that purpose. While the abstract concept of 'free creation' abounds in Skryabin's writings, the domain which he most thoroughly explored was, of course, music. Chapter 3 of this dissertation seeks to understand Skryabin's expressions of his mystic intuitions in his music on a phenomenological level. While Skryabin's harmonic practice has proven a rich vein for musicologists and theorists to mine, I chose to center my phenomenology on other aspects of his music, especially musical time, musical space, and the embodied motions of the performer in order to complement existing analyses. In order to facilitate a vocabulary for discussing the way Skryabin's music moves through the musical space he creates, I drew on the verbs of motion from his native Russian language due to the immense space for nuanced description of motion that this unique linguistic grammar provides.

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<sup>181</sup> Safonov, Vasily quoted in Sabaneev, *Reminiscences* (2000), 21.

Chapter 4 of this dissertation explored the exoteric aims of *Prometheus*, the completed work that most clearly proselytizes on behalf of Skryabin's mystic intuitions. It is a multisensorial work designed to chart the history and future of the human soul while influencing the spiritual faculties through bivalent means – sound and color. Simultaneously, it projects Skryabin's radically self-centered philosophical views through the piano soloist who embodies the 'creative principle,' metaphorically gesturing towards the Greek Titan Prometheus, the God Apollo, and the Demigod Orpheus to make a flattering set of comparisons to Skryabin himself. Skryabin had long been reticent about setting music to text after the abject failure of his *Symphony No. 1* (1900), so a logocentric communication of his philosophical aims was not possible at this time.<sup>182</sup> In place of such a clear declamation is *Prometheus*, a work that communicates through gesture, metaphor, and the phenomenological experience of moving through time. Before the *Prefatory Action*, *Prometheus* is a kind of spiritual sermon, one designed to propagate Skryabin's mystic intuitions in a subtler way.

Standing opposite from *Prometheus* are the late piano sonatas, esoteric and mysterious works that seemingly *beg* to be interpreted, yet remain opaque to many listeners. Chapter 5 of this dissertation explored *Piano Sonata No. 10* from the dual perspectives of listener and performer, and I argued that this piece does not *represent* a narrative of spiritual enlightenment, but *enacts* spiritual enlightenment in the performer. I view this sonata as a ritual act designed to strain the consciousness (and fingers) of the pianist as they rise from the simple beginnings to the apocalyptic climax before receding back to the stillness of the opening.

A distinction between the exoteric and esoteric has been a recurring theme throughout this dissertation, and could prove fruitful for future study. This distinction is especially critical in

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<sup>182</sup> See Morris, Mitchell, "Eroticism and the Transcendent Strain."

relation to the settings of performances of Skryabin's works. Skryabin was never fully comfortable performing large concerts as a solo pianist, and Sabaneev relays how his "weak, nervously graceful tone...ineffectually filled large halls" and "somehow did not quite make it to the audience."<sup>183</sup> Yet, this delicate tone was well-suited to "concert nights at the Skryabins'," as Sabaneev describes the gatherings that included such literary luminaries as Vyacheslav Ivanov and Konstantin Balmont.<sup>184</sup> Skryabin seemed to take much pleasure in performing his music in such an intimate setting, with heavy carpeting dampening the sound.<sup>185</sup> Skryabin often played only excerpts of his works, many of them while they were in progress, and would discuss them with his guests. Sabaneev even went so far as to say that "those who have only heard Skryabin in a concert hall cannot understand how he played during these intimate hours."<sup>186</sup> Such small, intimate performances, interspersed with conversation, wine, and demonstrations, are clearly radically different from a traditional concert performance.

There is also a stark difference in repertoire between Skryabin's exoteric performances and his esoteric private gatherings. In his home gatherings, Skryabin loved to play his *new* music, works-in-progress, even fragments of the *Mysterium* and *Prefatory Action* that he never committed to paper.<sup>187</sup> Yet, his public concerts featured quite a different set of repertoire. Faubion Bowers' biography includes set lists of most of Skryabin's concerts, and in the final years of his life, his earlier repertoire continued to predominate. His concert from March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1914 is emblematic, in that it featured only one work from after 1910, and the early prelude

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<sup>183</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 37.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>185</sup> Frolova-Walker, Marina, "Playing Scriabin" in *Demystifying Skryabin*, 248.

<sup>186</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 218.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 217.

opera 11 and 13 accounted for nearly half of the works performed that night.<sup>188</sup> In general, even at the end of his life, Skryabin's concert repertoire was heavily weighted towards his more approachable early works, such as *Piano Sonata No. 3*, the *Etude in D# Minor*, Op. 8 No. 12, and the ubiquitous *Nocturne* Op. 9, No. 2, "for the left hand." Most of Skryabin's late works were only appreciated by a devoted few, and these esoteric works were likely made far easier to appreciate in the intimate setting of "concert night at the Skryabins'."<sup>189</sup>

The concept of ritual is inescapable when discussing Skryabin's late works, whether it is the theurgy of *Prometheus* and the *Prefatory Action* or the intimate spiritual work of the late sonatas. Consideration of musical performances as ritual is not entirely new, as Anja Löbert has written about concerts of popular music as a form of ritual, focusing on concerts as "a kind of interruption of the continuity of ordinary life" in which "the adored performer – as a sacred being – appears as the object of the ritual."<sup>190</sup> Such investigations could shed light on new ways of understanding Skryabin's works, especially in relation to the exoteric-esoteric divide. While traditional concert hall performances of Skryabin's works might be the most easily equated to ritual as defined by the anthropologist Victor Turner, given the delineation of an enclosed space in which people gather for a specific event, it is likely the intimate "concert nights at the Skryabins'" that will provide the most illuminating insights.<sup>191</sup> When Skryabin played excerpts of the apocalyptic *Mysterium* and discussed them with like-minded mystics, was this a form of ritual? If so, what are the implications for understanding Skryabin's music and mysticism? The answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

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<sup>188</sup> Bowers,  *Scriabin*, Vol. 2, 260.

<sup>189</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 218.

<sup>190</sup> Löbert, Anja, "Fandom as a Religious Form," 130-131.

<sup>191</sup> Sabaneev (2000), 218.

The phenomenological method outlined in this dissertation is intended to provide new insights into Skryabin's works, and I hope that others find it to be a useful means of analysis. This dissertation was only able to cover two works in full detail, *Prometheus* and *Piano Sonata No. 10*, so there remain many more to explore. One theme I have attempted to highlight is a focus on radical specificity, and the other late works certainly hold a treasure trove of new insights into Skryabin's mysticism. Sabaneev likened the composer's late miniatures to "fragrant, luxurious flowers," and just as with a beautiful orchid, Skryabin's late works will likely reward intensive examination from as many angles as possible.<sup>192</sup>

Skryabin's music has long mystified audiences; this dissertation has been an attempt to understand these esoteric works and their intricate interrelationships with Skryabin's mystic intuitions. Attaining a complete understanding of these interrelationships is inevitably impossible, but the endless striving towards such a desired goal befits Skryabin's artistic and metaphysical impulse to struggle onward towards apocalypse.

You are the striving for perfection,  
You are a dream, you are light and joy  
But only he who has tasted the sweetness of labour  
Has come to know bliss.  
He who in a fascinating quest  
Has pleasantly spent his life,  
Who in powerful knowledge  
Has found consolation

Has loved with a complete love

Forward in striving and eternally.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>193</sup> Skryabin, *Notebooks*, 61.

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