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Transcending Imagination;
Or, An Approach to Music and Symbolism
during the Russian Silver Age

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Musicology

by

Ryan Isao Rowen

2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Transcending Imagination;
Or, An Approach to Music and Symbolism
during the Russian Silver Age

by

Ryan Isao Rowen

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology
University of California, Los Angeles, 2015
Professor Mitchell Bryan Morris, Chair

The Silver Age has long been considered one of the most vibrant artistic movements in Russian history. Due to sweeping changes that were occurring across Russia, culminating in the 1917 Revolution, the apocalyptic sentiments of the general populace caused many intellectuals and artists to turn towards esotericism and occult thought. With this, there was an increased interest in transcendentalism, and art was becoming much more abstract. The tenets of the Russian Symbolist movement epitomized this trend. Poets and philosophers, such as Vladimir Solovyov, Andrei Bely, and Vyacheslav Ivanov, theorized about the spiritual aspects of words and music. It was music, however, that was singled out as possessing transcendental properties.

In recent decades, there has been a surge in scholarly work devoted to the transcendent strain in Russian Symbolism. The end of the Cold War has brought renewed interest in trying to understand such an enigmatic period in Russian culture. While much scholarship has been

devoted to Symbolist poetry, there has been surprisingly very little work devoted to understanding how the soundscape of music works within the sphere of Symbolism. The question that arises is: what about music can be understood as transcendental? In the Symbolist journal *Novyi Put'*, Andrei Bely noted the piano compositions of Nikolai Medtner as being the perfect example of theurgy. Bely's description of this, however, is extremely vague and our understanding of where theurgy lies in the compositional process is hard to grasp. The same ambiguity exists in making sense of the composer Sergei Rachmaninoff, whose music is reviewed prominently in Symbolist journals. A composer who tried deliberately to embody the spirit of Symbolism and theurgy in his music was Alexander Scriabin, who planned to compose a seven day long piece that was meant to actually summon the apocalypse. Due to his untimely death, this was a work that never came to fruition. Confusion over the musical construction of Scriabin's late works, by musicians and scholars alike, is generally coupled with a sympathetic yet dismissive view of his own messianic and maniacal ideologies.

The opaque sense of meaning surrounding musical transcendentalism in this repertoire has presented a considerable challenge not only for performers, but for scholars as well. Musicologists have spent a considerable amount of time on the formal aspects of this music, but have still been hesitant in deciphering its meaning. Literary scholars have been able to interpret some semblance of meaning in music described by Symbolist poets, but have not shown where this lies within the music. What is necessary in trying to understand the Symbolist concept of musical transcendentalism and theurgy is a study that attempts to take into account all facets of research. In this dissertation, I present a means by which to understand this music without compromising formal structure, cultural context, or performance.

The dissertation of Ryan Isao Rowen is approved.

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2015

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Introduction

*“To those who are not accustomed to it
the inner beauty appears as ugliness
because humanity in general inclines to the outer
and knows nothing of the inner.”*

To begin with the transcendental challenge: Wassily Kandinsky's lofty admonishment in his paean to Scriabin near the end of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.¹ At the close of the nineteenth century, the preference for inwardness already had a long history. But with so many drastic changes happening at once, a need for further artistic expression of interiority as a true aesthetic measure seemed vital. Indeed, Scriabin's late works in particular have always proven to be something of a challenge. Many pianists today regard him as a canonical composer of the highest order, yet they are very selective about which of his pieces they wish to play. There is a “difficulty” to his music that makes him inaccessible—one that undoubtedly (though not exclusively) comes from his use of harmonic dissonance. His music is abstract; yet ultimately this is not the only thing that defines him.

I begin here with Scriabin with the intent to start a discussion about a period of Russian music that has remained elusive for a long time in musicology. The goal of this dissertation is to grapple with an important transitional moment, not only in music history, but also in the world of art in Europe as a whole. The narrative that usually separates the 19th and 20th centuries has too long ignored a cultural epoch in the *fin de siècle* that is just as rich and vibrant as its surrounding generations. This moment in time is not only unique in artistic and philosophical content, but remains a significant precursor to the shaping of modernism. Due to the immensity of material and topic related to this era, I will focus my attention on the music of one particular country: Russia. In addition, my work will deal primarily with the Symbolist movement during this

¹ See Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1977).

period. In this dissertation, I plan to show how three specific composers—Sergei Rachmaninoff, Alexander Scriabin, and Nikolai Medtner—embody a previously neglected understanding of Russian Symbolism and its associations with the music culture in Europe in general. Through the course of this dissertation, I hope to show how the musical strategies of these composers—in conjunction with artistic, poetic, and philosophical concerns—encapsulate a mode of expression that was endowed with religiosity and veered towards the transcendental strain.

Of these three composers, Scriabin has gained the most attention and notoriety in musicology. For a long time, there has been a penchant amongst music theorists for placing him within a procrustean bed—Scriabin seemed to fit comfortably as a precursor to atonality. In fact, his identity as compositional innovator often overshadows his interests in mysticism and transcendentalism. This is highly problematic at best and as I will show, in my chapter discussing his music, that he cannot be reduced in such simplistic terms. Because this has been a major part of discussion within musicology it is important to begin here with Scriabin in order to understand the period.

Scriabin has been most closely associated with the Russian Symbolists, who felt that music was the ideal medium of artistic expression. Under the auspices of this movement, artistic concerns moved from romanticism towards transcendentalism, where beauty and the sublime transformed into an experience of religious communion. Poetry and music soon became a means for incantation and an example of theurgy, a sort of religious magic. How exactly we define music's connection to theurgy is still unclear. These concerns cannot simply fall within the Whiggish account of tonality moving to atonality so commonly referred to. What I will show is that theurgy is a multifaceted and multidimensional concept in relation to music. Ultimately, in this dissertation, I will analyze the concept of musical theurgy within the Russian Symbolist

movement through its construction of meaning in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century music and its relationship to the concept of synaesthesia.

To make sense of theurgy, it is important to unpack the artistic and philosophical ideals of the turn of the century. Russian Symbolism began in the Silver Age, a period that has been touted as one of the most vibrant eras of Russian culture.² The many apocalyptic premonitions during this time reflected not only the dawn of a new century, but also a tumultuous political climate culminating in two revolutions. Much of the art reflected this very atmosphere. The tenets of the Russian Symbolist movement—through its poetry, painting, philosophy, theoretical concepts, and music—epitomized a trend towards transcendentalism in art that encompassed the whole of Europe.

The Russian Symbolist movement can generally be split up into two separate waves. The first wave of Symbolism began as the Russian literary scene moved away from the realism that characterized the latter portion of the nineteenth century. The leading figures that began to emerge were Dmitry Merezhkovsky, his wife Zinaida Gippius, Fyodor Sologub, Konstantin Balmont, and Valery Bryusov. Of these poets, the very first influences of *fin-de-siècle* culture took root in Russia through works of French Symbolists. Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine excited much interest and Konstantin Balmont presented his own translation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Bells*. Bryusov was primarily the instrumental figure of this first wave of Russian Symbolism.³ He even went so far as to spearhead a publication in Russia in between 1894 and 1895 titled *The Russian Symbolists*, which included much of his poetry, as well as translations of Verlaine, Maeterlinck, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé.⁴

² Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³ Martin Rice, *Valery Briusov and the Rise of Russian Symbolism* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1975)

⁴ Pyman, 39.

The second wave of Russian Symbolism included Vladimir Solovyov, Alexander Blok, Andrei Bely, and Vyacheslav Ivanov. What characterizes this second generation was their interest in mysticism and clairvoyance.⁵ Whereas the first generation was happy with the aesthetic connotations of mysticism, the second generation intended to go beyond this. The evocation of the noumenal for second-generation Symbolists meant that they intended their poetry to be truly incantatory. Countless poems, theories, and philosophical debates filled the pages of the Symbolist journals, such as *Vesy* and *Zolotoe Runo*. Proponents of this highly spiritual form of Symbolism found music to be the ultimate source of expressivity. It is in the second wave of Russian Symbolism that we first hear of “musical theurgy.”

The Russian Symbolists’ interest in music was part of the general European climate with interests in spirituality. Particularly influential to them were Friedrich Nietzsche and, especially, Arthur Schopenhauer, who described music as a reflection of the will. (In my first chapter, I discuss these philosophical ideals in greater detail, in particular Schopenhauer’s theory.) The Symbolists found this concept especially appealing because they were trying to invoke the transcendental strain in their art and music offered an effective medium to achieve this. Moreover, this grew out of nineteenth-century romantic aspirations towards the ineffable and the sublime. Eventually, the operas of Richard Wagner—and subsequently Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*—proved to be a major influence in the move from Romanticism towards transcendentalism. Symbolists, along with many other Europeans, viewed Wagner’s operas—being within the Schopenhauerian paradigm—as a form of transubstantiation.

This philosophical climate is what inspired the creed of the second wave Russian Symbolist movement – that incantation was possible through poetry and music. Such a creed led

⁵ Ibid. Also see Renato Poggioli, *Poets of Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

the Symbolists to the notion that their art—whether poetry, painting, or music—was a form of religious communion. Moreover, because they saw music as capable of expressing the will, music was soon deemed to have theurgic qualities.

Rooted in the teachings of neo-Platonists such as Iamblichus (a third-century Syrian philosopher), theurgy is defined loosely as a kind of “religious magic.”⁶ Under the auspices of Schopenhauerian aesthetics, music for Russian Symbolists was a language above words, conveying clairvoyance and truth on a transcendent and universal level. This is a crucial yet ambiguous element within the Symbolist movement. With music being placed on such a high pedestal, we soon see an attempt by Symbolists to harness its power; for example, Andrei Bely experimented by writing four symphonies in prose while Mikolajus Čiurlionis tried to express this in painting, attempting to emulate sonata form and fugues. Composers themselves, however, played an integral part in this interest in musical theurgy.

Nikolai Medtner’s association with the Symbolists stemmed from his brother Emil who was a major figure in the Symbolist circles. Emil contributed music criticism to the prominent journals of the movement and, most important, as state censor, turned a blind eye in allowing the publication of Symbolist poetry.⁷ A highly influential friend of Bely, Emil brought an emphasis on German idealism to the movement. Bely subsequently took a great interest in Nikolai’s piano compositions and wrote an article titled “On Theurgy” for the journal *Novyi Put*,⁸ in which he describes Medtner’s *Stimmungsbilder* op. 1 as an example of theurgic music.⁸ Afterwards, Medtner set Bely’s poem “Epitafiya” to music, which appeared in *Zolotoe Runo*, and is the only example of music to be published in a symbolist journal.

⁶ Simon Morrison *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 8.

⁷ Magnus Ljunggren, *The Russian Mephisto: A Study in the Life and Work of Emilii Medtner* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1994).

⁸ Richard Taruskin *Defining Russia Musically*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 318.

Despite Medtner's connections with Symbolist aesthetics, he never outwardly claimed that his music was theurgic. Regardless, it is important to take seriously Bely's assertion that Medtner's compositions were theurgic, to understand not only the compositional process of this ideal but also the Symbolist perception of this music. Scriabin, however, unabashedly displayed himself as the poster child of the Symbolist cause. Having been influenced by German Idealist philosophy and occult thought, most notably including Madame Blavatsky's theosophy, he grew confident that his own compositional craft could reveal universal truth. Scriabin's claim to synaesthesia also helped to iterate this idea, pushing him further towards apparent megalomania. His theurgic style explored the limits of musical conventions and tonality. Eventually we find him experimenting with new forms of expressivity. Ultimately he did this in order to express far more than the simple material world. He did this by expanding his tonal palette to include the structural resources of octatonicism, which harbored connotations of magic in Russian music; chromaticism, which implied sensuality; and non-tertial harmony, most famously in the "mystic chord." In the end, he was convinced that the theurgy of his works could actually cause the apocalypse. He intended to write the seven-day-long piece entitled *Mysterium* that was to be the paragon of *gesamtkunstwerk*, combining music, smells of perfumes, and color through a color-organ. The performance of such a piece was supposed to actually cause the earth to open up with flames rising and for eternal mystery to be unveiled. Unfortunately for Scriabin—but fortunately for us—he did not complete this work, having only written 40 minutes of music before he was carried off by septicemia in 1915.

Scriabin's musical ventures indicate a culmination in the Symbolist agenda. While he did not cause an apocalypse, the nature of his compositional practice did have a major effect on the music world, pushing the boundaries of late 19th century tonal conventions, already severely

strained, to collapse. The push towards the metaphysical that is present throughout the Symbolist agenda is an important development in modernity; by stretching the boundaries in order to find new ways to express subjectivity, Symbolists ultimately moved their art forms closer and closer to abstraction. If there were an apocalypse during the *fin de siècle* as a result of musical theurgy, it would be that a shift in reality occurred with modernism that caused art to be redefined.

Sources, Narrative, Method

Russian Symbolism straddles a moment in history where conventions of musical grammar underwent rapid transformations in several seemingly incommensurate ways. Scriabin's compositional innovations distinguish him as being of major importance during this time; yet, because of his mystical concerns, he has always been relegated to the margins in our general music history. Much of the literature and discourse surrounding Scriabin, however, has been reluctant to recognize the full significance of his involvement within the Russian Symbolist movement and is embarrassed to go into much detail; the theurgic music of Scriabin—to performers and music theorists alike—has remained one enigmatic ideal of a composer on the lunatic fringe.

Richard Taruskin makes an impassioned argument against willful ignorance regarding Symbolism. In his book *Defining Russia Musically*, and in a review of James Baker's *The Music of Alexander Scriabin*, Taruskin is adamantly opposed to a limited and reductive form of musical analysis and argues that culturally-informed, close analyses of musical works is critical to a hermeneutical approach that increases our understanding of subjectivity during this period.⁹

⁹ See Richard Taruskin "Review: *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* by James M. Baker and *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* by Boris de Schloezer, trans. Nicolas Slonimsky" *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (Spring: 1988), 143–69 and *Defining Russia Musically*.

Writing during a moment of significant change in musicological discourse, Taruskin's pleas address the highly fractured and biased scholarship surrounding turn-of-the-century music. Music theorists, focusing on an insular formalist project while avoiding cultural implications, were even willing to dismiss the republication of a historical document such as *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* written by Boris de Schloezer, Scriabin's brother-in-common-law, simply because it revealed too much of the composer's tendency towards megalomania and solipsism. So adamant were some music theorists against this that one even described Oxford University Press' decision to publish it as "silly as the book itself."¹⁰ Other musicologists, on the other hand, continued to speak about Scriabin in mostly biographical terms and addressed Symbolist culture in only the broadest sense, avoiding musical analysis altogether. For Taruskin, it was clear that a middle ground needed to be reached—one that included a serious study of Scriabin's cultural proclivities while, at the same time, continuing to analyze his music.¹¹

Besides Taruskin's appeal, scant research on music within the sphere of the Symbolist aesthetic—especially regarding transcendentalism and ineffability—exposes a genre desperately in need of interdisciplinary work today. Scholars in Slavic studies have accomplished a great deal in the pursuit to understanding incantational poetry of the Russian Symbolists. Unfortunately, musicology has not reciprocated, producing surprisingly little work willing to delve deep into the meaning and subjectivity of Symbolist musical incantation. There is more work done on literature and literary perspectives of music, while there is almost no analysis of actual pieces and their theurgic potential. The one exception to this comes from Mitchell Morris, whose dissertation, *Musical Eroticism and the Transcendental Strain: The Works of Alexander*

¹⁰ See David Murray, "Review: Distorted Vision," *The Musical Times* 129 (1987), 129.

¹¹ Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 312–13.

Skryabin 1898-1908, is an amalgam of philosophical, literary, and musical discourse.¹² Most important, Morris captures the essence of the beginnings of Scriabin's incantatory style by providing a close reading of several of his compositions. This dissertation will be the major model for my own work.

The most significant book published in a mainstream academic press by a musicologist on this topic is Simon Morrison's *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*. Morrison gives a virtuosic and informative study on Russian Symbolism and its use in opera around the period. Of particular interest are his studies of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. He even discusses Scriabin's *Mysterium* while briefly going into its theurgic possibilities. But because of the nature of his study, he shies away from grappling with musical representation; the impression left is that of a brief survey of Russian Symbolism without going into too much detail regarding the music.¹³ In my project, I aim to fill in this gap.

While scholarship on Scriabin is abundant, albeit open for interpretation, there is little to no work done on Nikolai Medtner. Due to a bias for research on canonical composers, Medtner's relative obscurity has left very little scholarship on his life and *oeuvre*. The major exception to this is Barrie Martyn's book *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music*.¹⁴ The wealth of information Martyn gathers through letters, articles, and programs provides crucial positivist research of this topic. Throughout my dissertation, I have consulted these same sources in critical conjunction with Martyn's observations. Martyn's hermeneutical analyses of Medtner's works,

¹² Mitchell Morris, *Musical Eroticism and the Transcendent Strain: The Works of Alexander Skryabin, 1898-1908* (Ph. D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1998).

¹³ For example, while certainly informative, the chapter devoted to Prokofiev's operatic setting of Bryusov's *Fiery Angel*—where Prokofiev composes in a distinctly modernist style—has little to do with any Symbolist view of music.

¹⁴ Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner* (Aldershot, UK: Scolar Press, 1995).

however, are superficial at best and sometimes careless at worst.¹⁵ He gives hardly any indication that the composer had an association with the Russian Symbolist movement. Magnus Ljunggren's study of Emil Medtner, *The Russian Mephisto* is a better source for this information.¹⁶

* * *

A major portion of my bibliographic resources comes from Slavic studies. As I would like to reiterate, scholarship done on Russian Symbolism and music is generally very lopsided, with most work being done outside musicology. For this reason, the research coming from Slavic studies are of great importance to my project. Works such as a Rosamund Bartlett's *Wagner and Russia* and Ada Steinberg's *Word and Music in the Novels of Andrey Bely* reveal an increased desire to engage with music, and will prove to be particularly beneficial.¹⁷ Other selected scholarship includes Michael Wachtel's work on Ivanov (especially in relation to Scriabin), John Elsworth and John Malmstad's studies of Bely, Judith Kornblatt's work on Vladimir Solovyov, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal's general studies of the period.¹⁸ Primary source material, however, are of the most importance. In particular, the major Symbolist journals, *Vesy*, *Zolotoe Runo*, *Novyi Put'*, and *Trudy i dni*, are crucial to my work because this is where the major discussions took place in Russian Symbolism.

What is missing in most of all in scholarship of this period is a comprehensive study of music that takes into account all the major work on Symbolism brought forth in an

¹⁵ For example, Tyutchev's poem for the "Night Wind" Sonata is mistakenly given the title *Silentium*. Martyn also, controversially, seems to brush aside any issues regarding anti-semitism.

¹⁶ See Ljunggren, *The Russian Mephisto*.

¹⁷ Rosamund Bartlett, *Wagner and Russia* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Ada Steinberg, *Word and Music in the Novels of Andrey Bely* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹⁸ Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *A Revolution of the Spirit: Crisis of Value in Russia, 1890–1924* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), *Dmitri Sergeevich Merezhkovsky and the Silver Age: The Development of a Revolutionary mentality* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975).

interdisciplinary manner. I stress interdisciplinary work mainly because I think that this topic cannot be approached any other way, especially when the Symbolists themselves were engaged in a wide array of topics. Research today, in this case, must mimic the research done by the Symbolists in order to fully grasp the gravity of their project. This will not only yield new insights into Slavic studies, but it will also be beneficial to musicology, where it will give a new way of understanding how musical meaning was constructed at the turn of the century.

* * *

The best way to make sense of this concept of theurgy is through actually providing an example—here I will briefly analyze Scriabin’s late style in order to show the nature of my method. In his Prelude op. 74, no. 4, we see his late style at its most mature and cryptic. Strange unresolved harmonies are pitted against unusual, disorienting rhythmic figures. In fact, this prelude seems written in a deliberately unvirtuosic style meant to evoke a chorale. In this crucial generic context, Scriabin juxtaposes octatonic writing with elements of chorale writing embedded in this work to create a ritualistic atmosphere through performance wherein the composer can present himself on stage as a musical theurgist.

The first surprising characteristic of this piece is its brevity; it is 24 measures long and only lasts one minute. For the listener, there is little time to make sense of what is going on in this prelude before it is finished. The music evades any coherent picture and leaves the listener with a vague impression and sense of desire for resolution. The sheer simplicity of this work makes it seem lacking. Compared to most of his earlier pieces, there is no virtuosity at all involved in this work. This is peculiar for a pianist-composer who hurt his right hand early in his career trying to imitate the technique of fellow pianist Josef Lhévinne. Instead, the prelude avoids any difficult technical figuration and remains basically homophonic throughout.

Moreover, the rhythmic pulse for the most part remains constant, plodding along at a quarter note except in the last nine measures where there are slight pauses on chordal harmonies.

Lent, vague, indécis Op 74 Nr. 4

p *pochiss.* *poco a poco cresc.*

4 *dim.* *p* *cresc.*

7 *mf*

10 *f* *dim.*

14 *accel.* *rit.* *p*

17 *p* *dim.*

Figure 0.1. Alexander Scriabin, Prelude Op. 74, No. 4.

Scriabin's tempo marking evokes this same quality: "slow, vague, undecided." With a performance following these directions, it is strange that the rhythmic pulse can leave such an impression of brevity. But this is exactly the point; contemplation is not the goal. This seems to be the exact opposite of what a prelude is supposed to do—to induce contemplation through representation of the sublime. Instead, the work's homophonic texture and slow rhythmic forward motion are trying to express something else. Unlike Scriabin's other preludes, this one focuses on four voices throughout, only occasionally allowing an extra voice to come in. This strict chorale harmony is extremely rare in Scriabin's music, leaving an impression akin to a Bach chorale. But the constant rhythmic pulse allows for no contemplation. (Perhaps the contemplation is deferred to the silence after the piece is done? Or maybe as prelude it suggests far more.) What is evoked is something more akin to a ritual, much like the singing of chorales in church. Here, we start to see the theurgic elements unfold.

While the homophonic texture is evident, it is still a piano work and not meant to be sung. In a way, this is similar to chorale preludes performed on organ in church. But if we are to look further into the notion of romantic fragmentation, it is easy to conjure up the image of the chorale being played with a choir that is not there. This is ripe with Nietzschean imagery of the choir in Greek tragedy.¹⁹ This seems like only a sampling of what is to come in *Mysterium*. Here, the pianist's stage for performance of this prelude will eventually become the world stage.

Scriabin's chorale writing, however, does not follow strict convention. He does his best to obscure any direct hints that this is chorale writing, since giving away his secret would defeat the point of this work. In the beginning of the prelude, there is a general melody outlined that seems to end conventionally on the first chord of measure 3. If we are to compare this to most

¹⁹ Not surprisingly, Nietzsche's own attempted, badly written, musical composition, *Hymnus an Leben*, focused on writing a chorale in four-part harmony.

Bach chorale settings we must take note of the fact that the melodic line of a chorale lasts for eight notes, including the upbeat. Here, Scriabin does the same thing, and the top melody gets a sense of symmetrical closure by measure 3. The only problem is the melody continues onward. In the rest of measure 3, the soprano line moves on and mimics the A2 at the end of measure 2. The melodic line is extended and the half note at the beginning of measure 4 signals the end of the melody. This is further exemplified by a repetition of the same material in the next four measures. Scriabin imitates the intended symmetry of a chorale melody but plows through in order to obscure any sense of closure. The two eighth notes making the A2 that pushes the melody upwards prove to be something of a disruptive force. In measure 8, this figure pushes the soprano line higher. Next, from measures 9 to 16, this three-note motive will not go away and causes the music to spiral downward because of a fixation on this motive. It was this disruptive motive that was supposed to end the melody at the beginning of measure 3 that makes up most of the formal instability for the rest of the piece. This behavior does not seem to have anything in common with typical chorale writing. Also, the melody itself does not seem to have any rest at all unlike chorale writing, which would at least employ fermatas. The soprano line pushes onward as if it were simultaneously one long line throughout the piece and many small melodic lines and motives.

While the chorale style of this work stands out, it must also be noted that the prominent soprano line establishes itself as if it were more of a song melody rather than a chorale melody. Again, Scriabin deliberately obscures any previous indications he made. This work is both chorale and prelude, chorale and song. This sense of hybridity also displays itself in the harmonic structure of the work.

The very first and last chords of this piece are simultaneously A major and A minor. While the harmonic ambiguity is apparent throughout this work, this duality hints at Scriabin's penchant for octatonicism. Because octatonic harmony already has a history in Russian music as connoting magic, any use of it in this prelude further cements any association of magical and theurgic elements of representation. In the first three measures alone it is clear that octatonic harmony plays an important role throughout. The octatonic chord used in the upbeat comprises two diminished sevenths 0369 and 147T. The downbeat of the first measure then uses a combination of 0369 and 258E. When this chord is established, the C-natural and G-sharp act as a suspension from the previous octatonic harmony which resolve to D-sharp and A-natural. These two octatonic harmonies alternate between each other for the first eight measures, with chromatic notes used as non-harmonic tones.

What is striking about the harmony of this prelude is not simply that Scriabin uses octatonicism, rather, it is how he uses it. Here, he does not do away with a consonance and dissonance relationship. Instead, he sets up a completely different standard for what is consonant and what is dissonant. In the opening bar, the first octatonic chord gives the impression of a dissonance that needs to be resolved. This harmony, however, is in fact a consonance. If we are to return to our chorale analogy, the beginning of a chorale typically starts with a consonance. The dissonant harmony can be seen in the first chord of measure 1 where elements of two octatonic harmonies are clashing with each other in suspension that is then resolved on the next beat. Just as a Bach chorale can be understood as showing the basic rules for voice leading in tonality, here Scriabin can showcase a completely different harmonic language that functions with the same rules. This is why the chorale model for this prelude is so strong; it not only

represents a ritualized musical setting, it is also able to showcase the mysterious complexity of a tonally dissonant harmonic structure.

* * *

From a broader sense, this dissertation is about historiography. Scriabin's music stands out like a beacon in a confusing start to a powerful epoch of music and thought in modernism during the twentieth century. This great upheaval was strongly defined: many advances in industrialization, technology, sciences were coupled with an anxiety about not only a world that was changing but also a way of life that was slipping out of grasp. The romanticism of the nineteenth century, with a penchant for highfalutin idealism made way for a stark, more austere look at the world and reality. Suddenly the world would feel colder, existential, and empty. The two world wars, revolutions, and other events brought losses of life of tremendous magnitude. These things plus the eventual fall of European imperialism imparted a strong reflection upon society and reality; the hegemony of a monolithic cultural view of history began to crumble substantially. But at this juncture, right at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, we see not only a European art scene trying to grasp such momentous change, but also a flowering of creativity both wrestling with these newfound realities and exploring newfound freedoms and modes of expression.²⁰ In music, this was primarily demarcated by a Western Europe finding dissonance and all of its possible cultural expressions. But a historical narrative that takes into account an understanding of how this unraveled remains highly contentious and charged even today. In this dissertation, I not only intend to find a way to clarify this moment of music, particularly in regard to Russia, but also to explore new ways to understand old practices

²⁰ Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993). Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Arts in France, 1885-1918: Alfred Jarry, Henri Rousseau, Erik Satie, Guillaume Apollinaire* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).

of performance, embodiment, and hearing that have either disappeared over time or have evolved into other forms of practice shaping different aspects of human subjectivity.

The title of this dissertation, *Transcending Imagination*, deals specifically with the kind of artistic imagination people of this period engaged in. There is no better way to explain Russian Symbolists than to characterize their work as a matter of an imagination whose content is about transcendence. Granted, the practitioners of these arts did not see themselves as simply imagining otherworldly ideals; to them, they were a real exploration of the spirituality and subjectivity of the world around. Scriabin, for example, truly believed in his own divine providence and his musical means by which to ascertain a real apocalypse to save humanity. The same can be said of other Symbolist poets, as we will encounter later in the dissertation. Regardless of this, a certain distance in our time allows us to evaluate—without disparagement—a mode of thought that was sincerely about transcendentalism. I do not mean to use “imagination” in a way that brings a pejorative connotation towards these thoughts or suggest that they are simply daydreaming in some way; rather, I use that word loosely to imply a real means by which these artists and philosophers saw an “image” of the world that truly reached beyond mere phenomenological dimensions. In this sense, the double meaning also implies the ability to transcend imagination itself, where these metaphysical ideals are seen and discovered through artistic media. At the same time “transcending imagination” carries also its historiographic meaning of the age itself, this being a moment where many shed the romanticism and idealism of old for a new world that seemed hopeful and promising. The shedding of romanticism itself was a moment difficult to reconcile, and being able to transcend from one mode of thought to another is significant. But while most of my study focuses on the blossoming creativity surrounding this change as this transition of eras occurred, there also came a move in

music where the act of listening became much more abstract—partly because of the passage of time but also a conscious or unconscious rejection of an old way of approaching the art form.

There is a tinge of irony to my choice of words here—so much dogma and strong-minded belief about musical meaning, progress, and ideology colors not only this age, but also the history we wish to tell about the period.

There is also the matter of the imagination itself, namely thoughts that occur in the mind both conscious and unconscious. This is a period where Freud’s speculations about unconscious behavior and other mysteries of modern human psychology are in their infancy. Musical imagination and the processes within the mind not only give us an insight into the many ways we experience sound as content, but also reveal ways in which we can contextualize meaning both in the present day and from a historical standpoint. One of these processes that proves to be an incredibly significant and underdeveloped area of study is that which surrounds the concept synaesthesia. While I spend a certain amount of time fleshing out synaesthesia within Symbolist circles, especially with regard to Scriabin and others, my concerns here reach to a much broader perspective. My account of synaesthesia is not from a medical stand point, but instead explores a phenomenology of music integrated with historical concerns.²¹ Throughout my dissertation I make the case for inscribing synaesthesia as a mode of imaginative listening that is not only highly effective at expanding the palette of the musical artwork of the period, but also a way to establish a complicated web of meaning that has otherwise been lost. In this sense, my goal is to find a way to transcend mere conventions of imaginative listening practices in order to explore other historical possibilities that may have taken place. This is why, in my subtitle to this dissertation, I use the double meaning for an “approach to music,” not only to indicate music’s

²¹ Here the work of Merleau-Ponty and musicologists such as Thomas Clifton have proven incredibly useful.

privilege as the transcendental art form artists see to reach, but also as a way of denoting the plethora of ways we engage with musical practice and the myriad of others we may still not know or deliberately obscure.

In musicology, these explorations have just begun. The upheaval in the past few decades in this field made way for newer perspectives, which have brought an engagement with music allowing for a wider range of possibility in understanding these works of art beyond a merely positivistic or music theory oriented one. My dissertation employs a hermeneutic approach that not only brings a closer reading of works by composers such as Rachmaninoff, Medtner, and Scriabin, but also becomes the central way to make sense of music that has otherwise remained somewhat unintelligible, misunderstood and misrepresented historically. Alexander Scriabin is the primary example of this. His penchant for mysticism and spirituality, as we will see, has proven to be a matter that not only instills a certain amount of trepidation in detailed analytical work, but also warrants a degree of ignorance and disdain regarding the nature of such topics. Scriabin is particularly troubling in this sense because for many musicologists and music theorists, the embarrassment of his compositional endeavors squarely conflict with the want to justify an already questionable historical narrative and genealogy of musical modernism. By the same token, Scriabin's younger compatriot Medtner is completely ignored because of his musical conservatism, which does not fit within this similar narrative. The same is the case for Rachmaninoff, whose popularity makes him even more contentious. I plan to flesh out these particular issues from a historiographic point of view and show that at moments of change it is important to look at the whole picture in order to make sense of what is happening. This is not in order to "save" certain composers within the narrative of a progressive canon of western music, or for the purpose of inflating prestige. Instead, this is about a critical approach to music that not

only accounts for a wide ranging perspective of how modernism was defined, but also gives voice to as many sides as possible of the historical spectrum. The aspects of musical conservatism and classicization in the face of difference or avant-garde perspectives will prove to be an important ground of exploration, especially when considering the weight of change occurring in university music history curriculum and the historiographic ramifications of continually changing practices. This is also important because it places a significant amount of attention on how to deal with curricular resistance. In an environment where the excellence of performance standards in conservatory culture mixes with the rigors of academic standards in the university, working between these matters is especially crucial in not only presenting a historical narrative, but also negotiating between voices and their relative degrees of agency.

* * *

The aspirations of this dissertation, as a way to try to make sense of a difficult era of art and music are of a magnitude much larger and unwieldy than I wished to imagine. For this reason, I must make the caveat that I have had to contain the directions of my discussions. Since music was given a distinct privilege in the nineteenth century above other arts, it should not be any wonder that this project, ultimately, has to be one that is not simply a musicological venture but an all-encompassing exploration. Yet I cannot reasonably, in a dissertation, reach much beyond the boundaries of my specialization and have so tried to contain the degree of interdisciplinary elements involved. This has proven extremely trying in many respects because there are many contextual aspects that require significant voice, and also many sides of understanding that need proper theorizing. The priority of music in the nineteenth century has also led to my own priority of music analysis and hermeneutic contextualization. In a larger

project, the degree to which I focus on philosophy, poetry, and psychology would play a much more seminal role.

Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter One — The Image in Mind—A Prelude to Synaesthesia

The music of Sergei Rachmaninoff plays a crucial historical role in bridging the gap between Romanticism and Symbolism. While he was a staunch Romanticist, his musical settings of Symbolist works prove to be an important link between two similar aesthetic points of view. Starting with Rachmaninoff, I wish to show the transitional element of the music being written at the turn of the century.

In this chapter, I focus on two major works—one small, one large—the Prelude in B Minor Op. 32, No. 10, and the symphonic poem the *Isle of the Dead*. I begin by discussing an anecdote regarding Rachmaninoff and his friend Benno Moiseiwitsch. In this story, by happenstance Moiseiwitsch stumbles upon an unusual discovery: that his own subjective understanding of his friend's prelude is in fact the same as Rachmaninoff's own. This is astonishing because Rachmaninoff's Preludes do little or nothing to indicate poetic content at all. Furthermore, Moiseiwitsch's prodding of Rachmaninoff about a program unveiled more: the inspiration of a painting by Arnold Böcklin, *Die Heimkehr* or *The Homecoming*. However did Moiseiwitsch find meaning in the prelude without any programmatic indications? Given the acknowledged connection how does this sense of meaning play out with respect to the music? In seeking an explanation, I explore the relationship between musical imagination and its connection to the pictorial.

To further demonstrate how this may work in a piece of absolute music such as the Prelude in B Minor, I turn to the tone poem the *Isle of the Dead* to establish some ground by which to present a hermeneutical approach that becomes crucial for the Prelude in B minor. Rachmaninoff based this work, written in 1909, on one of the Symbolist paintings *Die Toteninsel*, again by the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin. It is crucial in this study to establish similar pictorial elements in music relating to the same period; taking work by the same artist may simplify the quest. The scene in Böcklin's canvas is an island with rocky cliffs and temple-like walls strewn with cypress trees: a boat approaches with two figures in it, one standing and one rowing; at the front of the boat is a coffin. Rachmaninoff's music throughout can be heard as a direct depiction of both the subtle and surface elements of meaning in this painting. The repetitive ostinato pattern in 5/8 meter that is incessantly heard throughout the piece mimics not only the rowing of a boat approaching the island, but also the breathing of someone approaching death.

The pictorial nature of this orchestral work allows me to return to issues regarding programmatic and absolute music that will be mentioned in later chapters—namely, how music is able to conjure up narrative, imagery, feeling, and meaning. Here, I will show how it is directly expected to do these things. The result of such a process, I will argue, is a form of musical synaesthesia. It is this same process that is meant to be embedded in absolute music, but is instead left to the listener's unconscious to fill in the place markers and signification that are often deliberately given in programmatic music.

While the meaning and representation behind the *Isle of the Dead* is clear, this seems to be a general process that Rachmaninoff, and many other composers coming from the Romantic tradition, went through. Quoting a rather casual comment by the composer from a biography

written by Sergei Bertensson, we see that he makes no secret of the fact that within his compositional process representation is always crucial:

When composing, I find it of great help to have in mind a book just recently read, or a beautiful picture, or a poem. Sometimes a definite story is kept in mind, which I try to convert into tones without disclosing the source of my inspiration... If there is nothing within, nothing from outside will help.²²

This quest for meaning seems to be the most important romantic element in Rachmaninoff's music and reflects upon most of the Romantic generation that precedes him.²³ It is this romantic notion of absolute music—and not Eduard Hanslick's—that can be seen as a preference for many Russian Symbolists, because direct meaning is purposefully obscured while an intuitive, and ultimately, spiritual meaning is revealed.²⁴ Such a form of expression best fits their aesthetic; music evades direct representation at all costs. Intuition and the unconscious become the primary means for making sense of musical representation. This argument is steeped in Schopenhauerian ideals, which push for a universal argument for music's inherent ability towards expression. While this facet of universalism in Schopenhauer's theory is usually discarded today, in the musical understanding of the period it was taken to be true.

Arguing this point, however, means it is necessary to take a position both in the past and in the present. In the Silver Age, music has the inherent ability to represent (if ambiguously); in modern scholarship we take this as a learned intuitive process where topical, melodic, and harmonic material acquire unwritten quasi-semantic meanings developed within the European

²² Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, with the assistance of Sophia Satina, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1956), 156.

²³ Charles Rosen's *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) is particularly useful in making sense of this.

²⁴ Hanslick is particularly criticized, even vilified, by Emil Medtner for his attacks on Wagner. Vol'fing [Emil Medtner], "Sixtus Beckmesser redivivus," *Zolotoe Runo* 2 (1907): 65. Also in Magnus Ljunggren's *The Russian Mephisto*, 27.

musical paradigm.²⁵ This will be the epitome of my argument for musical theurgy within the Russian Symbolist rubric—namely, that music can reveal truth and clairvoyance because it can represent the will. However, the only way to show how this works in the music is by actually unpacking representation of meaning as it was potentially understood in this time period. This is why I make such a long diversion into analyzing Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead*; providing a pictorial context for analyzing the Prelude in B minor proves crucial for this chapter—namely that a program can clearly exemplify how music conjures image, narrative, and meaning.

Not only will this provide the foundational example of how musical theurgy works within Symbolism, but it also sets up the entire foundation for exploring the nature of synaesthesia in Scriabin's music. What I parse through in this chapter as well are the phenomenological implications of synaesthesia. My approach is to go beyond the color associations that are so often the focal point of these discussion and to show how color and eventually pictures in the mind constitute a means for a developed musical imagination. What becomes even more significant later in the chapter is how the musical practice of this period depends on synaesthesia as a way to understand the need for the synthesis of an endless amount of meanings as they pertain to a piece of music. How this is executed in the mind, and the dependency of that mind on combining many of those meanings together as fragments of one whole, creates the basis for a different, or even lost, mode of listening due to changes in an environment that bring different semiotic associations and symbols. This does not mean that they are not related, but rather, if some are missing, some aspect of cultural reconstruction cannot occur.

²⁵ I will discuss the issues of absolute music in much further detail in this chapter. Daniel Chua's book *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) will be an important resource, as will the writings of Carl Dahlhaus, Susan McClary, and Lawrence Kramer.

But while these historiographic concerns present an interesting perspective on where meaning takes shape in the unconscious, the use of aesthetic concerns as a means to excite feeling brings about the most important element of synaesthesia. That is, in this chapter, my goal is to present “synaesthesia” as a historically significant interest of the period. This means that a historically developed and directed synaesthetic preparation can give a present-day musical usage a heightened sense of experience and exploration, as well as providing an important analytical tool to critique elements of interpretation that are sometimes too difficult to put into direct words. That is to say, I propose the prospect of using poetic language, similar to that used in the period, as a means of inducing synaesthesia, and so to paint broader strokes of feeling when confronting the ineffable in music. This experimental approach places emphasis on embodying certain nineteenth-century concerns into some semblance of experiential understanding. The point of this is to demonstrate a mode of listening that engages directly with theurgy and with how that plays out in musical terms. This depends entirely on making a rather large leap with respect to the imagination itself.

Chapter Two — Towards the Flame: Approaching Scriabin’s Apocalypse

It is my intent in this chapter to further solidify the importance of Scriabin’s mystical vision when looking at his compositions, without dismissing him for his megalomania. I will be focusing primarily on *Vers la Flamme*. In parallel with my brief analysis of his Prelude op. 74, no. 4, I intend to meld musical analysis with a cultural study in order to make sense of how Scriabin conjures up musical theurgy. This analysis will explore the melodic and harmonic techniques characteristic in the late style, so as to make sense of the meanings they embody or evoke. For example, *Vers la Flamme* makes liberal use of octatonic harmonic constructions,

which have the most basic connotation of magic within the Russian compositional tradition. The dissonances that Scriabin composes out through these octatonic passages reveal themselves to have the qualities of consonant harmonies. Through this technique, he unveils that an obscured meaning can be revealed through further abstraction of harmonic convention. Scriabin is not simply trying to “reach” atonality, as the progress narrative would tell us; he is trying to invoke something else. Just as conventional tonal functions reveal a hidden meaning, this is abstracted further, where a new harmonic language is created in order to reveal a greater truth beyond the Will.

I also include an analysis of what it is like to actually perform one of Scriabin’s works. This is the crucial next step in making sense of musical theurgy. The composer casts his role as performer as being akin to a sorcerer, priest, or theurgist when on the stage. The subject matter of *Vers la Flamme* is that of a mystical ritual and the gestures that form while performing certain melodic figurations are equivalent to a sorcerer performing magic. For example in his tone poem *Prometheus*, Scriabin playing the piano part in what is essentially a hybrid of a concerto and symphony, places him in the role of theurgist; he becomes both *Prometheus* and *Orpheus* in the endeavor and his performances of these works are, to him, rituals where mystery is to be revealed through musical theurgy.

Chapter Three—A Reminiscence of Nature’s Forgotten Melodies

In this chapter, I explore Medtner's music after the revolution with respect to an idealization of nature, along with his aesthetic traditionalism and politically reactionary sentiments, shared by a number of artists during the beginning stages of modernity. Medtner’s *Sonata-Reminiscenza* is an evocation of lost tonality through a depiction of the past. His musical

language emphasizes a conservative lyrical style that portrays the snow-covered Russian countryside where he sought refuge from the turmoil of the city. This is in stark contrast to music of the avant-garde, which sounded to him like the disordered noise of urban life. Through recurring leitmotifs within the sonata, Medtner creates a narrative where the music constructs a belated version of pastoral nostalgia. In this melancholic reminiscence, he is grappling with the encroachment of modernity and the chaos of the revolution. Medtner finds solace in *Sonata-Reminiscenza* by reinscribing spirituality and idealism in music through a tonal style that represents a natural order he felt was disappearing.

* * *

While it has been my goal to add to the scholarship on Russian Symbolism and its relation to music in a general sense, ultimately I believe the most fruitful way to do this is from the perspective of a performer. Pianists today have grown up with modernism. And while many young pianists incorporate twentieth- and twentieth-first-century composers into their repertoire, there is still an urge to ignore modern compositions, especially those with harsh dissonances. The message is clear to many of piano teachers: young pianists hate atonality and would prefer to play Chopin.

I also grew up with these same biases against dissonance. During my piano lessons at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in my high school years, I shuddered at the notion that a composer such as Schoenberg would soil the pristine purity of my carefully selected recital repertoire—only to frustrate my piano teacher who was trying to give me a well-rounded education. My propensity towards tonal conservatism brought me to the music of Nikolai Medtner, the antipode of musical modernism. Surprisingly, this steered me to the music of

Scriabin who can be seen as the arbiter of musical abstraction. I soon found out that making sense of any of this music involved entering a world that is completely unfamiliar to us today.

Becoming accustomed to a musical composition, as Kandinsky suggests in his description of Scriabin, can affect how we perceive the beauty in that work. By understanding Russian Symbolism, and subsequently musical theurgy, we are given the opportunity to hear and perform this music with a new perspective without the bias of our own generation.

I.

The Image in Mind—A Prelude to Synaesthesia

Sergei Rachmaninoff smiled with delight. It was springtime in London, the year 1933, and the composer was unusually warm. He was showing his friend, Benno Moiseiwitsch, a postcard he had received (the two pianists were enjoying some good humor and fun after lunch). The message inquired about the famous Prelude in C-sharp minor, a work Rachmaninoff had grown to detest because of the relentless demands by the public for him to perform it. The curious admirer asked if the piece was “meant to describe the agonies of a man having been nailed down in a coffin while still alive.”²⁶ Amused, Rachmaninoff proclaimed, “If the Prelude conjures up a certain picture in her mind, then I would not disillusion her.”²⁷ This remark caught Moiseiwitsch by surprise. The mere thought of a hidden program in his friend’s music resonated too strongly. He wanted to put forth his own query; it was about a piece he played during his American debut in 1919—one that was dear to him: the Prelude in B minor. For many years Moiseiwitsch had his own secret idea about this work, but at this moment he could no longer hold back his own curiosity. “Did you have a program?” he asked. “Yes,” answered Rachmaninoff in his distinctly cavernous bass voice. “Good! I want the first round,” Moiseiwitsch replied, with especial intent to prod and guess. “I know that your idea is not mine,” he explained boldly, “but I know that mine is correct.” Together they haggled, composer and performer, about the meaning of a short piece of music. After this playful banter, Moiseiwitsch finally confessed that he had a long story associated with his idea. To this, Rachmaninoff assured

²⁶ Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda (with Sophia Satina), *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956), 296.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 296.

him that their conceptions could not possibly be the same because his own story could be answered in simply one word. Despondent, Moiseiwitsch sat himself down in a chair. Then, speaking earnestly, he explained, “Well, to me it suggests the return—” A long arm shot out and a booming voice rang out: “Stop!” The composer had willed the room to silence. Moiseiwitsch was taken aback. “Why? What have I done?” Whereupon a deep somber voice uttered in resignation, “That’s what it is; it’s the return.”²⁸

The October Revolution left many artists displaced from their homeland. Rachmaninoff and Moiseiwitsch had been in self-imposed exile and shared a profound sense of nostalgia. This celebrated story about the Prelude in B minor Op. 32, No. 10 is one of reminiscence and homecoming. For the two émigré pianists, however, the return home seemed impossible. As the years went on, the Russian Empire of old that they grew up in became increasingly distant both in place and memory. With each passing day, even the dream of return appeared bleak and far removed. Towards the end of his life, Moiseiwitsch spoke affectionately when relating his encounter with Rachmaninoff and the "true meaning" of the Prelude in B minor. In those final days, he remained living in London; by then the composer had passed on long before in America. Neither ever returned home. For the two expatriate musicians, that time together discussing a piece of music allowed them to reflect meaningfully and emotionally about a lost life. But even that wonderful moment Moiseiwitsch had with his friend—like a dream fleeing in the morning, or the nature of music itself—left him and belonged to the past. Yet the meaning was kept alive by the perseverance of his memory and the telling of his tale.

²⁸ Ibid., 296. Most of this anecdote comes from a combination of this source and an interview with Moiseiwitsch that can be found in the documentary *The Art of Piano: Great Pianists of the 20th Century*, DVD, directed by Donald Sturrock (NVC Arts/Warner Music Vision, 1999).

With no markings on the score indicating any discernible program, the prelude remains austere; it is a paragon of absolute music where connotation is the sounding of the ineffable. Moiseiwitsch's feat was remarkable: he uncovered the hidden secret of an otherwise indecipherable musical work. Had he not pressed Rachmaninoff about this, the composer may very well have taken his inspiration to the grave. Yet through this story, the prelude breathed new life; the two musicians found solace together, resurrecting a dormant dream buried by fate. Suddenly, the Prelude in B minor had a distinct program that allowed a search for lost time both in soul and in music. And only through Moiseiwitsch's defiant imagination do we know that Rachmaninoff actually had a specific image in mind: Arnold Böcklin's painting *Die Heimkehr*, or *The Homecoming*.²⁹

This prelude represented for the composer his remove from Russia and his feelings of reminiscence thereafter. But for one peculiarity: the Preludes Op. 32 as a cycle were written in 1910, a good seven years before Rachmaninoff crossed the border into Finland, never to return to his homeland. Was he anticipating his exile? Probably not—yet, such an idea certainly adds to the aura of mystique and *gravitas* that surrounds much of the composer's *oeuvre*, let alone this particular piece. The inspiration of Böcklin's painting and his homesickness coalesced as one in the autumnal years of his life.

But knowledge of this painting was deliberately withheld—at least until Moiseiwitsch's prying. Was this ultimately a gift? Or was this music meant to linger uncontaminated by words? Must any person listening to music only long for understanding and meaning while continuing to remain silent? Rachmaninoff certainly did not stop his friend, nor was this story suppressed. How, then, does the imagery from Böcklin's painting relate to this prelude? How does knowing

²⁹ Ibid., 296.

about it affect the music? And this asks furthermore, how can such music relate to painting in general? These questions regarding meaning and music are truly significant and yet it is easy to turn a blind eye or deaf ear because they are so hard to grapple with.

In general, Rachmaninoff's music has been subject to limited inquiry in this direction, whether by performers, critics, or musicologists. Moreover, there is a dearth of scholarship on Rachmaninoff in the field of musicology and on Böcklin in art history, let alone the two together.³⁰ These artists were certainly important in their own time. Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead* could be found "in every Berlin home," as Vladimir Nabokov is so often quoted, from his novel *Despair*.³¹ Rachmaninoff, as we already know, was unable to escape the public's demands to hear his extremely popular Prelude in C-sharp minor Op. 3, No. 2. In fact, Rachmaninoff's works, particularly the piano concertos, continue to maintain a ubiquitous presence inside the concert hall today around the world and are a mainstay of piano competitions. This fame, however, may have driven the proverbial nail in the coffin, so to speak, with regard to a much larger problem of legacy. Long after their deaths, Rachmaninoff and Böcklin have dwelt in an unusual purgatory wherein they are aligned with a dominant classicized tradition in academia, but are marginalized by the accessibility of their output. Obstinate anxiety about popularity in general has only recently been broached as a topic in musicology, let alone the academy as a whole, but overall persists as an uncomfortable topic for some.³² Another dilemma involves the specter of modernism in scholarly discourse, which offered no reason to look kindly upon

³⁰ The bibliography on Rachmaninoff is scant at best. The search for Arnold Böcklin yields paltry offerings that, similarly, leave more to be desired. See Geoffrey Norris, "Rachmaninoff [Rakhmaninov], Serge [Sergey] (Vasil'yevich)," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., edited by Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 2001).

³¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (New York: Random House, 1976), 56.

³² Musicology has seen long overdue upending dogma that deliberately excluded the study of popular music. Rachmaninoff's music has sometimes been a part of important discussions about the tension between popular and classical music. See Robert Fink, "Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music Studies at the Twilight of the Canon," *American Music* 16/2 (Summer, 1998): 142-144.

conservative bygone styles, let alone any residual bouts of romantic idealism. Prevailing histories and narratives painted artists such as Rachmaninoff and Böcklin as the *bêtes noires* of twentieth-century progress. Of course, the issue surrounding their popularity does not help alleviate fears or insecurities that such reactionary voices could have imparted lasting influence on culture.³³

Divergent paths and voices, however, cannot—and should not—stay obscured in any study today especially when one tries to establish a cultural history.³⁴ Romanticism has, in fact, persisted strongly in its influence, albeit in ways unexpected or in forms that have evolved substantially. The old debate regarding absolute versus programmatic music, for example, continues tensely along these very sentiments.³⁵ Looking at Rachmaninoff's Prelude in B minor in tandem with Böcklin's *Die Heimkehr* poses an important challenge to the pervasive idealization in classical music culture, considering the impact of historical and cultural details. Bridging such gaps between music and painting is imperative to the study of music during the *fin de siècle*—and this involves showing directly how a specific painting and a piece of music can relate to one another. Beginning with close observation and reflection on the picture and the composition will prove indispensable.

Arnold Böcklin's *Die Heimkehr* shows a man staring down at a cottage at dusk. He is seated on top of a reflecting pool—a vantage point from which he can see a house shrouded and

³³ Richard Taruskin's seminal work, *Defining Russia Musically*, roots out these covert agendas suppressing persistent romanticism, especially with respect to Alexander Scriabin. This admirable undertaking unfortunately falls short; Taruskin subtly reinforces some of the very biases he argues against by diminishing the role of composers such as Rachmaninoff. Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

³⁴ This is ultimately a larger question of historiography that has recently been a significant subject of debate. The importance of difference and diversity covering a range of topics has proven vital in making sense of the burgeoning modern era in the twentieth century, and in reflecting upon the shape of discursive priorities and politics in present day scholarship.

³⁵ See Carl Dahlhaus, *Aesthetics of Music*, trans. William W. Austin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Daniel Chua's book on this topic shows the complicated nature of both history and historiography of absolute music. Daniel K. L. Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

darkened by trees. In the darkness, a candle burns, illuminating the window and showing that someone is inside. The matter is simple, but powerful nonetheless: a man has come home. This is the return from a long sojourn that Rachmaninoff and Moiseiwitsch both lamented.



Figure 1.1. Arnold Böcklin, *Die Heimkehr*

The painting is modest. There is no real overt action taking place in this scene: it is static. How can this really be represented in music? Drawing on a simple parallel, Rachmaninoff begins his prelude with a sense of stasis: in the first four measures, the prominent musical idea is the undulating dotted triplet; this motive immediately is brought to a halt by a rhythmically suspended chord, which is followed by an affirming quarter note in the lower register. Taking

place three times, this is followed emphatically by two more sustained notes to bring the phrase to a close. This rhythmic structure constitutes a stoppage of motion. These static gestures sit still, just like the man in the painting. Yet the harmony remains unsettled and uncomfortable, as if it needs to continue moving. The upbeat at the beginning of the piece starts its first dotted triplet on an E minor chord: the subdominant. This then moves to the tonic in B minor on the first suspended chord. The next gesture reverses this. The placement of these two gestures corresponds to a question and answer. The first rhythmically suspended chord is on the downbeat of the first measure, but it feels unresolved until the held chord at the beginning of the second measure, which acts like a stronger placement. This is unusual because it briefly gives the impression that the tonic of this opening is not B minor, but E minor; moreover, it implies that the tonic is a harmonic suspension that needs resolution. After this second held chord, the four-bar opening phrase continues with two more dotted triplets and sustained chords that place the harmony firmly in the tonic in B minor. Again, because of the rhythmic peculiarity of this opening, this very first phrase comes across as unsettled even though it establishes the tonic conventionally. This four-bar phrase structure is repeated again, this time ending on the subdominant and followed by two measures echoing the phrase in resolution.

X.

S. Rachmaninow, Op. 32, N° 10.

The image displays a musical score for the first twelve measures of Rachmaninoff's Prelude in B Minor, Op. 32, No. 10. The score is written for piano and is marked "Lento." The key signature is B minor (two sharps) and the time signature is common time (C). The music is characterized by a steady, rhythmic accompaniment of dotted quarter notes in the right hand and eighth notes in the left hand. The first measure begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a triplet of eighth notes in both hands. The second measure introduces a suspended chord in the right hand. The third measure continues with the triplet accompaniment. The fourth measure features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and a dotted triplet in the right hand. The fifth measure returns to the piano (*p*) dynamic. The sixth measure includes a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and a dotted triplet. The seventh measure is marked *dim.* (diminuendo) and features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The eighth measure is marked *m. d.* (mezzo-dolce) and features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The ninth measure is marked *dim.* and features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The tenth measure is marked *m. d.* and features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The eleventh measure is marked *m. g.* (mezzo-gioioso) and features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The twelfth measure is marked *m. g.* and features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The score includes various dynamic markings such as *p*, *mf*, *dim.*, *m. d.*, and *m. g.*, as well as articulation marks like slurs and accents. The notation includes triplets and dotted rhythms throughout.

Figure 1.2. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor Op. 32, No. 10—Measures 1-12

After the first ten measures, the music continues on from the open-ended, question-like subdominant where it presents the dotted triplet without a suspended chord, pushing the piece along with forward momentum.



Figure 1.3. Measures 13-18.

Next, between measures 17 and 18, the opening gesture of the dotted triplet and sustained note occurs again, but it is accompanied by an incessant, driving chordal triplet figure. This enforces, further, a strong sense of kinetic motion continuing through most of the center of the piece until measure 36.

poco a poco cresc.

rit.

Tempo I.

ff

m.d. *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.*

m.d. *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.*

m.d. *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.*

m.d. *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.*

m.d. *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.*

m.d. *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.* *m.d.* *m.g.*

ff *dim.* *f* *rit. e dim.*

The musical score consists of six systems of piano and bass staves. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 3/4. The piece begins with a 'poco a poco cresc.' instruction. The first system includes a 'rit.' marking. The second system is marked 'Tempo I.' and 'ff'. The score is characterized by dense textures with frequent triplets and sixteenth-note patterns. Dynamic markings include 'm.d.' (mezzo-dolce), 'm.g.' (mezzo-giochiato), and 'ff' (fortissimo). The piece concludes with 'rit. e dim.' (ritardando e diminuendo).

Figure 1.4. Measures 19 -36.

The entire middle section is a development of the opening and continues to build momentum and energy, meditating primarily on minor chords and dissonances until it finally unleashes in a tumultuous run in the right hand of measure 47 that morphs into a cadenza that disappears into the ether of the upper register of measure 48. After a brief fermata, the first five measures recapitulate, re-establishing the opening irresolution. The music returns to the same place—this, remembering the painting, is a nod to the man's return. This time, however, there is a subtle difference in harmony: measures 52 and 53, the second four-bar phrase, emphasize C major, the dream-like and distant \flat VI harmony of the dominant in E minor. This deceptive cadence briefly suspends the return back to the home key of B minor, an unusual paradox where the sad resolution in the tonic feels so far from home; the little excursion to C major gives, for a brief moment, hope of escaping the inevitable gloom of minor. But the music then creeps its way back to B minor. Suddenly B major appears but is quickly rescinded. The final emphatic chromatic gestures present a bittersweet exchange between B major and then B minor in measures 58-60, which precede a resolution in the B minor tonic, tragically bring the piece to a close.

L'istesso tempo.

pp *poco cresc.* *6*

dim. *3* *6p* *poco cresc.* *6*

leggiero *mf* *dim.*

pp *cresc.*

f *dim.*

Figure 1.5. Measure 37-47

veloce
2 3 5 4 2 3 1 2 3 5 3 2 5 2 1 3 2 4 2

p

m.g. *dim.* *pp* *mf*

a tempo, come prima

mf *dim.* *mf* *p* *pp*

Figure 1.6. Measure 37 to the end.

There is a lot happening here. This preliminary analysis is only a brief overview of the prelude's action, only a superficial reading that disregards much of the music's content. Yet it constitutes a standard analysis of musical meaning, or basic musical grammar and syntax, at least. What we can glean from this first encounter is that the music's representational interests are not restricted simply to the surface details of the painting. The man sitting, facing the house might be reflected by the opening ten bars where we hear moments of static rhythm in the sustained chords. But the momentous middle section of the prelude that develops the musical material seems absent from the painting. In a way, the opening and recapitulation bookend the entire prelude and represent the simple, iconic element of what we actually see in the painting. The rest of the content in the piece is all reflection and meditation (both symbolically represented by the man sitting, staring down from the reflecting pool). After all, the painting, as a subject, evokes introspection; we are invited at first glance to imagine, ask: what is this man thinking? What is he waiting for? Why is he not entering the home? From measures 11-48, the middle section of this prelude, the action unfolds like a journey. Is it possible that the image of the man is simply a snapshot that occurs at the end of the piece? Perhaps the prelude exists entirely in the moment of that snapshot. The momentous middle section would be a reminiscence of previous events from his journey playing through his mind or the tumult of emotions he is experiencing upon homecoming. In either case, the reappearance of the opening gesture in measure 48 emphasizes a return from a musical journey within the prelude; at the end, our protagonist is left seated in front of the home.

This basic hermeneutic analysis of the prelude uncovers a relationship to Böcklin's painting that unfolds in a rather conventional manner. Our impetus for such engagement can be

tied to Moiseiwitsch's claim that he could "...almost translate every bar into words."³⁶ (Alas, if only he left us a more detailed account in the description of the image he had in his mind.) If anything, that chromatic gesture at the end which exchanges the B major chord for B minor colors that feeling of nostalgia and reluctance. Some have suggested that this brief moment sounds like a quotation of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Song of the Indian Guest" in *Sadko*.³⁷ In this opera, three characters—a Varangian, an Indian, and a Venetian—are told they are not allowed to return home. Perhaps Moiseiwitsch latched onto this melancholy quotation at the end of the piece? Is this prelude an utterance of or allusion to that song? This same chromatic gesture permeates the entire prelude. Certainly a song about a distant homeland sung by a character with the same predicament would have some significance? Indeed, this is an important allusion, whether intentional or not. But it is one very short motivic musical phrase. And, of course, the downward chromatic line itself could simply be construed as a lament as well, and not just as a quotation. Adding to this, we must remember Moiseiwitsch himself saying he could translate almost every bar... And while we may never be able to reconstruct what he imagined, it seems a little too facile to focus on *just* one metaphoric quotation, however important the allusion is throughout the prelude. Alone, this echo in the music remains sadly ambiguous and bittersweet.



Figure 1.7. Rimsky-Korsakov, "Song of the Indian Merchant" from *Sadko*.

³⁶ Bertensson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music*, 296.

³⁷ Max Harrison being the most significant to note this saying, "...these six minutes of closely wrought music...sound like an allusion, probably unconscious, of the *Chant hindou* from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko*." Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life Works, Recordings* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 173.



Figure 1.8. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor, final bars.

Returning to the preliminary analysis, it becomes clear that the music deviates substantially from the rigidity of what is directly depicted on the canvas—it is not simply iconic musical representation. The relationship between music and painting in these two artworks is dependent on abstraction: much of the content lies not in the work itself, but instead within *imagination* itself. Indeed, the genre of the prelude, with its evocation of later music and ideas that continue onward without sounding best fits an exploration of such imagination. This emphasis seems to be the point here since most of the middle of the prelude is not only in the mind of the performer and listener, but also takes place in the mind of the man within the painting itself. This brings up an important issue regarding the pictorial in music: because music moves through time and a painting is a static snapshot of a scene, the way music is able to depict a picture is how it transforms the medium. Its ephemerality is its advantage. In order to understand this, it is necessary to unpack the issues of visualizing through music that we have inherited from the nineteenth century.

Correspondence between arts is a crucial aspect of culture during the *fin de siècle*. Moreover, Rachmaninoff composed and Böcklin painted within such an environment. While interaction between artistic media was crucial, music was given the most important position because of its propensity towards abstraction. The appearance of this aesthetic priority is due in large part to the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer via Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche.

It is a matter of ontology that starts with Immanuel Kant's distinction of a world that can be described through phenomena versus noumena—that is to say, an existence we understand through empirical and conscious experience (phenomena) as opposed to a truer reality uninhibited by our senses (noumena). For Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*, music is an unfavorable art especially compared to, say, literature, which invokes thought.³⁸ Schopenhauer, on the other hand, considers music the highest of the arts because for him it gives direct connection to the noumenal realm. In his *World as Will and Representation*, he defines Kant's noumenon as a concept he calls the Will: a force that is the very essence of existence—from the interaction of the elemental in nature to the desires of being.³⁹ Or more simply put, it is everything from the energy that causes things in the universe to the human impulse to live, both being of the same; the world we see and experience empirically is simply a *representation*—a mirror, so to speak—of the Will. For Schopenhauer, music is a copy of the Will because it interacts directly with feelings, unlike painting or literature, which involve another level of mediation through contemplation. Hence, music represents the Will unimpeded and is therefore closer to noumenal reality. The wide dissemination and impact of this view of music in Europe during the nineteenth century was due in large part to Wagner's operas and writings on music.⁴⁰ With his adumbration of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Wagner brought forth what he saw as the necessary unification of artistic media while harnessing music's awesome and newly invigorated power in order to create transcendental experience through art. This Wagnerian influence is immense and can be seen in France and Russia, resonating particularly through the Symbolist

³⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 123-7.

³⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, vols. 1 & 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1979).

⁴⁰ Wagner's appropriation also puts aside Schopenhauer's pessimism and uses the philosophy for his own purposes. This is most notable in his *The Art-work of the Future*. William Ashton Ellis, trans., *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1892).

movement, by the end of the nineteenth century.⁴¹ The innate iconic impulse in programmatic music thus gained a new potency.

Sound, strictly speaking, is heard, not seen; creating a picture through music should seem like something unusual. This has not been the case, however; one can simply look at the persistent interest in the overt iconicity in programmatic music throughout history—for example, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* or Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. Along with this, music's auditory nature is typically understood in a metaphorical dimension—we speak of high and low notes, dark and bright tones. A large part of this has to do with description being a process imperative to communicating about music as sound. This phenomenological observation entails a necessary interaction between sensory behaviors within the mind—that is to say conceptualizing music is a *synaesthetic* experience. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that the crossing of the senses is, in fact, a general rule in perception; and, as Thomas Clifton clarifies, “the sense organs of the body are not functionally independent of each other, not because of any possible but still uncertain intersensory neural connections in the brain, but because of a centralizing self which synthesizes its empirically discrete perceptions.”⁴² What this indicates is that phenomenal experience does not rely on the empirical senses remaining independent from one another.⁴³ Synaesthesia, then, can be a form of understanding; or better yet, understanding is a form of synaesthesia. It is through this cross-sensory modality that we can spatialize, feel, visualize, and imagine music's content and meaning.

⁴¹ See Rosamund Bartlett, *Wagner and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962), 229 and Thomas Clifton, *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 66.

⁴³ He goes on to explain, through Merleau-Ponty, that deductive thought is what categorizes in this way. And because the senses are all a part of motor behavior, which is a part of the body, what we perceive to be metaphorical, then, is actually nonmetaphorical and nonanalogical. Clifton, *Music as Heard*, 66.

These details of musical conception can fluctuate significantly—and are subject to criticism—depending on cultural priority and historical context. This topic in present research receives attention primarily from neuroscience and psychology; scientific studies, mostly clinical, yield a fascinating body of work.⁴⁴ Synaesthesia as an involuntary medical condition that involves actual enhancement or disturbance of everyday life, depending on the individual, is an important—albeit related—distinction to make from Merleau-Ponty’s broader phenomenological interests. This difference shows a concern in mapping out what was otherwise considered an anomaly onto a larger purview of human perception.

The notion of synaesthetic experience did not escape the curiosity of many artists in the late- nineteenth century. The musician who hears tones as colors is the most popular, and therefore important, example to cite today, with Rachmaninoff’s friend Alexander Scriabin being the most famous and significant example for this study.⁴⁵ Scriabin’s own claim of synaesthesia cannot be proven clinically today, and his common image as a megalomaniac can, for many, discredit his proclamations, visions, and musings as the grandiosities of a madman. Indeed, the mere fact that for Scriabin the spectrum of colors cycles through the circle of fifths seems somewhat contrived. Regardless, Scriabin’s ideas about music reveal a heightened imagination that, even if anomalous, was taken seriously in the period. The conjuring of color through sound itself forms what illuminates pictorial imagination through music. We can glean a sense of

⁴⁴ Continued research in conjunction with music studies will be fruitful indeed. The groundwork for pioneering study in neuroscience and music has already been laid. See, for example, Lynn C. Robertson and Noam Sagiv, eds., *Synesthesia: Perspectives from Cognitive Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Simon Baron-Cohen and J.E. Harrison, eds., *Synaesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), and Massimo Marraffa, Mario de Caro, and Francesco Ferratti, eds., *Cartographies of the Mind: Philosophy and Psychology in Intersection* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007). Also see the works of Oliver Sacks.

⁴⁵ Other examples include Olivier Messiaen, et al.

synaesthesia in context through an exchange with Scriabin and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov that Rachmaninoff told his biographer, Oskar von Riesemann.⁴⁶

The year was 1907, and a heated debate took place at the *Café de la Paix* in Paris — Scriabin and Rimsky-Korsakov were trying to convince their skeptical compatriot of the existence of color correspondence to musical keys. For Rachmaninoff, this was far too silly to be true. Rimsky-Korsakov countered, “Look here! I will prove to you that we are right by quoting your own work. Take, for instance, the passage in *The Miserly Knight* where the old Baron opens his boxes and chests and gold and jewelry flash and glitter in the light of the torch...” —to which Rachmaninoff admitted that this passage was in fact written in D major, a key Scriabin and Rimsky-Korsakov described as a golden-brown color.⁴⁷

“You see your intuition has unconsciously followed the laws whose very existence you have tried in vain to deny.” In this grand refutation, Scriabin asserted to Rachmaninoff that even *he* could not evade the phenomenon of synaesthesia. In the end, Rachmaninoff still did not agree, but was unable to convince either of his colleagues that they were wrong in their observations. He went on to explain to Riesemann that “while composing this particular passage I must unconsciously have borne in mind the scene in Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera *Sadko*, where the people, at Sadko’s command, draw the great catch of goldfish out of the lake Ilmen and break into the jubilant shout, ‘Gold! Gold!’ This shout is written in D major. But I could not prevent my two colleagues from leaving the café with the air of conquerors who were convinced that they had thoroughly refuted my opinion.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Riesemann's work is controversial, though Rachmaninoff signed off on it for publication. Oskar von Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff's Recollections* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).

⁴⁷ Riesemann, 147. See also Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 488.

⁴⁸ Riesemann, 147.

Through this anecdote, there is an indication that Scriabin and Rimsky-Korsakov are grasping for some kind of collective musical experience where synaesthesia plays an important role. Scriabin's propensity towards the extreme was not surprising for Rachmaninoff, but Rimsky-Korsakov's assertion of the very same color-key relationship caught him off guard. Rachmaninoff's bewilderment and subsequent statement of disapproval reveals far more than he intended to refute.

In stating that the use of D major was possibly an unconscious reference to *Sadko*, he insinuates something unsettling about the compositional process—meaning can take root through association, but it can happen without the composer's awareness. Moreover, Rachmaninoff's admonishment of his friends' disregard for his opinion highlights not only the composer's disagreement, but also unveils a cultural attitude about the “musical work” as a reified, autonomous ideal that can very well be separated from authorial intent.

The synaesthetic musings of Rimsky-Korsakov and Scriabin within the framework of *Zeitgeist* fit most readily under the rubric of Symbolism, the artistic movement during the *fin de siècle* embodying the last brightly colored sparks and flourishes of romanticism before the First World War. Since as early as 1865, Charles Baudelaire's poem *Correspondences* from *Les Fleurs de Mal* placed attention on synaesthesia as *the* sought-after experience for attaining truth through indirect meaning. Adherents of the Symbolist movement took this ideal, along with the previously mentioned Wagnerian agenda of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as the strategy for representing the transcendental strain through art.⁴⁹ Whether or not musicians and composers made this their goal, the issues surrounding synaesthesia and Wagner relate significantly with respect to musical

⁴⁹ It is no surprise that Jung's theories have been highly influenced by the Symbolist movement. A notable example of this, as related to Emil Medtner, is Jung's interest in Russian Symbolist poets and theorists, most notably Dmitry Merezhkovsky. See in particular Magnus Ljunggren, *The Russian Mephisto. The Study of the Life and Work of Emilii Medtner* (Stockholm: GOTAB, 1994).

meaning, autonomy, and collectivity. All of this remained at the foreground during this period. Rachmaninoff was not necessarily an adherent or an advocate of the Symbolist agenda, but it is clear through the anecdote above that he was certainly a part of the debate. In a sense, Rachmaninoff's sudden awareness of the allusion to *Sadko* gives D major its gold tinge and thereby makes the synaesthesia happen. But if we are to take Scriabin and Rimsky-Korsakov's word seriously, that coloration in D major is always inherent and present. This is the essence of Symbolism. Color and tone relationships in synaesthesia are important in this context, not simply because they happen but because they act as symbols that spur thought, imagination, and imply connections. But most important of all, they interacted directly with feeling and thus embody the element of Schopenhauer's theory of the Will. The idea is that these things involving the imagination occur without the need for any word to be spoken.

This foray into Rachmaninoff's engagement with synaesthesia adds yet another important dimension to pictorial music in the late nineteenth century. The formation of imagery through heard music can be understood as being composed of fragments of association. Just as the iconic element in music can draw an image in the mind, so, too, can associations of meaning create an impression.

While synaesthesia in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological definition applies as a general rule, the Symbolist paradigm favors the individual experience primarily because the impressions are created through fragments of association. As mentioned above, this ambiguity and connection to feeling seems to function as the Will—and therein the noumenal. The primary goal of the Symbolist theoretical agenda was to harness the experience of music within a broader framework of transcendentalism.

This impression of music, more generally speaking, is not as hazy as we may think. Part of this has to do with the need for an additional axiom: that any time we allow our imagination to create an image within the mind through music, by virtue of allowing one sense to interact with another, we are engaging in a synaesthetic experience, one that is fundamentally built on synthesizing different associations of meaning. Thus, musical imagination—by definition, forming images within the mind—must *always* be synaesthetic.

* * *

What I have suggested above is a way of looking at music during the end of the nineteenth century through the lens of the Symbolist movement. As mentioned previously, Rachmaninoff cannot be labeled as simply a “Symbolist composer.” The Symbolist ideal, however, is relevant here because it reflects the most accurate understanding of music in a European art scene heavily influenced by Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche. The issues surrounding programmatic and absolute music relate significantly to both the pictorial element and the matter of synaesthesia I have already described.

Labeling “Symbolist music” or “Symbolist composers” in and of itself is highly problematical when compared with such in literature and poetry. Debussy’s affinities with the French Symbolists, along with Scriabin’s brash undertaking in relation to the second-wave Russian Symbolist movement, are the most obvious connections that can be made. But the issue here is that Symbolism as a theory swallows Wagner’s Schopenhauerian pill whole: it singles out music as *the* driving force for transcendentalism. Music’s propensity towards the ineffable, its evasion of direct, concrete meaning is what makes it so desirable. Or to simplify, in Schopenhauerian terms, it reflects feelings and therefore the Will directly. This sudden priority placed on music shows the art of Symbolist poets, writers, and painters aspiring towards the

condition of music. In this way, almost all music written in the Romantic vein is Symbolist, by virtue of how it can be received. Symbolism in general is not separate from Romanticism, but rather an extension. And, much like many other genre classifications that occur in classical music, it can be and has been applied retroactively. The Symbolist attempt at attaining a greater sense of meaning through musicality applies to music itself directly as a form. It is no surprise that critics sympathetic to such an ideal, during the period, discussed any composer's work, no matter how far removed from its influence (take the Russian Symbolists interest in Beethoven or Grieg, for example). This also means any performed music during this period can be considered within this context—including composers who have not adhered to or even heard of such theoretical ideas. Critical accounts of Rachmaninoff's music graced the pages of Symbolist journals such as *Vesy* and *Zolotoe Runo* as often as those on Scriabin's music, which more overtly attended to transcendental agendas.⁵⁰

By unpacking synaesthesia and establishing its place within an ontology that reflects a Symbolist theoretical paradigm reminiscent of the period, Rachmaninoff's Prelude in B minor and Böcklin's *Die Heimkehr* can be interpreted in context; however, before this I already presented a brief musical analysis of these two artworks explaining how sound and image can relate. The point of this was to show that while the relationship between music and picture can be iconically derived, it is limited. The iconic representation that happens in music depends heavily on the imagination to draw on the listener's knowledge both consciously and unconsciously. (The idea being: someone who hears, say, the bird song at the end of the second movement of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, goes through a process of creation in their mind based on birds

⁵⁰ Take for instance a review of Francesca da Rimini in the first issue of *Zolotoe Runo*: Vol'fing, "'Skupo rytsar' i 'Francheska da Rimini' (Opery Rakhmaninova na stsene Bol'shogo teatra)," *Zolotoe Runo*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1906): 122-3; or, a review of his Second Symphony; Vol'fing "Rakhmaninov, kak ispolnitel'," *Zolotoe Runo*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1908): 75.

they've "seen" and "heard" previously.) Whether the image is a still picture or a scene in action, listeners who choose to imagine while listening must engage with their own cognition and recognition and create their own associations. No two persons' imagination will produce the same thing. It is subjective. This is exactly why music's ephemerality is so important in this period. The image in mind occurs immediately and limits the amount of mediation. (This immediacy will prove to be extremely significant.) Where a set picture or program is established ahead of time, the mind is given help. This is exactly why the debate between programmatic and absolute music is so fervent. The argument for absolute music has always been a matter of potential: the more abstract music is the closer music reaches towards an ideal (or the noumenal) because it remains almost entirely in the mind and the listener does not have to engage phenomenologically outside hearing, especially regarding explanations of what is heard.⁵¹ What makes musical subjectivity so powerful, however, is the ability to establish analogues and resonances, feelings and ideas without ever having to speak of them aloud; that there is a connection between musicians, composers, and listeners that is unspoken but understood and that it leads to the same noumenal truth.

The argument in favor of absolute music does not mean the imagination process ceases nor that there is no content at all. Form in music still outlines content, but most important for understanding the period, not everyone was in complete agreement with Hanslick about the nature of music and the preference of a strict abstraction of the absolute. For the Prelude in B minor, the content was meant to be hidden and irretrievable. Rachmaninoff was astonished that Moiseiwitsch uncovered his secret. This does not mean that it is necessary to simply throw out

⁵¹ Hanslick's *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* is quite powerful. It is no surprise that the hegemonic claim of Western music's universalism persists today. Edouard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution Towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986).

the knowledge we have gained. What makes discussing music's imaginative content so difficult is that because the experience is subjective we cannot say exactly what it means and expect it to relate perfectly with someone else's experience. But it does not mean the content is not there, whether indicated by author or imagined by recipient. In describing his symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead* along with the compositional process itself, Rachmaninoff revealed his views on how inspiration unfolds:

“There must be something definite before my mind to convey a definite impression, or the ideas refuse to appear[...] When composing, I find it of great help to have in mind a book just recently read, or a beautiful picture, or a poem. Sometimes a definite story is kept in mind, which I try to convert into tones without disclosing the source of my inspiration [...] If there is nothing within, nothing from outside will help.”⁵²

Curiously enough, Rachmaninoff also weighed in on the subject of absolute music. In an interview around 1910, he discussed all 24 of his Preludes shortly after the completion of his Op. 32 set:

“By its very nature the Prelude is absolute music, and it cannot be confined within the framework of programme music or impressionistic music. Commentators have attributed all kinds of meanings to the Preludes of Chopin... Absolute music may suggest an idea or induce a mood in a listener, but its primary function is to give intellectual pleasure by the beauty and variety of its form. That was in fact the aim for which Bach strove in his amazing cycle of Preludes, which are a source of boundless delight for the musically mature listener. Their incomparable beauty will be lost if we try to find a reflection of the composer's psychological terms, then we must understand that the function of a Prelude is not to portray a mood but to prepare it. A Prelude, it seems to me, is a form of absolute music intended to be performed before a more significant piece, or fulfilling the function of introducing some sort of action, which is of course reflected in its title.”⁵³

With conviction, Rachmaninoff asserts the futility of placing works of absolute music inside a procrustean bed. He finds problematic the pursuit of specific programs at the behest of form and abstract beauty. But he does not chastise ideas or moods that may be inherent within music. In

⁵² Bertensson and Leyda, 156.

⁵³ Originally appearing in *The Delineator*, New York, 1910, February, 127; but also found in Z.A. Apetyan, ed. *S. Rakhmaninov. Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Sovietskiiy kompozitor, 1978), 63-4. Quoted here from Valentin Antipov, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: Critical Edition of the Complete Works, Series V: Works for Piano Solo*, vol. 17, (Moscow: Russian Music Publishing, 2006), xiv.

discussing the Preludes, Rachmaninoff tells his opinion firmly, but he takes great care to use language that leaves the question of meaning open and up to the listener. Two decades after this interview, both Rachmaninoff and Moiseiwitsch met and, as we know, their encounter reveals a sympathetic and open attitude to the fluidity of absolute and programmatic categories. More remarkably, the ambiguity of musical meaning coupled with the search for a specific topic in the Prelude in B minor defined a powerful emotional connection in their friendship. Here, direct engagement with the contingency of musical meaning contained the utmost potency.

There is another important matter Rachmaninoff mentions—the act of preparation. The prelude, as a genre, suggests beyond itself, whether the result may be an act of theater, the whimsy of an idea, music that continues after the throes of a final cadence, or the gravity of a mood, and so on. Such music is *always* at the mercy of imagination. This is a quintessential characteristic of absolute music from this period. The form of the prelude is a “Romantic Fragment,” which Charles Rosen explains is “at once complete and torn away from a larger whole...”⁵⁴ He traces the creation of this concept to early nineteenth-century Jena in Thuringia, specifically to the Schlegel brothers. In a 1798 publication, Friedrich Schlegel describes this concept in the following manner: “A fragment should be like a little work of art, complete in itself and separated from the rest of the universe like a hedgehog.”⁵⁵ Rosen articulates the open-endedness of this poetic description further:

“The hedgehog (unlike the porcupine, which shoots its quills) is an amiable creature which rolls itself into a ball when alarmed. Its form is well defined and yet blurred at the edges. This spherical shape, organic and ideally geometrical, suited Romantic thought: above all, the image projects beyond itself in a provocative way. The Romantic Fragment draws blood only from those critics who handle it unthinkingly.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 48.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

Undoubtedly, when Rachmaninoff discussed the preludes by Bach and Chopin, not to mention his own caution against overly critical reflection, his argument was endowed with these decidedly nineteenth century ideals.

While the music of a prelude suggests preparation of what may come after, there is inevitably a lingering question about what comes before. Musically, the prelude is more tightly closed off as a “beginning,” because of the nature of its genre and name. But this does not dispel curiosity about a “music” that still may precede the music itself. It is important to remember that Rachmaninoff’s preludes are published in cycles, each enclosed in their own way—individual pieces and individual opuses. And in a nod to Bach and Chopin, he explores all key signatures as if in one cycle of 24 Preludes.⁵⁷ Therefore, the structure of the romantic fragment in these sets contains: one prelude, an entire opus, or all preludes—these are connected to each other, but separate. Rachmaninoff further highlights a connection by developing recurring motivic material in specific sets and all of them together—the undulating dotted rhythm from the Prelude in B minor is prominently displayed throughout the Op. 32 set. In this way, the Prelude in B minor can easily be seen as the climactic moment of its own set, but also for Opp. 23 and 32 combined, and all 24 Preludes together.⁵⁸ (It is also important to note that all of the preludes connect Rachmaninoff’s body of work as one part of all the preludes within the pantheon of tradition that includes Bach and Chopin.)

Putting aside the cycle as a form, Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in B minor—individually contained in itself—can still suggest preceding material on its own, even if it is defined as a beginning. The nature of its ambiguous harmony at its first upbeat and sustained chord evokes in

⁵⁷ It is curious to note how catalogue numbers strangely glue these cycles together by number: Op. 3, No. 2; Op. 23; Op. 32. Rachmaninoff may very well have been deliberate in this when publishing.

⁵⁸ Raymond Knapp brought to my attention the fragmentary and cyclical nature of these sets, which he discusses in one of his unpublished papers.

the prelude that feeling of “return,” which implies that something had to have happened before. We already know that this is the subject of the painting. It may be useful to briefly draw on an example from another late-nineteenth-century composer, Johannes Brahms, to show just how consistent themes and styles of this sort were expressed in the period. Brahms’ *Intermezzi*, from the Opp. 117, 118, and 119 sets of piano pieces, for example, draw upon similar qualities of reminiscence through beautifully contained yet melancholic motives, melodies, and harmonies. With these sets, each of these numerous *intermezzi* function like preludes—romantic fragments spurring the possibility of music imagined both before and afterward. But in Brahms’ own *oeuvre*, the *intermezzo* as a genre harkens back to an older work of his: the Piano Sonata in F minor Op. 5. In the fourth movement, Brahms presents an *Intermezzo* in the middle of a five movement sonata that unravels in the style of Beethoven. He subtitles this *Intermezzo* as “*Rückblick*,” which translates from German to a sort of “reflection” or a “look back.” This movement is presented as a funeral march that employs the main theme from the second movement of the sonata—one movement looks back to another. Brahms transforms this second movement, which begins with an epigraph on love, into the fourth movement about death—evoking a feeling of loss when looking back in time.

Andante

Andante espressivo

Der Abend dämmert, das Mondlicht scheint
Da sind zwei Herzen in Liebe vereint
Und halten sich selig umfängen. **Sternau**

legato *tr* *p* *ff* *

Figure 1.9. Brahms, Piano Sonata in F Minor Op. 5—Second movement

Intermezzo (Rückblick)



Figure 1.10. Brahms, Piano Sonata in F Minor Op. 5—Fourth movement

For Brahms, the intermezzo, as a genre, then becomes symbolic of deeply felt reminiscence, which he uses in the intermezzi he wrote at the end of his life. These late works were contained within the parameters of Hanslick's theories of absolute music, remaining as simply the beauty of form; and yet they still reveal meaning and content through feelings in sound, fragmentation, and through knowledge of his other works. (Brahms of course did not entirely agree with Hanslick's views.)

There is a larger point to bringing up Brahms here, besides the intermezzo's reminiscent similarity to Rachmaninoff's prelude. Preparation—especially that which remains unspoken—is the crucial component to understanding meaning that forms through unconscious imagination. This prior knowledge, while varying between performer, composer, or listener, is what helps make the content for associations. Just as seeing, having seen and hearing birds previously may evoke the images of the nightingale, quail, and cuckoo in Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, so too, albeit more abstractly, does a contextual knowledge of content facilitate a connection of meaning of musical form. Rachmaninoff's Prelude in B minor, as romantic fragment, foregrounds this with respect to subsequent mood or idea felt after the music. But preparation is also an important means for gaining content beforehand for composer, performer, and listener alike. Rachmaninoff himself goes as far as to even describe the “boundless delight” experienced by a “musically

mature listener” that hears the preludes of Bach. Interestingly enough, the pedagogical aim of Bach’s work follows this same purpose—the student acquires knowledge for creation. Another significant matter is brought to light by this: for someone equal parts composer, pianist, and conductor, such as Rachmaninoff, countless hours during childhood are spent practicing and learning music. While there is nothing unusual about this, it does emphasize a crucial part of the artistic process of creation. An extremely large amount of time is spent internalizing harmonies, rhythms, melodies, gestures, shapes, and so on—but of a varied yet highly specified repertoire. This, of course, will undoubtedly condition a certain way of listening—but also associating. This seems to explain Rachmaninoff’s emphasis on what he deems a “mature musician,” which probably means someone acculturated within an expected mode of hearing.⁵⁹ Also, for pianists such as Rachmaninoff and Moiseiwitsch, there is a real intimate experience not only with the instrument, but with how that music is played.⁶⁰ It is not uncommon to describe such intimacy with the piano, for example, as almost being one with the instrument—or in a flourish of unbridled romantic metaphor and imagination, that the pianist and piano itself are together one creature: a centaur.⁶¹ Professional musicians spend uncountable hours honing and perfecting their craft on their instrument in this manner, so that such a metaphor is apt and powerful.

The process involved in practicing an instrument, and the intuition gained makes deep and extensive effects on the unconscious and our senses of musical meaning. Yet it remains a tacit process. The same can be said about composing where intimate knowledge and awareness

⁵⁹ Postmodern discourse has lead the way in trying to capture and articulate diverse aspects of listening. See Andrew Dell’Antonio, ed., *Beyond Structural Listening?: Postmodern Modes of Hearing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁶⁰ For an understanding of the corporeal nature of music performance, see Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini’s Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

⁶¹ I heard this in numerous places but remember it most distinctly from a masterclass given by Jura Margulis, son of the late Vitaly Margulis. Tamás Vásáry also makes this analogy in the video documentary *Art of the Piano*. Whether Jura Margulis or Vásáry lifted this purposefully or unconsciously, or came to such a conclusion on their own or from some other source inherently shows a connective sense of purpose in piano performance.

of musical scores and performances take precedent. Brahms proves a helpful example, yet again, when considering not only his own subtle reference to his own work in his intermezzo, but also his penchant for allusive references to Beethoven.⁶² Influences on a composer's work in the nineteenth tradition sometimes are highly dependent upon the works from the past, either from their own or others.⁶³ Inspiration and allusion, however, sometimes flirt openly with plagiarism.

Discussing Brahms and this very notion, Rosen surmises the following:

“With Brahms, we reach a composer whose music we cannot fully appreciate—at a certain level, at any rate—without becoming aware of the influences which went into its making, in exactly the same way that it is difficult to make sense of Mendelssohn's “Reformation” Symphony without recognizing the chorale tunes. Influence for Brahms was not merely a part of the compositional process, a necessary fact of creative life: he incorporated it as part of the symbolic structure of the work, its iconography. We might even conjecture that the overt references are often there as signals, to call attention to others less obvious, almost undetectable.”⁶⁴

This notion of “symbolic structure” relies heavily on the unconscious to process and make the necessary connection. But Brahms, here, is making these links consciously and deliberately. Rachmaninoff, in his student days, followed a similar path when composing his first piano concerto. The precocious seventeen year old found Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor to be a rich source of inspiration, finding ways to create an entirely original work with structural, and

⁶² See in particular Raymond Knapp, “Brahms and the Anxiety of Allusion,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 18/1 (London: Routledge, 1998): 1-30.

⁶³ This has a strong correlation to the work of Harold Bloom, whose work is incredibly useful here; however, his take on influence being predicated on jealousy is problematic. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) and Richard Taruskin's "Revising Revision," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46 (1993): 114-38. Raymond Knapp articulates this in further detail and clarity in his essay cited above. Knapp, “Brahms and the Anxiety of Allusion,” 6.

⁶⁴ See Charles Rosen, “Influence: Plagiarism and Inspiration,” *19th-Century Music* 4/2, (Autumn 1980): 94. This also appears as a chapter in Charles Rosen's *Critical Entertainments: Music Old and New* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

even gestural similarities standing out.⁶⁵ A testament to this idea appears particularly in the rhapsodic opening of both works, which carry a striking likeness to one another.

The impact of inspiration, pedagogy, hours of practice on the instrument, devotion to craft, and constant listening develop a clear groundwork for meaning in composition, performance, and listening. I think it is important to mention that the idea, obviously, of a “mature listener,” in Rachmaninoff’s wording, does not have to cover all of these categories (nor is the whole concept ever necessary to uphold). But it does speak to a weighty bias present in the music of this culture, one that demands a classicized subject. In this sense, the notion of meaning in a reified musical work becomes somewhat complicated and especially dependent on prior knowledge.

Music’s instantaneousness and ephemerality, however, seem to defy these principles. Drawing upon French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, Carolyn Abbate makes a strong case for understanding what she describes as “real music”—that is, music that exists in real time.⁶⁶ “Metaphysical mania encourages us to retreat from real music,” she says, “to the abstraction of the work.” Extending her point further she continues:

“Yet as [Jankélévitch] wrote, ‘composing music, playing it, and singing it; or even hearing it in recreating it—are these not three modes of doing, three attitudes that are drastic, not gnostic, not of the hermeneutic order of knowledge?’ Musical sounds are made by labor. And it is in the irreversible experience of playing, singing, or listening that any meanings summoned by music come into being. Retreating to the work displaces that experience, and dissecting the work’s technical features or saying what it represents reflects the wish not to be transported by the state that the performance has engendered in us. The musical work—the thing we scrutinize for supra-audible import—in less severe terms is a souvenir, one of the things taken away from the experience of playing or listening, to be ‘put...in a drawer’ and contemplated as a way of domesticating that experience.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Z.A. Apetyan, ed., *Vospominaniya o Rakhmaninove*, 2 vols. 5th ed. (Moscow, 1988), 435-6. Also see Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Brookfield, Vermont: Scholar Press, 1990), 48-53 and Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings*, 36-7.

⁶⁶ Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Spring, 2004).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 505-6 and Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), 51.

This is profound. It challenges aspects of musicological inquiry at their core. Abbate's sensitivity to the fact that music is made through labor alludes to Christopher Small's influential work unveiling the social fabric of music making—or better, through his neologism: *musicking*.⁶⁸ Through Jankélévitch, however, she enforces a stronger critique of music's reification—and further implicates troubling engagement with music's ineffability, ephemerality, and “drastic” qualities. Casting a virtuosic assessment of what she describes as musicology's attempts at gnostic conjuring, Abbate assails instances of hermeneutical approach that, in her view, coerce subjectivity and stifle individual agency. Her questions and arguments are significant and her defense of “real music” should be duly noted. However, there is a disconcerting condescension in tone here. Quests for meaning are not always clothed in the robes of gnostic hermitage and resultant in maniacal retreat. In trying to shake the foundations of the lofty ivory tower, she bears down from above upon lower and softer fortifications that are within and without musicology. Ceasing discussion or thought of possible musical meaning entirely is an approach on the verge of the existential, uncomfortably denying subjectivity in a similar mode that Abbate critiques. Sometimes the comfort of trying to gain knowledge, however limited, helps avert the eyes from the frightening chasm of what can otherwise be a daunting abyss of meaning lost to time. In such a world music's ineffability disappears entirely if nothing is there at all. Abbate is well aware of this and tries not to inflict this; but she presents terms in such a drastic manner (so to speak) that they yield painfully drastic feelings that can push subjectivity unwillingly in as oppressive a direction as enforcing a monolithic meaning.

The porous boundaries between insider and outsider categories complicate musicology and classical music culture—especially with respect to history, performance, pedagogy, and

⁶⁸ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, N.H., 1998).

aesthetic concerns—and pave the way for disagreement regardless of the direction turned. This incongruity is part of what makes some forms of analysis seemingly essentialist in tone. The point of talking about meaning in musical discourse, however, is not to promote such essentialism (even if it seems that way), but rather it is to suggest artistic or historical possibilities. Historiographically, this is obviously very slippery. For example, Rachmaninoff's music is still performed today within a constantly changing tradition and demographic of classical music; cultural priorities sometimes remain the same, appear similar, or stand starkly different from those at the turn of the twentieth century. The goal of hermeneutic analysis is never to supplant any musical subjectivity. It can, however, play a key role in not only establishing a historical vantage point, but also in staging a point of departure for artistic creation in performer and listener alike. Evasion of all discussion and thoughts of meaning—for example, those that are historically contingent—vastly limits the imaginative potential in music both past and present.

With respect to knowledge gained within the historical and cultural frameworks presented here, meaning in music that aspires to the ineffable becomes dependent on some semblance of recognition and memory, whether organically derived or constructed through conscious or unconscious efforts. But it can also expand through further creation in the mind, depending heavily on the subjects involved in listening or performing the music. When there is direct word from the composer, the source of meaning seems much more secure. But as the exchange with Rimsky-Korsakov and Scriabin in the Parisian café suggests, composer's intent is only half the picture and sometimes disregarded. In this context, music and its meaning remain autonomous. Music can therefore attain and gather other meanings that may not be attributed to it in the first place. A musical work contains all possible meanings, whether direct, associative,

or diffuse.⁶⁹ With a synaesthetic approach, it may be conceivable for the willing listener or performer to gather an understanding of unconscious meaning in music—especially with respect to Moiseiwitsch’s story—by simply flooding the conscious mind with a large amount of possibilities. While total saturation is impossible, the idea is to engage in a fashion that allows the mind to synthesize disparate kinds of meaning. This approach can replicate the confrontation between the phenomenal and noumenal within Schopenhauerian terms prevalent in the late nineteenth century. An important aspect to making sense of this idea is to confront notions of the unconscious itself.

* * *

To recapitulate, I am arguing that a much greater range of possible outcomes of meaning in music can and should be explored if we are to present a broad historical perspective. They can provide a hermeneutic window for the imagination that one can look out of, escape from, or simply ignore altogether.⁷⁰ The discussion of music as an "impression" in this sense is meant to enhance the ineffable within musical imagination rather than stifle it. My goal, then, is to blur the process by the accretion of potential meanings.⁷¹ This intentional blurring re-appropriates Wagner's Schopenhauerian model for a historical mode of listening. As I mention earlier, the musical imagination requires the mind to explore sources of knowledge to draw an image within the mind. In the Symbolist context from the period, these would be different symbols representing supposedly a greater, truer reality (again, the noumenal). And there is a way to map out this historical form of listening: if all sources of meaning are embedded in the unconscious

⁶⁹ Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" 532.

⁷⁰ This is best articulated by Lawrence Kramer in *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 11-28.

⁷¹ This goal shows clear connection to postmodern and post-structural influences explored in the 1990s onward in musicology. While relevant, I do not wish to divert the conversation to a theoretical discussion on the works of Jacques Lacan or Jacques Derrida.

ahead of time, the act of listening to music can engage with meanings intuitively, synthesize them, and create a synaesthetic impression or ideal that—while impossible to examine—recreates a subjective experience closely akin to collective listening, completely within the subjectivity of the willing participant. The act of providing meaning through scholarship, therefore, remains only to bring about sources of unconscious knowledge that are lost to time. It is this element of *Zeitgeist* and contextual impression, that we may or may not have, that allowed Moiseiwitsch to pick out the subject of the Böcklin painting by hearing only the music itself.

* * *

Before returning to the Prelude in B minor, it may be useful on our journey through the vast seas of musical meaning to navigate down a divergent course, one that uncovers more within this unconscious process. Looking for meaning in painting and music in the works of Rachmaninoff also unveils other historiographic questions. Outside of the *Prélude in B minor*, the set of *Études-tableaux*—whose title already suggests pictures—are another clear example of absolute music with hidden meanings that would have otherwise remained unknown. At the suggestion of Sergei Koussevitsky, Rimsky-Korsakov's composition student, Ottorino Respighi, orchestrated a selection from both the Op. 33 and Op. 39 sets provided by Rachmaninoff.⁷² Of these, Rachmaninoff revealed in a letter to Respighi the topics he had in mind: Sea and seagulls, Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, Scene at a Fair, a Funeral March, and Oriental March. Again, Rachmaninoff's mode of inspiration and composition holds true and Respighi's orchestrations work to enhance the coloration of such imagery in a similar way that they may be orchestrated in an operatic or balletic scene.

⁷² Bertensson and Leyda, 262-3.

With this knowledge, one can surmise a similar interpretation of any of the other *Études - tableaux*. There are two other works in both sets of *Études-tableaux* mentioned by Oscar von Rieseemann where Rachmaninoff happens to reveal hidden connections. *Études-Tableaux* Op. 33, No. 8 in G minor and Op. 39, No. 1 in C minor are both based, yet again, on pictures by Arnold Böcklin—Rieseemann indicates that these are inspired by two different paintings respectively, *Morning* and *The Waves*.⁷³ There is a problem, however, with these references that show us the difficulty of the synaesthetic reconstruction of inspiration. The first problem that occurs is one where Rieseemann titles the first work as Op. 39, No. 8 in G minor. There is no such work with that catalogue number in the collection in that key and, as Barrie Martyn deduces, Rieseemann must have confused the opus numbers.⁷⁴ This is a minor mistake, but there is another, more serious difficulty. The translations of the painting names do not have clear German counterparts and can possibly be one of many paintings. Martyn, again, suggests a correction—*The Waves* being *Der Spiel der Wellen (The Play of the Waves)*. The other painting, *Morning*, does not seem to have a clear translation. After surveying Böcklin's works, I have no clear indications of a correlation or direct translation.⁷⁵ Either there was a miscommunication between Rachmaninoff and Rieseemann or something was lost in translation. Rieseemann's biography was translated from German to English and published immediately in 1934, with no German edition immediately accessible.⁷⁶ There are already notable issues with Rieseemann's biography. For instance, Rachmaninoff singled out, specifically, moments of unwarranted self-praise that Rieseemann took the liberty to add.⁷⁷ He, otherwise, allowed for the publication, and subsequently did not refute

⁷³ Rieseemann, 237.

⁷⁴ Martyn, 288.

⁷⁵ Alfred Schmid von Heinrich, *Arnold Böcklin* (München: F. Bruckmann, 1919).

⁷⁶ The Russian edition simply reports the same translation: Utro. Oskar von Riesmann, *Vospominaniya zapisanie* (Moscow: Raduga, 1992).

⁷⁷ Riesmann was speaking in his voice without permission.

issues surrounding these Études and their respective paintings. *Der Spiel der Wellen* seems the most convincing, but *Morning* cannot be found. While Martyn provides a very brief analysis of how the music can invoke the moods of these paintings, he leaves these questions unanswered. Has he seen *Morning*? This is unclear and judging by the fact that he provides the German for one painting as it relates to Böcklin's original but not the other indicates that he seems just as unsure.⁷⁸ Max Harrison's biography on Rachmaninoff, too, also mentions these briefly, but simply does so in passing, never addressing this issue. Does anyone know what Böcklin's *Morning* even looks like? Does it even exist? It is possible that this painting is, in fact, in a private collection and not a part of a catalogue. Or another painting with a different name may evoke this. Maybe it was destroyed during World War II?⁷⁹

This is an important juncture in making sense of Moiseiwitsch's understanding of the Prelude in B minor. Rieseemann's anecdote, whether true or not, still provides fodder for the performer or listener in exploring musical imagination. In line with the romanticism discussed above, a fragment of possible meaning survives. But a lack of engagement with the possible relationship between music and picture, by performers and music historians, allows for these details and mistakes to remain unobserved. Are these questions about meaning really so insignificant that they can be overlooked? While it is true that the music can continue on without these images since they will remain a further fragment, it is wrong to exclude their importance historically especially when considering the possible enhancement of the imagination through performance and listening.

⁷⁸ A minor editorial mistake regarding publishing sloppiness occurs as well: Martyn's footnote for Rieseemann regarding this subject indicates page 247 instead of the actual page of 237. Martyn, 233.

⁷⁹ If I were to conjecture, it could also be Caspar David Friedrich's painting titled "Morgen"—this different painter has a similar temperament but a different impetus for romanticism.

In developing this further, I would like to explore another work by Rachmaninoff that lends itself to the pictorial imagination—a work that was mentioned previously in this chapter in the words of the composer himself: the symphonic poem the *Isle of the Dead*. In it, I will show how the pictorial imagination in a programmatic work contains many musical elements in the score itself—whether motivic, gestural, *etc.*—that bring to the fore a way of reading an austere work of absolute music from the period. Like the Prelude in B minor and the *Études-tableaux* previously discussed, the work is based on a painting by Böcklin. Even in such a piece with a direct, unmasked subject such as this, the music functions similarly; it does not convey simply one meaning, rather it relies on a wide array of meanings. In the *Isle of the Dead* we find a work much more obviously aligned with Symbolist affinities—these tendencies are less obvious in *The Homecoming*, but as we will see later, the simple reading of the prelude before will reveal much more through the right framework. For now focusing on the *Isle of the Dead* will provide a proper framework for understanding of how unconscious, synaesthetic listening functions.

In general, Böcklin's paintings are rife with symbols that were overtly Wagnerian, such as classical subjects (nymphs and centaurs), as well as representations of the Medieval. The *Isle of the Dead* is, as its haunting title implies, a meditation on death. The island is where someone is to be buried—it is a symbol of death. Analyzing a painting such as this and uncovering the nature of its content—much like what has been discussed previously about music and synaesthesia—requires a certain negotiation of iconic and symbolic material. To enable this, *ekphrasis*—a Greek rhetorical device that is typically used to describe visual art, but is also commonly used in literature—will prove to be the most effective mode of description. As Michael Baxandall observes in his book *Patterns of Intention*, “description is less a representation of the picture, or even a representation of seeing the picture, than a representation

of thinking about having seen the picture.”⁸⁰ This sounds, not surprisingly, close to Schopenhauer's theory of Will and representation, but drawn out rather than instantaneous. An emphasis on thought reminds us that when encountering a description of a picture, specifically when we cannot see that picture itself as an accompanying visual aid, it requires us to draw upon our knowledge and memory to produce that image in our mind, much like what was previously described with iconic visualization in music. Therefore, the prose of *ekphrasis* must strongly capture the context of the painting at hand. As we will see, this is a useful way of unraveling the pictorial element of musical synaesthesia. But it is important to engage first with the painting. Here is my ekphrastic description of how Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead* unfolds:

Far out upon the expanse of water, an island, alone, sits—still. Its cliffs are imposing, yet uneven and jagged; the sides worn down from the battering of waves and passing storms; carved in are columns, temple-like, but austere and devoid of ornament. A once proud structure, set into the walls of rock, seems to stumble forward in prostration to the relentless passing of time, which has been no more sympathetic than the waves and storm. Strewn with cypress trees, the livery of its final days, the island conceals its rapturous past life hidden at its center. The ghostly dithyrambic echoes no longer can be heard, muffled by the overgrowth; the bright glittering ceiling of gold and azure is now blackened; the sun that once shone above is now setting, covered in dark clouds. The water all around has calmed down after the storm; it is placid, a vast carpet of faded and muddled grayish blue.

A boat approaches with two figures. One stands erect, clothed in white; the other, an oarsman, is dressed in gray, rowing, guiding the vessel slowly to shore. At the front of the boat

⁸⁰ Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 11.

*is a coffin, also draped in white, but decorated with flowers woven together like a long garland.
The person shrouded in white has come to bury the coffin on the island.*



Figure 1.11. Böcklin, *Isle of the Dead*, 1880, New York Version.

Böcklin described this painting as “a tranquil place.” He was commissioned by a young widow for an “image to dream by.” As one can see in the painting itself, I have purposely taken liberties in my ekphrastic description. I have added my own thoughts and ideas that expand outside the parameters of the image itself. While I describe the features of the island and the people in the boat as accurately as I can, there is no indication or glimpse of the island’s past in the manner that I hint at. I have placed this image—the static snapshot of a scene—within a narrative. This creates another source of mediation, in this case, my thoughts are written down; however, this is a necessary extra step to make sense of what can go on in the mind. My own act of seeing the painting invoked these thoughts based on how my unconscious interpreted its

elements. What Böcklin has provided through this still image is an invitation for the rest of the action to be imagined. The extra mediation here, through *ekphrasis*, enforces my interpretation and gently stifles a subjective view for anyone else; but for my own experience, the action and story—and in a sense, the reality of this moment and previous moments—become true and real. This is in no way an essential viewing or reading, but conjures a synaesthetic subjectivity. Herein denotes an important element of experience involved in this form of art. Taking this further, I can interpret more and uncover symbolic meaning.

Placing this within the classical symbolism evoked by my description, I can make note of the oarsman who is ferrying the boat to the island: it is Charon. The water he is rowing on is the River Styx, the island itself, the underworld souls go to after they die. If I am to abstract further, the boat approaching the island symbolizes the actual act of dying wherein reaching the island is the equivalent of finally being dead; or to talk about it another way, the soul leaving the body and then transcending. An otherwise simple depiction of an island on water with a boat transforms through this mode of imagination and becomes a transcendental work of art by evoking the feeling of this profound act of dying. Here, especially in this Symbolist context, is where the painting is meant to speak of a greater truth that mere realism cannot unveil—that in symbols, the individual transcends through the art work through feeling and subjectivity.

The Symbolist artwork, for it to reflect the transcendental strain, must be, in the romantic sense, fragmented. The painting of the *Isle of the Dead* as one scene is one part of a whole reality that is supposed to take place within the mind or on a greater plane of reality; the artwork, then, acts simply as a prelude to thought, experience, feeling, and dream. Or more simply, the artwork is a symbol itself. This is then layered with the subsequent symbols evoked, then invoked, by the painting—Charon, the journey to the island, the approach towards death—as fragments that spur

the imagination beyond clear comprehension and into a feeling that transcends pure reason or understanding. Representation through each symbol is amalgamated together as one creating a saturation of many meanings happening at the same time. To add another layer to this, Böcklin made five different versions of this painting. Each version is slightly different, but is the same basic scene. He does not simply show different views of the scene and the island, even though that was a possibility. The different paintings of the *Isle of the Dead* do not have a hierarchy—one of them is not the master copy. What Böcklin duplicates with these five paintings is the subjective experience itself. Through this, the paintings and their symbols are fragments for the imagination, while the subjective experience itself is also a fragment. These many differing versions reflect not only the multiplicity of subjective experience but also the variability of remembering something, highlighting the impossibility of exactitude in the phenomenal. The impression of all these versions of the painting as being phenomenally separate from an essential presence of one is crucial to experiencing a truer expression of the noumenality of death explored in this moment.



Figure 1.12. Böcklin, *Isle of the Dead*, 1883, Third Version



Figure 1.13. *Isle of the Dead*, Fifth Version, 1886.

Turning to Rachmaninoff's symphonic setting of this painting, his inspiration came from a black and white reproduction he saw in Paris around 1907; this apparently left a larger impression on him than the original in color he saw in Berlin and Leipzig, saying: "I was not

much moved by the color of the painting. If I had seen the original first, I might not have composed my *Isle of the Dead*. I like the picture best in black and white.”⁸¹ Here, we have yet another subjective fragment involving Rachmaninoff’s own view. As the composer, this impression adds yet another shade of gray to the musical work, but it does not discount the other five color iterations; as mentioned before, the fragmented subjective experience can involve the authorial view, but it does not control the art work. The monochromatic view ultimately brings an atmosphere that is drearier than the color version. In order to understand how the music relates to this painting, Baxandall’s ekphrastic becomes crucial. But in music analysis, this approach already has some theoretical precedent. Lawrence Kramer, in his seminal work *Musical Meaning: Towards a Critical History*, has already delineated the means of employing *ekphrasis* in musical hermeneutics.

The piece begins in the bottom of the orchestra, producing a rather ominous sound of subdued terror. These first few passages reflect this sense of terror by imitating the muffled sound of a bell in the low register. This is achieved by two notes, each played a fourth apart, alternating between double-bass and cello; the harp and timpani plucks out these same notes in the same low register. The overtones of these low notes played so close together clash as dissonances similar to the manner of actual bells, while the pluck of the harp in the lower register together with the striking of the timpani gives a subtle timbre akin to striking a bell. Symbolically, this is the knell tolling and signaling death. This work is in a 5/8 meter and the quarter note and dotted-quarter exchange of these two notes imitate the unevenness sometimes heard in bell tolling. After the ominous opening, the lower strings begin an incessant ostinato pattern in A minor in the same shape of the knell motive. The ostinato pattern signals the

⁸¹ Bertensson and Leyda, 156.

pictorial, it represents the oarsman's uneven, yet fluid strokes while sculling. The ubiquity of this ostinato pattern, as heard throughout the piece, depicts the rowing as one long journey to the island. What further implicates this sense of rowing in the ostinato is the pattern created by the 5/8 meter. The musical unevenness also evokes the sound of waves breaking on the shore representing the ocean; at the same time, it is the up-and-down rocking of the boat upon the water, indicated by the notes moving up in the phrase. The incessant ostinato, while working to drive the piece forward, can easily thrust the listener into vertigo with its spinning repetition of successive eighth notes. The impending sea sickness and delirium is already felt from the music. Here, through synaesthesia, the music not only imitates the rocking motion and therein embodies the feeling of being on that vessel, the music acts to induce a physical unease.

The person rowing symbolically transforms into Charon rowing the dead soul to the underworld. The musical representation of the waves, the boat not only places the scene on the water, the programmatic indication places a heavy weight towards a symbolic classical subject. Charon in the picture accompanies this journey towards final rest. And simultaneously the 5/8 bell tolling and rowing pattern is symbolically a fragment of two other things: the beating heart and breathing of a dying person. The discomfort of seasickness mentioned above easily transforms becoming the malady of death. With all of this said, the ostinato pattern as *leitmotif* contains multiple symbols at once; the *leitmotif* is persistent throughout the work until the very end, where reaching the isle indicates an end to the journey—the rowing stops, the breathing stops, the heart beat stops; the boat is moored, the island is reached, Charon has steered the vessel across the Styx, death has arrived.

Iconically, one goal is the primary directive: to reach the island. The music here is able to depict something that the painting itself cannot: narrative trajectory. Because the picture remains still, the music's ability to depict brings to life a pictorial narrative that otherwise occurs just in the imagination. The piece functions in a quasi-sonata form where an exposition, development, then recapitulation act as specific temporal makers for the action occurring.

As seen above, the basic narrative imagination of the painting is extremely simple, but the symbolism allows the piece to transform; Rachmaninoff, further, lends more fodder for the imagination through the experience of listening to music. From beginning to end, in contrast to the persistent 5/8 meter and ostinato pattern, the next most striking figure Rachmaninoff presents the listener with is a developing *leitmotif*. In the beginning of the piece it is unclear what this motive could possibly be. It is simply presented as a rhythmic pulse that becomes a falling **m2** interval, imitating the sound of a sigh, a symbolic representation of grief and sadness. As the piece moves on, it soon becomes clear that this rather simple sighing gesture is also an underdeveloped *Dies Irae* theme, the ultimate symbol for death, which organically unfolds. There is a strange paradox here, where from the seed of a small motivic cell, Rachmaninoff gives life to something that ultimately *is* death itself. We see in measure 25, the horn begins to reveal this with a lower neighbor E-D-E, which constitutes a fragment of the chant tune, followed by leaps of a fifth and fourth.



Figure 1.15. Rachmaninoff, *Isle of the Dead*—measure 25, horn part.

By measure 61, the flute, oboe, and violin, infect the music with this motive in staggered entrances. Throughout the rest of the piece, this lower neighbor motive unfolds into the *Dies*

Irae. This continued use of *Dies Irae*, especially its development, slowly brings death closer, just as the boatman in the narrative slowly comes closer to the island and its representation of death, towards the end of the piece. Along with this, motivic development conjures a spatial experience: as the presence of *Dies Irae* slowly becomes clearer, death is becoming much more imminent; or it is as if the island slowly becomes more visible, through mists or dark rains of a storm or because it was hidden; only seen after climbing the horizon.

The doleful minor key remains persistent in the work. The piece finally reaches change in C major at measure 115. A soaring theme is introduced here in an emphatic first violin line, slowly climbing towards the heavens built on fifths and fourths (this leap upward in reverses the direction of the first lower neighbors heard). This particular passage acts as a landmark, musically speaking—a sort of “second theme” in III. At the top of this violin line, in measures 117-119, we suddenly hear, for the first time, the four-note *Dies Irae* theme in its entirety, but because the preceding music introducing the mood in the major key, it comes as a surprise, disguising its deathly connotation; only in measure 119 does the tragic weight of the theme become clear when A minor is heard on the strong beat. This is a rather impressive pictorial effect—the *Dies Irae* theme slowly comes into full view; hearing it in its entirety for the first time, the entire island is seen for the first time. The awe-inspiring sight in this instance overwhelms the emotions in a way so that C major masks the fear of death that *Dies Irae* represents. This is the feeling of joy after being adrift out at sea and finally seeing land, creating a bittersweet relief that the journey will be over and death will soon arrive. After this moment, *Dies Irae* begins to slowly invade the piece, like an infection, showing up in many other instrumental parts.



Figure 1.16. Rachmaninoff, *Isle of the Dead*—measures 115-124.

Eventually the music finally reaches its next point of arrival, where the ostinato pattern is played *forte* in C minor in measure 201. It is at this point that there is no turning back. After establishing a return of the opening material more prominently, the music finally settles down. At the *Largo* in measure 252, the music sounds as if it is reaching a standstill; the boat is stagnant on the serene undisturbed water when suddenly unison strings and a timpani roll interrupt this brief moment of calm. The music portrays thunder and lightning from the storm. In order for the mind's eye to see this, the senses here correspond with one another; the listener feels the thunder through sonic reverberation and hears the lightning. After each lightning strike, *Dies Irae* is ominously announced. The feeling of fear that comes when approaching death, in this instance, is met with the symbolic gesture of thunder and lightning conjuring fear in nature. After facing the terror of death directly, the music suddenly transitions in measures 258-259. Here, there is a sudden shift away from the narrative that is expected to continue. The first violin line ascends and physically pulls itself out emotionally from the state that it is in. In 1925, Rachmaninoff explained to Leopold Stokowski that this moment "...should be a great contrast to all the rest of the work—faster, more nervous and more emotional—as that passage does not belong to the 'picture'; it is in reality a 'supplement' to the picture—which fact, of course, makes contrast more

necessary...In the former is death—in the latter life.”⁸² This moment of imagination is a reflection, a reverie, for the two souls on the water. It is merely a dream. The emotions are no longer actually in the boat and the landscape evoking the fear of death has disappeared. It is only fitting that in measure 259, a brand new theme is introduced in the violin line. This theme is not only the evocation of happiness and happier times through E-flat major, but also a melody constructed as the opposite of the *Dies Irae*. Whereas the *Dies Irae* is a stepwise melody that descends, this melody takes the *Dies Irae* and pulls it upwards so as to avoid the connotation and downward pull towards death. In a way, this melody is a sort of transcendence of death, harmonically, melodically, and spatially (since dreaming diverts attention away from the island, musically making it no longer in view). These feelings can reflect joyousness in a way that either implies fond memories to reminisce upon or hope of transcendence beyond death’s ominous doom.



Figure 1.17. Rachmaninoff, *Isle of the Dead*—measures 259-260, violin line.

This somewhat happier melody doesn’t stay in one place for long affectually and begins to build tension, rising higher. A sense of large space is created from measure 290 onward, where first and second violins are two octaves apart at *fortissimo* during this moment. From measure 328, the sounds of roaring waves and storm surround the boat; the turbulent waters are contrasted strongly with thunder and lightning suggesting that the dream, either of reflection or possible evasion of death, is over. This ensues until everything sinks downwards in a *Dies Irae* in the

⁸² Martyn, 205.

cellos and strings. The music then builds again towards measure 376 when the full force of the orchestra abruptly strikes severe violent blows. Everything is suddenly quiet except tremolos and the incessant playing of *Dies Irae*. At this moment, the terror of death is imminent and unavoidable.

lunga Largo.

The image displays a page of a musical score for Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead*, measures 382-291. The score is written for a piano and includes a variety of musical notations and performance instructions. The tempo is marked *lunga Largo.* at the top. The score features several systems of staves, including grand staves for the piano and individual staves for the right and left hands. Key performance markings include *pp poco sforzando*, *sforz.* (sforzando), *ff* (fortissimo), *dim.* (diminuendo), *p* (piano), *pp* (pianissimo), *gestopft* (stopped), *con sord. trem.* (with mutes and tremolo), *pizz.* (pizzicato), *div.* (divisi), and *unis.* (unison). The score also includes dynamic markings such as *sfz.* (sforzando) and *pp*. The notation includes complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, and various articulation marks like slurs and accents. The overall mood is somber and dramatic, characteristic of the piece.

Figure 1.18. Rachmaninoff, *Isle of the Dead*—measures 382-291.

After this, in measure 401, the solo oboe, plays a minor key version of the transcendent *Dies Irae* melody, this time lamentingly. By measure 427, the piece melts back down into A minor for the recapitulation. The long violin line in the beginning that introduced the first fully developed *Dies Irae* theme in C major and gave the first full view of the isle, is now resolved to play in the tonic of A minor. What this signifies is that reaching the island, and death, is inevitable. The piece finally moves towards the end, sinking down into another *Dies Irae*. The ostinato pattern finally stops, the final heartbeats are played in the timpani in measures 471-473. A final A minor chord hovers suspended in measure 475 in the strings; the boat has reached the island, death has arrived.

The journey is over, not only to the *Isle of the Dead*, but also to the past. The return to the Prelude in B minor requires this engagement with not only the symbolic, but the possibility of imagination involved in the music itself. In a way, the Prelude in B minor and its association with Böcklin's *Die Heimkehr*, are both symbolically connected to the *Isle of the Dead*. Both subjects involve some sense of journey and an element of return—the voyage away from land and back. In many ways, this mirrors Rachmaninoff and Moiseiwitsch's own journey across the Atlantic on a ship. It is important to remember that the *Isle of the Dead* is a one way journey, just like life itself. In this sense the return is a return to nature, a return to being simply a part of the earth. Time, of course, moves in only one direction. *Die Heimkehr*, then, is a sort of impossible dream: the hope to return to the past, to youth, to a world that is lost.

This journey—from one land across sea to another—is an important symbol governing human psychology. The struggle of life in and of itself can be understood as the want to return to the state prior to existence, but under that being's own choice and terms. The *Isle of the Dead* is the enactment of this very condition and this ideal is by its essence an example of return. In the

painting, it is symbolically represented by human-made architectural creation (artifice) slowly returning back to nature with the overgrowth of cypress trees (which already represent death). But in a broader sense this sort of psychological confrontation with death is what is occurring on a much larger scale, both in art and on the world stage. Symbolist art, for many, is considered sometimes a proto-modern, or presaging of modernism. For others, it is already modern by the fact that it grapples with the very conditions and feelings of everyday life. The advent of new technology is given a strong correlation with the decay of culture and in particular spirituality. But the return to nature defies this in the painting. The want to represent the world in its truest possible form not only resulted in Realism, but also a resistance to a world that was *only* scientific, empirical, cold, and empty. Through the phenomenal experience, and the search for the noumenal, artists outwardly expressed this anxiety surrounding such austere realism, which, of course, resulted in the blossoming of a rich body of work in *fin de siècle* creation. The incredibly wide range of style, technique, and form of such art along with its explorations of sexuality, death, life, beauty, ugliness, spirituality, God, evil, and so on, acts as a sort of meditation and cultural catharsis upon the repressed psyche of the burgeoning modern. In a nineteenth-century environment rife with Victorian repression, it is no wonder Max Nordau's assessment in his highly influential *Degeneration* was that of a pervading cultural sickness.⁸³ Not surprisingly, Sigmund Freud's subsequent psychological work begins at this juncture in time, dealing primarily with symbolism in the unconscious mind—while his was a precisely scientific and medical concern, its significance comes from the need for direct engagement with the propensity and function of the human imagination and its relationship to a changing perception of reality.

⁸³ Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. George Mosse (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

In light of this, Böcklin's sometimes morbid subject matter, and persistent representation of ugliness in centaurs, naiads, and nymphs, brought to the fore the idealized classical subject placed within a Realistic painting style; the result is a kind of extreme realism to a once idealized past, formerly so beautifully constructed in the imagination.⁸⁴ A wider spectrum allowing finer gradations of what constitutes beauty is what Böcklin and others tried to create in order to accommodate a world changing at the whim of modernity's all-encompassing reason. The eventual result seems to be a struggle between the "ideal" (past) of the nineteenth-century imagination and the "real" (future) of twentieth-century science and progress; and yet, at this moment in time, these two still remain locked in embrace.

With the onslaught of these flourishing changes in modern life, it is no wonder that for many the *Isle of the Dead* became the quintessential archetype of the age through Symbolist art. It is not merely coincidence that this painting showed up in so many homes in Berlin, as Nabokov reports. There is a sort of psychological acceptance of not only this drastic change to everyday life, but also the means by which beauty and spirituality in a familiar world will come to a close. Böcklin painted another work to counter this one called the *Isle of Life*, a similar Greek-style island with mythological creatures and subjects happily swimming at the shores. This is an antithetical and somewhat reactionary response to his own *Isle of the Dead*, where hope remains for a future that will maybe bring a return to the classical ideals of old (or possibly the resurrection of spirituality, maybe through religion and its promise of paradise and utopia). Or, it is a forced confrontation through ironic dissonance of representing an impossible worldview, now lost.

⁸⁴ Suzanne Marchand, "Arnold Böcklin and the Problem of German Modernism," *Germany at the Fin de Siècle: Culture, Politics, and Ideas*, ed. Suzanne Marchand and David Lindenfeld (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2004), 129-166.



Figure 1.19. Böcklin, *Isle of Life*, 1888.

Böcklin's *The Homecoming*, however, seems to be another cultural antithesis to the *Isle of the Dead*, in a similar vein and inhabiting many of the same traits. A journey to the isle is sort of a return home to all those things in the past that are long gone or dead. Through image, and as a subject, *The Homecoming* does not look forward into the future with the same overt optimism as, say, a surface reading of the *Isle of Life*. Instead, the return journey results in an inability to enter the old home from the past (and maybe the childhood home). *The Homecoming*, then, is significant in its starkly realistic imagery juxtaposed with its unrealistic ideal. From this standpoint, it is both the most possible and impossible painting.

There is a strange kinship between *The Homecoming* and the *Isle of the Dead* that shows up in other ways. The German title, *Die Heimkehr*, is also the title of a book of poems by

Heinrich Heine, whom Böcklin was particularly inspired by in his paintings.⁸⁵ In this collection, poems stand out that show their symbolic meaning in relation to the paintings discussed. For example, *Die Lorelei* is a prominent poem in this collection; it is about a maiden on the top of cliff, entrancing sailors to crash on the shore. Lorelei is a cliff upon the Rhine known specifically for this legend and when one visualizes this image, there is a similarity to the cliffs of the *Isle of the Dead* painting. The high palisade of the cliff side is a symbol of death in the same manner as that of the cliffs in the *Isle of the Dead*. From here it is then easy to uncover more symbolic connections. For example, Lorelei, as *femme fatale*, hearkens to sirens and water nymphs in mythology, whether Ondine or Rusalka. Here a direct correlation is made to the already ubiquitous connective metaphor between sexuality and death brought forth by desire. Even visually, a symbolic connection can be made here to another painting by Böcklin, *Odysseus and Calypso*.

⁸⁵ See Andrea Linnebach, *Arnold Böcklin und die Antike: Mythos, Geschichte, Gegenwart* (Munich, 1991), 21-35.



Figure 1.20. Böcklin, *Odysseus and Calypso*, 1883.

Here the temptation of Odysseus by Calypso mirrors what would be a false or misdirected end to a journey. In the image itself, Odysseus, standing erect, is turned away from Calypso, who holds a poignantly angular harp. He is cloaked in a dark color; note here that he symbolically resembles the cloaked figure in front of coffin in the *Isle of the Dead*, who is wearing a white color. Odysseus' journey—the classical hero archetype that resonates with both of the other Böcklin paintings—is at a standstill on a Greek isle; this represents a sort of purgatory resultant from his own desire. The darker color is symbolic of this antithetical representation.

After one notices the connections between Heine's poetry and other Böcklin paintings, it becomes clear that an unwieldy web of metaphoric connections can be drawn upon. I feel that it is necessary to dive into these seemingly unrelated parts to grasp a better understanding of the

multilayered aspects of meaning involved in seeing, hearing, and experiencing one artwork and another and being able to draw connections unconsciously without making those connections come to the fore either verbally or in thought. Here, the shape of Odysseus and his cloak and the symbolism of the scene is far more than a passing similarity, representing the condition that was sought after in the soundscapes of music. This is the multitude of symbols synthesized as one.

Returning to Heine's *Die Heimkehr*, another poem stands out in a different but far more important manner. The poem is *Der Doppelgänger*, which is about a man who returns to the home of his love, only to see someone who looks exactly like him in the window, mocking his movements:

Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen,
In diesem Hause wohnte mein Schatz;
Sie hat schon längst die Stadt verlassen,
Doch steht noch das Haus auf demselben Platz.

The night is silent, the streets are still,
my love lived in this house;
she's left the house long since,
Yet the house stays where it was.

Da steht auch ein Mensch und starrt in die Höhe,
Und ringt die Hände, vor Schmerzengewalt;
Mir graust es, wenn ich sein Antlitz sehe, –
Der Mond zeigt mir meine eigne Gestalt.

Another man stands there and stares upward,
and wrings his hands in torment;
I shudder when I see his face—
The moon shows me my own.

Du Doppelgänger! Du bleicher Geselle!
Was äffst du nach mein Liebesleid,
Das mich gequält auf dieser Stelle,
So manche Nacht, in alter Zeit?

You double, you ghostly companion!
Why do you ape me love's pain,
that tortured me in this place
so many nights, in bygone days?⁸⁶

This poem, famously set by Franz Schubert and revered for its exploration of the uncanny reflection of human subjectivity, is in many ways the homecoming of the Heine's cycle (though could it possibly be a dream induced by fear?). It is also the basis for Böcklin's own *Homecoming*. In many ways this poem is playing out the symbolic representation of an actual Odyssean return, one where all the expectations of resolution coming home remain uneasy in the inability to replicate the past. Through entering this web of meanings, we encounter Böcklin's

⁸⁶ Susan Youens, *Heinrich Heine and the Lied* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 74-75.

“doppelgänger.” Returning to that man we saw sitting in Böcklin’s *Homecoming*, we remember that he was staring down at a house in the evening. A lamp shines bright in the window. But the man does not enter the home. There is another slight detail that is easy to miss that becomes abundantly important: the man is sitting upon a reflecting pool, his double in clear view next to him. In Heine’s poem the man mocking the protagonist is someone who looks exactly like him, his *doppelgänger*; this image could simply be his own reflection in the window or a ghostly visage of his past; but regardless of what he sees, imagines, or whatever else, there is another man aping his very movements, mocking him. On the surface in the poem, the obvious fear is that his former lover has found someone else. But more symbolically, his former self stands before him, mocking his inability to return to that past.

From here, the painting reveals much more—the reflecting pool, high upon a small hill, shows the reflection of the man but only with the clouds above and nothing else in the landscape. The clouds in the sky itself are a much darker gray akin to tragedy with only a hint of a rainbow in the upper right corner where a tiny shard of light from the setting sun cuts through signifying some small hope. Because of the angle of the reflecting pool, it is in a position facing upward and catches more sunlight hidden in the clouds of the evening sky. The reflection makes the *doppelgänger*’s world of the past seem like clouds are clearing up, as opposed to the man’s reality in the present—depicted in front of him—where the clouds cover the sky. Also, it is important to note that not only is it evening, but also autumn. Here both evening and autumn are symbolic of the twilight of a later life. While the color of the man’s hair indicates that he is not that old yet, it would seem that the journey has aged him—and of course the clouds indicate that there is still gray above, even if removed from him. The autumn trees with their orange color,

also symbolically reflect the connection to the man himself. Looking at this house, he is staring back at himself, into his unconscious, to a world that he cannot return to, but is still him.

A Freudian interpretation is also possible not only for the *Homecoming* but especially for the *Isle of the Dead*, where both scenes are symbolic of the female genitalia, which in fitting with decadent sexualized art from the period, could come to fruition unconsciously upon viewing. A comparison of the *Isle of the Dead* and the idea of a return to nature (a burial) as metaphorically related to, say, Gustave Courbet's provocative *L'Origin du Monde* (The Origin of the World) from 1866, creates a strong resonance. The overt symbolic reference to eroticism is much more guarded in Böcklin—this would be in stark contrast to a fellow Symbolist such as Franz von Stuck. In this abstracted way, the shapes and placement of mountainous cliffs, strewn with cypresses, reveal a central entrance in the *Isle of the Dead*, which functions similarly to the oranges of trees surrounding a hidden home with window and door. In such an interpretation, the representation and relationship to desire, lust, and lover, both in the Heine poems (*Lorelei* and *Doppelgänger*) and in the Odyssean hero's return, become important. Such a Freudian perspective can also yield an oedipal interpretation as well: the return to the past, such as a return to childhood, reflects a symbolic return to the mother, and thereby the womb. The idea, of course, with both of these interpretations is not literal, but symbolic. This is the key when considering what the word "mother" means when, say, one considers the idea of a "motherland," a place that has given birth to the subject. The house in the *Homecoming* is a rural relic of the past, while the *Isle of the Dead* harbors the Greek past, and it is ultimately overrun by Mother Nature herself.

Another, more problematic account can be understood in context to the period and the representation of gender. The idea of the city as both a vibrant locus of culture, yet a sterile

environment devoid of the life of nature—that is to say, representing death—yields a complicated construction of place, and has particular resonances with feminine symbolism presented by Symbolist artists during the *fin de siècle*. The symbolic association brings to the fore the separation between a city’s decay (crime, prostitution, etc.) and nature’s vitality in relation to life.⁸⁷ This, of course, is much more complicated and cannot be reduced to merely countryside versus urban—for example, there is far more going on in Bizet’s *Carmen* than just a crude tension between lustful promiscuity from a far off land and the wholesome love from home, as represented in Carmen and Michaela respectively. Georges Rodenbach’s Symbolist novel, *Bruges-la-morte*, most notably captures this duality in the desire for the feminine form in connection with a return to the past while moving forward into the future, when Hugues encounters a *Doppelgänger* who looks like his dead wife, and in the obsession of reviving the past eventually kills her. There is something similar that both Hugues and Don José seem to be searching for that has strong resonances not only with past and future, but also identity, subjectivity, and spirituality in relationship to place, far away or at home. Again, the seemingly arbitrary connections represented here coalesce together with far more spatial dimensions. In the *Bruges-la-morte*, the gender construction connected to the city merge with the theme of reflection represented in the water canals in the city of Bruges, giving the feel that the city itself has a past and a doppelgänger.

⁸⁷ Sharon Hirsch highlights this relationship in her book *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society*, especially in the chapter “The City Woman, or Should-be Mother,” where she explores these complicated representations without resorting to simplistic characterizations of the *femme fatale*. Sharon Hirsch, *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

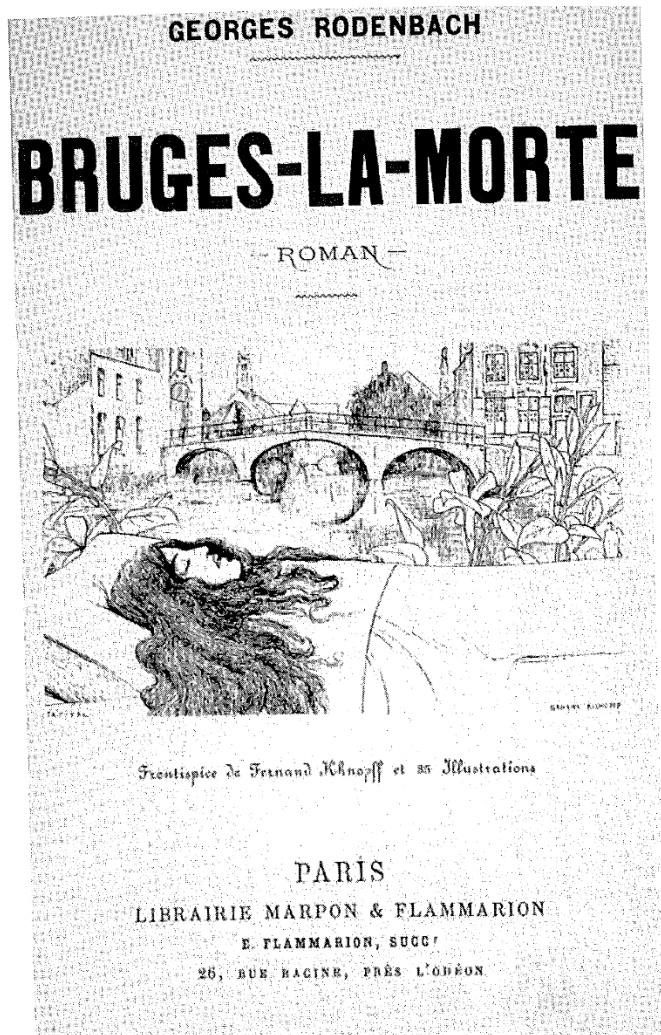


Figure 1.21. Fernand Khnopff, Frontispiece for Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-morte*.

The same desire of feminine presence upon a return journey not only characterizes Heine's *Doppelgänger* and thus implicates the same in Böcklin's *Die Heimkehr*, but the image of water and reflection permeate that relationship as well, along with the connections to Rodenbach—and to the sea that separates Odysseus with Calypso (as opposed to Penelope). A multifarious array of symbols striving towards the same goal can easily unravel and become unwieldy. But the idea with this kind of symbolism is to understand that this is not about direct representation but a feeling towards something “truer in meaning”—perhaps noumenal. The

muddle of multivalence—that endless stream of meanings, connections, and symbols—can create an unrealistic contiguity when one tries to contextualize the nature of a Symbolist worldview. This brings us back to the connection between the Böcklin’s paintings and Rachmaninoff’s music and the idea of understanding the meaning through some semblance of a Schopenhauerian Will. These are not concrete forms of content but mere expressions of meaning.

* * *

Yet this all seems so far from the music. On this journey of trying to discover imagination and meaning in this little prelude by Rachmaninoff, I have seemingly led us far away from home. There comes a point where it is important to untangle oneself from the treacherous web of possibility and to return back to the music. Uncovering symbolism and meaning, when really delving deep, can seem divergent and off topic. The point here is that there are connections; even if they are not direct, they make up an entire web of meaning that synthesize in associations within the unconscious. All of these differing views of Böcklin and Heine—*island, home, desire, love, death, woman, mother, nature, city, water, reflection*—are not parsed out as separate in the unconscious. It is important to consider here the confusing way in which the brain parses content. The psychologist Ignacio Matte Blanco, drawing upon Freudian psychoanalysis, proposes that these many different things coalesce together as symbols in the unconscious, but in the form of asymmetrical and symmetrical association.⁸⁸ Matte Blanco starts by showing that when a child is born they are able to recognize the world around them by categorizing in their mind certain associations in the brain as symmetrical or asymmetrical.

⁸⁸ Ignacio Matte Blanco, *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets: An Essay in Bi-Logic* (London: Karnac, 1975). Eric Rayner, *Unconscious Logic: An Introduction to Matte Blanco’s Bi-Logic and Its Uses* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

These associations and the nature of their relationships constitute the conscious and unconscious way we perceive and understand the world. Under Matte Blanco's rubric, conscious thought functions both in symmetrical and asymmetrical manner, while the unconscious functions entirely symmetrically. (This is ultimately far more complicated but must remain abbreviated for now.)

* * *

Böcklin's painting, and the chain of supplemental sources of meaning, brought forth a rather important connection to the poet Heinrich Heine. From this web of meanings and allusions, intertextuality unfolds in a rather messy fashion without any direct lines of connection. Rachmaninoff himself set three poems by Heine as songs, including one titled "A Dream," describing a native land once enjoyed but now lost. A familiar theme continues to crop up.

The question to address here is whether there is a connection, at all, between the Prelude in B minor and the poem *Der Doppelgänger* and what it means. The painting already affirms this on its own. But what is intriguing is the possibility of another connection that is musical—that very famous Schubert setting of this poem mentioned above. This is where the difficulty of interpretation will bring the most skepticism. There is certainly no doubt that Rachmaninoff knew this song—in a letter from Nikolai Medtner to Rachmaninoff, the former spoke regarding the question of brevity and length in musical works after dedicating his "Night Wind" Sonata to the latter; he describes how there is much more in a small piece such as *Der Doppelgänger* than a work that is long winded and goes on for too long. Both Rachmaninoff's prelude and the song setting are in B minor—if only a very minor allusion. But besides that there seems to be no real motivic quotation or allusion on the surface that at all has any significance—yet. In fact, *Der Doppelgänger* does not contain the same kind of emotional content nor arc—it is much more

intense in a shorter space, whereas the prelude relegates most of its intensity to its introspective middle section, but leaves the outer portions somber.

There is a significant importance regarding a deeper connection in what *Der Doppelgänger* brings—that is a direct look into the psyche. But besides B minor, is there another more roundabout connection? I think that searching deeper still for a larger web of allusions can help. The content is still there based on how the painting was a form of inspiration. But there is one more thing that stands out. The Prelude in B minor consistently fixates on a repeated ascending two-note motive. Whether in the undulating dotted gesture in the beginning or in the prominently featured melody of the middle section, a two note cell defines this piece. The *Isle of the Dead*, for example, uses *Dies Irae* to symbolize death, but this motive shows up everywhere else, in almost every work: piano concertos Nos. 2 and 3, all three symphonies, Rhapsody on a theme by Paganini, Symphonic Dances, just to name a few. Almost all of his works—excluding some of his earliest—make use of this motive and in a manner far more than other composers of the period. In fact, Rachmaninoff's repertoire tends to be defined by these gestures, particularly *Dies Irae*. From this we see a direct relationship between the two-note motivic cell, whether descending or ascending. The opening melody itself focuses primarily on the ascending stepwise cell, playing it twice but embedded in the dotted rhythm of an undulating folk-like melody.



Figure 1.22. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor Op. 32, No. 10—two note cell.

Taking this motive as the primary impetus for the work yields the possibility that its derivative shows up in the main ascending melody in the center of the prelude. The introspective center of

the prelude places significant emphasis on this upward ascending two note motive, in battle with its version as *Dies Irae*.

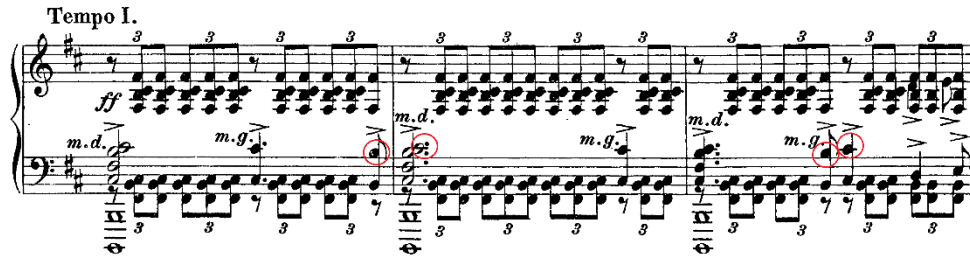


Figure 1.23. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor Op. 32, No. 10—measures 22-24, with two note cell.

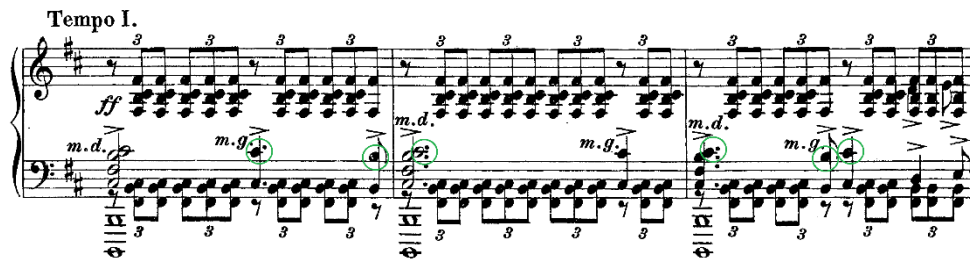


Figure 1.24. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor Op. 32, No. 10—measures 22-24, with two note cell featuring *Dies Irae*.

With the two-note cell placed as upbeat to downbeat, alongside a reinforcement of C#, neither stands out more than the other. This rhythm, however, distinctly highlights that short-long relationship for the ascending cell. This iteration of these two notes, not only dramatizes the moments but hints at something far more hymn-like. Could there be something religious here? The melody, with its surrounding content, calls to mind the climax of Rimsky-Korsakov's Russian Easter festival, which also emphasizes an ascending two-note melody. But as we know, this melody in the Rimsky Korsakov is distinctly the Russian Orthodox Chant tune, *Christ is Risen*.

The musical score is presented in a grand staff format, consisting of multiple systems of staves. The top system includes a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment. The middle systems feature various instrumental parts, including strings and woodwinds. The bottom system includes a bass line and a piano accompaniment. The score is marked with various dynamics and performance instructions, including *pp*, *dimin.*, *smorz.*, *non divisi*, and *pizz.*. The music is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. The score is arranged in a grand staff with multiple systems. The top system includes a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment. The middle systems feature various instrumental parts, including strings and woodwinds. The bottom system includes a bass line and a piano accompaniment. The score is marked with various dynamics and performance instructions, including *pp*, *dimin.*, *smorz.*, *non divisi*, and *pizz.*. The music is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature.

Figure 1.25. Rimsky-Korsakov, Russian Easter Festival Overture—climax.

Soon it becomes clear that deeply embedded in this prelude is a fragment of this very religious motive. Rachmaninoff, in fact uses, this same melody in the very last movement of his Suite No. 1 for two pianos.

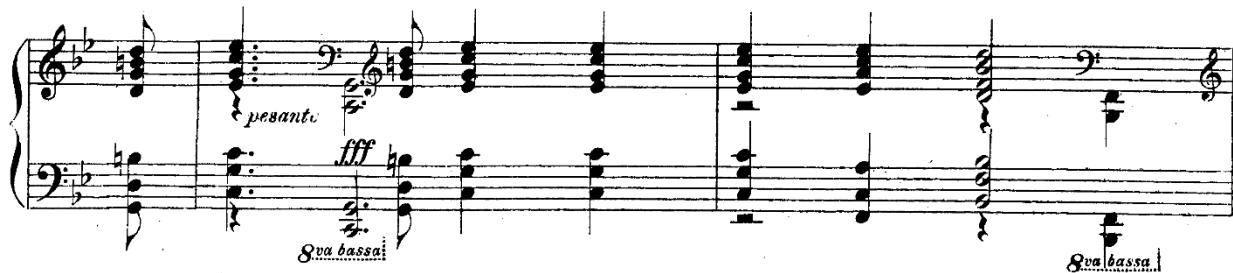


Figure 1.26. Rachmaninoff, Suite No. 1 in D Minor, fourth movement—*Christ is Risen*.

The fourth movement of this work—originally called *Fantasie-Tableaux* (Fantasy-Pictures)—is given the title *Easter* and quotes *Christ is Risen* as its primary melody, all the while surrounded by the tintinnabulation of a repetitive accompaniment imitating Russian Church bells. This distinctive sound is a defining spatial element of a Russian city. In fact, that particular movement of the Suite opens with the following epigram by the poet Alexei Khomyakov:

И мощный звон промчался над землею,	Across the earth a mighty peal is sweeping
И воздух весь, гудя, затрепетал.	Till all booming air rocks like a sea,
Певучие, серебрянные громы	As silver thunder carol forth the tidings,
Сказали весть святого торжества;	Exulting in that holy victory... ⁸⁹

This is an important allusion for the Prelude in B Minor; its small two-note motive conceals not only a reference to his predecessor Rimsky-Korsakov and his own composition (Suite No. 1), but also signals a past through the Orthodox Church. And further, *Christ is Risen* and *Easter* both signal a return of Christ. The theme of resurrection and return in of itself functions in the same world as the return to the past of the individual represented in the painting. But the inability to return to the actual past implied gives the insinuation of a resurrection that has not happened and

⁸⁹ Translation from *Rachmaninoff, Fantasy (Suite No. 1) for Two Pianos, Four Hands* (New York, International Music Company, 1943).

the continued wait for the Messiah’s return. This overtly religious tone places this prelude in the same company as his other religious works, especially his choral settings of the All-Night Vigil and the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. But also it places a geography on the work, not unlike that depicted in Böcklin’s painting. Rachmaninoff’s friend Medtner, himself in exile, used this same two-note gesture prominently in his Violin Sonata No. 3 towards the end of his life in 1938—he later felt self-conscious about the unconscious, “small plagiarism” of this tune, explaining: “The whole of Russia somehow poured into me at this point and I can do nothing about it.”⁹⁰

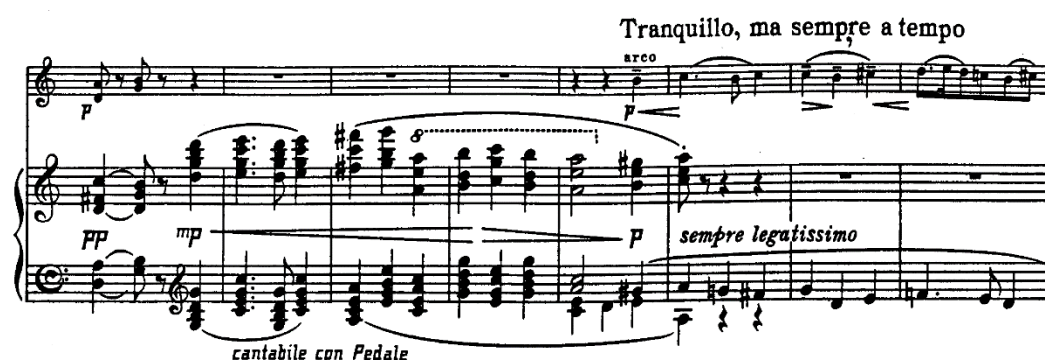


Figure 1.27. Nikolai Medtner, Violin Sonata No. 3, last movement—Christ is Risen in piano and violin lines.

This is indeed a potent memory of nation and place. The sound of *Christ is Risen* and the bells of the church—tolling in the Prelude’s chordal accompaniment—gives the sense of being outdoors and indicates the sounds of a Russian city. So for Rachmaninoff and Moiseiwitsch in their later years, the reverberations of such melody and accompaniment can signify the sounds of home.

But delving deeper and further, this question of resurrection and return plays an important role in the representation of subjectivity as related to the soul of a person and their journey through life. This prelude, with its binary structure naturally brings not only a journey in a literal

⁹⁰ As related by Anna Medtner in Z.A. Apetian, ed. *N.K. Medtner, Vospominaniya, stat'i, materialii* (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1981), 43. Also mentioned in Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music* (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1995), 228.

manner, but insinuates much more. There is a sense of a journey of the individual's self and soul. If we are to consider the prelude's opening melody as a motive for the protagonist of *Die Heimkehr*, that melody's journey must transform in the middle. That undulating dotted rhythm, with its upward two-note motive, changes in rhythm to something more closely resembling *Christ is Risen*. There is a sort of transformation—or maybe transfiguration—of man to Christ. This is that ensuing battle between *Christ is Risen* and *Dies Irae* in the middle of the work—a sort of struggle between life and death. This is done by representing the motive in opposite forms through rhythmic change, as sort of mirror images of one another. For the Orthodox believer the idea of mirroring the life of Christ in one's own makes sense. Through this, there is a sort of journey towards a religious goal. The struggle between *Christ is Risen* and *Dies irae* in the middle, cadences in ambiguity.

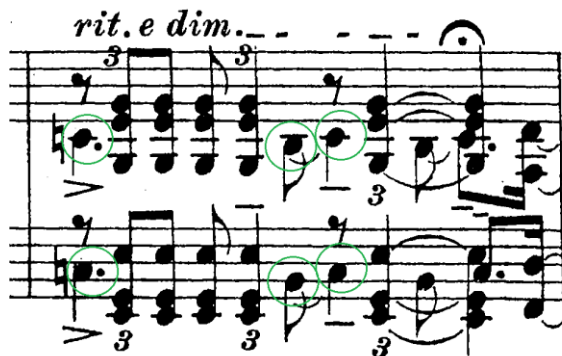


Figure 1.28. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor Op. 32, No. 10—cadence at measure 36, with two note cell featuring *Dies Irae* circled.



Figure 1.29. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor Op. 32, No. 10—cadence at measure 36, with two note cell featuring *Christ is Risen* circled.

But eventually the unsure melancholy end references the inability to reach that goal. This is directly related to Rachmaninoff's song setting of Dmitri Merezhkovsky's *Christ is Risen*. Note the same orthodox tune is invoked, however, not specifically in its melodic form, but rather in poetry.

М.С. и А. М. Керзаним

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52. ХРИСТОС ВОСКРЕС



Слова Д. МЕРЕЖКОВСКОГО

Соч. 26, № 6

Moderato $\text{♩} = 58$

„Христос воскрес!“ - поют во храме; но грустно

мне... душа молчит. Мир полон кровью и сле.

meno mosso

cresc.

Figure 1.30. Rachmaninoff, *Christ is Risen*, Op. 26, No. 6—opening seven measures.

In Merezhkovsky's poem, the poet implores that Christ would shed a tear upon his return because of what he sees of what's become of humankind. Not only does this song refer to a return of Christ, but also makes clear that that return has not happened. While the opening gesture of this song highlights this very same *Dies Irae*, we can also see that there is an inverted allusion to this song in the Prelude through the dotted rhythm melody.



Figure 1.31. Rachmaninoff, *Christ is Risen*, Op. 26, No. 6—opening melody in accompaniment.



Figure 1.32. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor Op. 32, No. 10—opening melody in right hand.

The hidden symbolism of Orthodox Christianity is crucial here. Once this is noticed, even the abstract score of the prelude starts to reveal this. In Rachmaninoff's autograph for the Preludes Op. 32, he labels each one with a roman numeral. This practice, while sometimes absent in modern editions, is especially evident, and crucial, in the first edition by Gutheil.

40

X.

S. Rachmaninow, Op. 32. N^o 10.



Figure 1.33. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor Op. 32, No. 10—first three measures of Gutheil edition.

The use of Roman numeral X for ten denotes the cross making the prelude symbolic of Christ. This, then, explains the peculiarity that Op. 32 as being 13 preludes—represented are Christ and the twelve apostles. Rachmaninoff use of 24 key signature, like Bach before him, can be seen as split into one (Op. 2, No. 3), ten [X] (Op. 23), and 13 (Op. 32). Intentional or unintentional, this remains a significant element of symbolism. The meaning of this prelude is, of course, much more complicated. If we are to take this religious notion in the score much further, however, that struggle between *Dies Irae* and *Christ is Risen* even unveils an interesting fact about the key of B minor. It uses only two sharps (*kreuz*, or cross, in German), suggesting an incomplete trinity, highlighting a resurrection that has not happened, and ultimately the return that cannot occur.

This theme of straying away, being lost, and the want for return, has its distinct resonances through the self and spirituality. Thematically, Böcklin's *Die Heimkehr* and Heine's *Der Doppelgänger* reminds us of that reflection upon the self. The inferred Christian symbolism above proves useful in finally unearthing something from the web of meaning in this prelude and its connection to Böcklin. If we again refer to Schubert's setting, we notice the passacaglia-like accompaniment as ominous and foreboding—even sinister—as it sounds; but along with this, it also emphasizes a pair of two-note motives, both of which face downward.

Sehr langsam.

Still ist die Nacht, es ru-hen die Gassen,

pp

Figure 1.34. Schubert, *Der Doppelgänger*—opening eight measures.

This theme, as pointed out by Susan Youens, has an analogue in the fugal subject of Bach’s prelude in C-sharp Minor from Book I of the Well-Tempered Clavier. In this music, the movement is shaped like a cross where the four notes represent the four outer points of a cross.

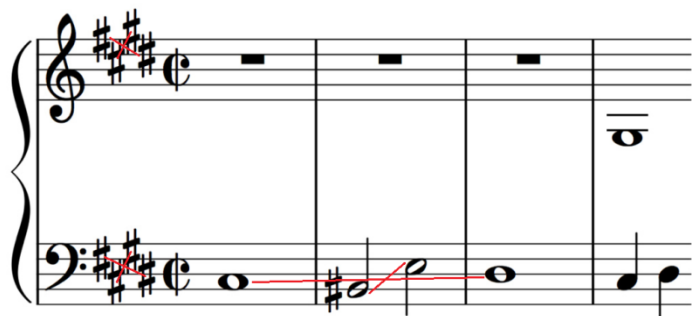


Figure 1.35. Bach, Fugue from Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp minor, WTC I—opening subject.

This stile antico theme, however, not only takes that cross shape, but also a similar shape Bach uses: his own name B-A-C-H. For Bach, he already uses the cross symbol in relation to his own name representing himself in the Art of Fugue.



Figure 1.36. Bach, middle of the final fugue from the Art of Fugue—B-A-C-H.

This signature, or self-reference, in relation to Christ is key when considering this motive’s shape. Schubert’s own accompaniment becomes the version of Bach’s cross that is menacing and mocking when considering the self; a way of life that was the ideal (or from the past) is now gone and lost, but mocking the present from the past. Remember that Rachmaninoff uses almost the same motive for what he described as “life” in the *Isle of Dead*.



Figure 1.37. Rachmaninoff, *Isle of the Dead*—measures 259-260, violin line, with the same motive circled.

For the Prelude in B minor, the reference by itself symbolically represents not only the loss of idealism, but also the loss of spirituality in the face of modernism.⁹¹ Through untangling this web of allusion there can finally be understood a direct musical connection to the theme of the *Doppelgänger* implied by Böcklin's painting that goes beyond just Schubert and Rachmaninoff's use of the B minor key signature. In one of the final bars (measure 57) Rachmaninoff highlights a harmony that could fit with the accompanimental melody from Schubert's *Doppelgänger*. The operative note is the A#. It is as if there is a very well hidden quotation and allusion to Schubert only at the end of the piece.

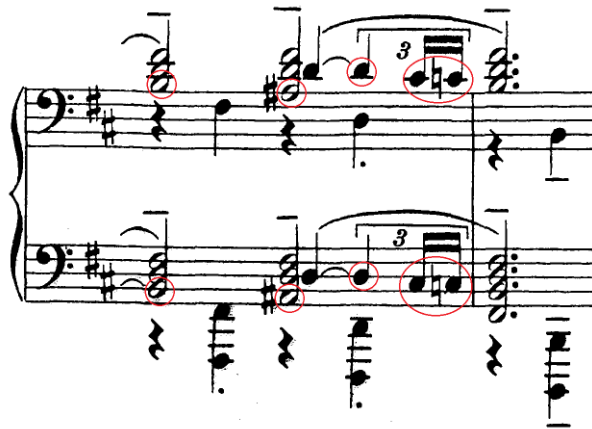


Figure 1.38. Rachmaninoff, *Prelude in B Minor Op. 32, No. 10*—measure 57.

⁹¹ And even the loss of an older style of music with the onset of increased dissonance and chromaticism. This will prove crucial in the later chapter on Medtner.



Figure 1.39. Schubert, *Der Doppelgänger*—ending.

At this penultimate gesture in the prelude, the hidden motive from *Der Doppelgänger* secretly refers to Böcklin’s painting through Heine, Schubert, and a chain of other symbols. Not only does it acknowledge the self through harmony, but also the motive with its cross shape itself calls upon Christ. This of course ties in to the Russian Orthodox Easter tune.

The chromatic slip from C-sharp to C-natural gives the same feeling as the end of Schubert’s accompaniment in the final iteration of this motive. But it also draws attention to that ensuing final chromatic line mentioned much earlier: the possible quotation of Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Song of the Indian Merchant” from *Sadko*.



Figure 1.40. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor, Op. 32, No. 10—ending.



Figure 1.41. Rimsky-Korsakov, “Song of the Indian Merchant” from *Sadko*.

The juxtaposition of all the religious content as related to *Der Doppelgänger* soon makes sense when we realize that in the Rimsky-Korsakov, the Indian guest sings about the phoenix, a symbol of rebirth. Something to remember: the “Song of the Indian Guest” comes right after the moment in *Sadko* when the great catch of the goldfish is drawn by the people. This is that moment, regarding synaesthesia, that Rachmaninoff himself admits “I must unconsciously have borne in mind.”

Unconscious reference to musical material is how we are to understand Russia’s presence in this prelude. If we take all of what was discussed before, even the bell line in the prelude’s opening reveals more. It intones yet another Russian Orthodox chant melody, one he uses in “*Blagosloven yesi, Gospodi*” in his *All-Night Vigil*, Op. 37, and in Rimsky-Korsakov’s Russian Easter Festival Overture.

X.

S. Rachmaninow, Op. 32, N° 10.

Lento.

The musical score consists of four systems of piano accompaniment. The first system begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand, which is circled in red. The second system continues with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The third system features a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking and a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, with a *m.d.* (mezzo-dolce) marking. The fourth system begins with a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic and includes a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The score is marked 'Lento.' and includes various dynamic markings and articulations.

Figure 1.42. Rachmaninoff, Prelude in B Minor, Op. 32, No. 10—first 12 measures with Orthodox Chant melody circled.

Первоначальный темп
Почти шепотом. Выделяются только указанные нажимы

гро. ба. Сла. *pp*

гро. ба. *pp* коротким звуком

гро. ба. Сла- ва От-цу и Сы- ну и Свя-то, му Ду- ху. По-кло-ним-ся От-цу *pp* коротким звуком

* Может быть заменен первыми тенорами. — Примеч. С. В. Рахманинова.
14226

Figure 1.43. Rachmaninoff, *All-Night Vigil*, Op. 37, “*Blagosloven yesi, Gospodii*”—Orthodox Chant Melody circled.

RECIT.
M **Maestoso.** $\text{♩} = 76.$

Trombone II. Solo

a piena voce
6 Violoncelli div. a 3.

pp colla parte.
2 C. Bassi

Figure 1.44. Rimsky-Korsakov, *Russian Easter Festival Overture*—at rehearsal M, Orthodox Chant Melody in trombone line.

How the ineffable in music transforms into an image can be approached by understanding a synthesis of many symbols, which creates a larger impression. The reference to many allusions can, and may occur through the imagination of listening. Unconscious engagement with the music presents no clearer marker of place than the sounds of Russia. This prelude places the listener and performer in a world that is temporal, spatial, and spiritual, not to mention existential. This is why the themes of “return” and “loss” resonate so strongly for Rachmaninoff

and Moiseiwitsch—whether or not Rachmaninoff made these connections while composing is not the point.

The “return” in the Prelude in B minor instills the same anxiety of the period. The homecoming was especially about a return to a past that was lost. Later in Rachmaninoff’s life this took on a different form when he and Moiseiwitsch were reminiscing; the same feelings resonated when remembering their motherland, Russia. Parsing between these two sources of difference is crucial. Unraveling the nature of synaesthesia in music and the unconscious is in and of itself a long and perilous journey. For the Prelude in B minor, the journey that contextualizes the past will yield a piece of music—like Rachmaninoff and Moiseiwitsch (not to mention the man in the painting)—that looks different. A return to the world and music before must then remain within a dream.

II.

Towards the Flame: Approaching Scriabin's Apocalypse

He was in the midst of speaking about the music he was about to play. "The name of the piece, the title, is Vers la flamme." Staring piercingly, he continued in broken English, "Vers la flamme is 'toward the flame.' It's very modern, very percussive, it's very crazy. It's very difficult to take it." Revealing a wry smile, he proceeded to take his jacket off explaining again that this was a very difficult piece. "This is a little frightening music, be prepared for big sound. If I don't collapse, it's alright." His smile fell away as a hush overcame the surroundings. The first notes sounded. In a slightly crouched position, his body jutted forward somewhat. Deliberate or not, this posture, and the seriousness on his face, revealed a stern, meditative concentration. An ominous harmony emerged; floating above this were two notes: a pronounced semitone that was a mere fragment of a melody—one short note moving upward to a sustained note. He played it twice, but eventually those notes revealed the beginning of a larger whole—a haunting melody that wound around like a serpent, encircling itself back to the same sustained pitch. Each finger was delicately placed, curved then flattened. His eyes were slightly open, yet they seemed to close occasionally as if entranced. The music gradually increased in volume: a flame flashing and flickering out of the embers of blackened wood in front of him. And with gestures from both hands and the seductive movement of his fingers, he slowly conjured something from the depths of the keys—what was this shrouded mystery in the music? And was he a sorcerer of some sort, drawing something unseen, unknown, and unspeakable from the fire? The instrument responded with a cry of dissonance. But these cold sounds somehow were warm, flushed in a beautiful array of color. A bright luminescence shone through in the sound of golden tones delicately

placed and rounded by the weight in the tips of his fingers. Next, the two-note motive turned the opposite direction; inverted and played downward, it transformed from its chant-like quality; its announcement now sounded like the recitation of two-syllable words in a spell. It was a little louder, with a sound more robust, though the ambience of the music remained relatively subdued. The strange dissonances surrounding the two-note motive were carefully placed within stagnant harmonies, stacked vertically, and moving rhythmically forward in slow motion. This created carefully aligned pillars of sound. It was as if you were walking forward in procession, and at the periphery of your vision each homophonic texture was placed like a column in a temple; and at the center of your attention was that same motive, the chromatic tone, a flame on the altar beckoning you towards it. The sound of that cryptic yet beautiful sense of desire permeated outward yet drew you in closer...

Suddenly, a subtle change of tempo was stoked in the accompaniment where a sinister tritone sounded, wavering back and forth—the flame was increasing in size. Each phrase was still carefully rounded in sound emphasizing this tritone. This was accompanied by an arpeggiated gesture occasionally appearing in the left hand like the strumming of a strange harp. The motive came more frequently, increasing loudness with each sound, building intensity until a chord built on a discordant cluster erupted. After this, the pianist played a trill on that same chord. Leaning slightly to the left as his left hand trilled, his right hand crossed over showing the arms in a seemingly awkward yet carefully placed position. The right hand was playing the haunting tune from the beginning, but this time played over and over; the serpent shape of that melody underwent metamorphosis, its repetition insisting upon endlessness, transforming into ouroboros, infinitely eating its own tail. Unexpectedly, the same hand that was rapidly oscillating, creating sparks with the sounds of the trill flipped under the other arm and

violently struck the keys, and then quickly moved right back underneath the other. With each strike, the hand came off the keyboard at an angle; visibly, it looked as if the pianist smacked the keys; though, the tone was contained, creating a harsh sound, but full and not flattened. This happened repeatedly. Then, with the semitone motive leading the way, the music pushed forward with the trill transforming into a tremolo played by both hands. Everything was louder and louder, and far more difficult; the pianist's virtuosity ambivalently vacillated between mastery and struggle. Tension increased. Suddenly, a chord built from fourths flared up from the tremolos. This was followed by the same serpentine melody—that enigmatic worm of alchemy—played again and again in repetition with crossed arms and stricken chords. With each appearance, the harmony changed and this gesture moved up in register with each presentation, heightened the tension. The pianist pushed and pushed, frantically. Finally, the tremolos dissipated and the repeating quartal chords sounded loudly, triumphantly like trumpets announcing an arrival. The pianist pounded forth the left hand gradually and broadly—in the shape of a fist—and played the expanse of the entire keyboard. The sound exploded. Suddenly, he lifted his hands as high as possible as if they had been burnt from touching the final notes. Alexander Scriabin's music burst out, unveiling its secret beyond the fiery bosom of the piano itself into the phenomenal world.

Unexpectedly, and with unanticipated silliness, Vladimir Horowitz stuck out his tongue, blowing lightly—a raspberry. He was exhausted. With his body upright, erect after lifting his hands from the keyboard, Horowitz sank into his seat, arms falling to the sides with a slap on the piano bench. In a depleted voice, he laughed, “That is difficult!” His body seemed bent out of shape as he leaned on the piano to prop himself up as he stood. Off from the side another voice called out, “It really is...it really is a struggle between life and death.” Horowitz smiled with

wide eyes and nodded, “Yes, it is.”⁹²

How to describe the performance of a piece of music, especially one that reaches beyond itself? Is a strict and empirical description enough? What about feelings, images, ideas, thoughts, or reactions—all of those subjective modes of experience that we may or may not be able to explain? Or what about contextual sources of meaning the music engages with that may seem far away from us today? My description above is of a video of Vladimir Horowitz performing Scriabin’s *Vers la flamme*. It is an ekphrasis, filled with embellishment; I am deliberately imagining beyond what is there, to set a mood and maybe ignite a fire in your mind—either to explore a synaesthetic imagination, or a heated frustration at my evocative incursion upon a piece of music.

With 2015 marking the centennial of Scriabin’s death, perhaps we have yet another chance to come to terms with this composer’s problematical legacy. How are we to make sense of the complex meaning in Scriabin’s compositions and the spiritually challenging content that flows from them? And what can we say about performances of these works? I begin here with Horowitz, not just because his playing is closely aligned with the romantic tradition Scriabin comes from, but also because of his commanding presence on stage as a pianist. I want to explore how a performer’s charisma, along with our unconscious knowledge and subjective imagination, can play an important role in giving us insight into the workings of Scriabin’s transcendent music and its meaning. It is this engagement with the act of performance itself in the moment, and its function as ritual that allows for the closest iteration towards Scriabin’s apocalyptic vision; that is to say, a crossing of that liminal barrier between imagination and reality.

⁹² *Vladimir Horowitz: A Reminiscence*, DVD, directed by Pat Jaffe (West Long Branch, New Jersey: Kultur, 2007).

This archival footage is from an abandoned documentary filmed in New York around 1974 that eventually found its way into another documentary titled *Vladimir Horowitz: A Reminiscence*.⁹³ This performance was shot nine years after Horowitz made his return to the concert stage in 1965. Thanks to this long hiatus there was widespread interest and intense desire to see and hear the piano playing of someone whom many considered to be one of the greatest pianists of the twentieth century. Horowitz would go on to rekindle the fiery performances of his youth into one of the most celebrated careers in American classical music, where he concertized all around the world, save for one place—the land of his birth, Russia, where he refused to return.

This video shows a sincere and earnest performance of Scriabin's *Vers la flamme*; and yet, it is downright silly at the end. Horowitz was certainly not shy about joking around at the piano, especially in these sorts of documentaries (much to the scorn of his wife, Wanda). But there is a fine line present between a great, austere seriousness in the performance of a musical work and the possibility of comedic release from the tension of such severity. The two seem at opposite poles but here are paired closely together. I could not help but laugh when seeing this video for the first time when I was young. Certainly I was not laughing at Horowitz. Was I? No, I must have been laughing with him, knowing the difficulty of performing such a piece. But his gestures at the end are comical nonetheless. And so was the situation. In the beginning of this segment, before the performance of the piece, a man's voice from off camera instructed him to take off his jacket. Horowitz replied saying, "Yes, I have to take off my jacket," doing this with a look of utmost sincerity and complete seriousness. Allowing himself ease from the constraint of his coat, he looked like a boxer who was about to enter the ring for a fight. Or maybe an image in

⁹³ Audiovisual recordings like this, although limited, present a real opportunity to engage with live enactment from a time that has already passed.

true synaesthetic fashion is more appropriate here: he was preparing himself for the combustible nature of the work he was about to play, where actual heat emanating from the music would be too unbearable. This, coupled with the physical exhaustion, where it appeared as if he feigned fatigue (with tongue out in depleted energy), provoked my indecorous laughter. But there is a joy to such laughter: any pianist who knows this music would never deny how very hard it is to play.

An impromptu piano performance by Horowitz off the concert stage and its humorous nature can give us insight into the difficult line music of this kind sometimes must straddle. Alexander Scriabin, who is probably the most important composer associated with Russian Symbolism during the Silver Age, wrote the piece as a serious precursor to his apocalyptic musical endeavors. At times, when I have found myself describing the music of Scriabin to someone, I receive quizzical looks and the occasional spurts of laughter, whether or not that person was familiar or unfamiliar with the composer's life. The seriousness—and sheer madness—of Scriabin's venture, however, cannot be disputed. While my own interpretive musings, through a candidly subjective and embellished telling of *Vers la Flamme* and Horowitz's performance of it, tries to capture some spirit of this music, my description can teeter on the edge (well, several edges, most of them regrettable). The seriousness of romanticism when read through a modern lens and context sometimes treads precariously along this border and—especially in the case of prose as extreme as Liszt's flowery biography of Chopin—can stumble beyond into the absurd. But even the seemingly outlandish, weird, or funny may have mattered; its task or aspiration might well have been vital. Romanticism of old is lodged in a strange place within present-day classical music culture: it is simultaneously a proudly defining characteristic but also can be a subtle source of embarrassment. The stark contrast of the latter shows a side closely affiliated with an aspect of modernism that has, since the early twentieth

century, outwardly shunned romantic fantasy. But this paradox between romantic and modern is what allows a general acceptance—with almost religious zeal—of western classical music’s hegemony and seemingly miraculous “universality” while at the same time discarding things that are blatantly over the top. Or at least some things... After all, for a very brief moment, Horowitz’s performance of *Vers la Flamme* “really is a struggle between life and death.” The man behind the scenes who uttered those words remained completely serious while concurrently—inadvertently—making light of Horowitz’s display of exhaustion in laughter. But if we look more carefully, a discrepancy emerges about such an expression of fatigue revealed by the romantic pianist—one where an incongruity lies between the superhuman and the all-too-human person who must perform. Self-deprecation, here, is the acknowledgement of that gap, an attempt to remain in control, above the fray—beyond the battle between frailty and aspiration.

And yet, ironically, it is Scriabin’s intentions and endeavors that go quite too far to be taken so seriously in this age. The perplexing legacy of *Mysterium*—the composer’s unfinished (and, in fact, barely begun) seven-day-long magnum opus meant to induce rapture and cause the end of the world—has widened more eyes in confusion than clairvoyance. Scriabin propelled himself upward into the stratosphere of music, but in the end we are able to see only his head in the clouds. Yet these same romantic sentiments resonate in the Horowitz performance and are not so much forgiven as celebrated. Forgiveness is in fact not necessary. All of this is a matter of intense and solidified cultural dogma. Through the veil of romanticism, classical music culture has inherited a strong and powerful means of control by virtue of a devout sense of faith. This religiosity is not unlike that possessed by Scriabin himself.

But while “classical” music and its romantic ideals are here conjoined, there is an important distinction to be made. The issue at hand may be about the application of romanticism

itself, or the implication of its aesthetic goals. Boris de Schloezer, Scriabin's brother-in-common-law, went as far as to claim that Scriabin was the only truly *romantic* Russian musician by virtue of his craft's intentionality: to transcend artistic media.⁹⁴ Schloezer further distinguished between classicist and romantic in art:

Generally speaking, for a classicist, art is only an interlude, a celebration of some sort; it interrupts the course of time and serves as a break in the routine of life. It is an intermission, after which life resumes its course and returns to "serious business" as if nothing had changed. The goal of a romantic, on the other hand is to erase such a distinction. A romantic definitely desires that everything be changed, with art not merely an entr'acte but a celebration that goes on, that overflows into everyday existence and integrates with it in order to illuminate and, in effect, transform it. For a romantic, the main purpose is to convert a work of art into a means of action, not only on the aesthetic plane but also on the plane of reality. The two worlds coalesce in this conception; the intention is to impart to artificial products of the creative imagination the status of real events (or likewise, to impart to real events the status of the imaginary). This is the clue to the importance of *Parsifal*.⁹⁵

This is indeed a strong distinction, though one that does not necessarily find consonance with most, if not all, perspectives in modern academic discourse. The passage above comes from Schloezer's extremely important recollections about his familial relation titled *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*. The excerpt is from an English translation by Nicolas Slonimsky published by UC Press in 1987 and is a valuable primary source document deserving of scholarly veneration not only for its accessibility but also for its widespread distribution. Yet upon the release of this new translation, there was a profound air of discomfort. In a scathing review in the *Musical Times*, David Murray described this as a "silly book, and no more comprehensible," allowing, only derisively, that "as a historical document, Schloezer's work has a certain deplorable

⁹⁴ Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 309.

⁹⁵ Boris de Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, trans. Nicolas Slonimsky (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 234. Quotation from Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 309.

importance...What can have possessed the Oxford University Press?"⁹⁶

Richard Taruskin, a tireless advocate of Russian music, took it upon himself to clarify the difficulty of contextualizing Scriabin's music and establishing its place in present-day scholarship.⁹⁷ Reviewing Slonimsky's translation, along with James Baker's Yale-ish theoretical discussions in his book *The Music of Alexander Scriabin*, Taruskin forcefully proposes to take Schloezer's account seriously, not simply as a passing curiosity, but instead for exploring the possibilities Scriabin's music attempts to approach. Here, he makes a strong case to dispel much of the latent embarrassment involved in understanding Scriabin's musical motives. But he especially takes aim at Baker's highfalutin advocacy of music theory as a means of salvaging Scriabin's cultural significance. Taruskin took aim, especially, at the incongruity of Baker's own assessment where at first he says, "Alexander Scriabin would have resented being remembered merely as a composer"⁹⁸ only to backtrack and conclude that, "Although his visions were the primary motivation for his experimentation and innovation, what remains today is his music. Scriabin's art survives because he was a master of the craft of musical composition. Much as he might have been disappointed, it is through the study of his musical structures that we can best know him today."⁹⁹ Taruskin's pointed criticism of Baker's conclusion reveals the latter's covert (and unconscious?) agenda to reinforce the problematic historical narrative of compositional-technical "progress" within musical discourse, one that deliberately filters out mysticism from discussions of Scriabin's music due to ideological and aesthetic embarrassment.

The underpinning issue is a matter of historiography. For many scholars, Scriabin needed

⁹⁶ Schloezer's book was distributed by Oxford University Press in England in arrangement with UC Press. David Murray, "Distorted Vision," review of *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* by Boris de Schloezer, translated by Nicolas Slonimsky, *Musical Times* 128 (1987). Discussed in Taruskin, 313.

⁹⁷ Richard Taruskin, review of *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* by James M. Baker and *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* by Boris de Schloezer, translated by Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (Spring, 1988): 143-169.

⁹⁸ James M. Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), vii.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 270.

to fit neatly into a narrative that highlights the breakdown of tonality. This was imperative for a musicology that continued to place importance on an agenda focusing on positivism and music theory. Proponents of modernism in the twentieth century, particularly composers and music theorists, have sat uncomfortably, ruing the notion of a “religiousness” in the western canon’s romantic past, and especially eschewing the possibility in the present. Understanding Scriabin historically as a mystic remains fine, so long as he is contained and his music has been extracted—saved, if you will—from his solipsistic megalomania. Musical culture, along with everything else coming out of the twentieth century, supposedly has transcended this imagination, so to speak—romantic fantasy is not only outdated or no longer viable, but also rather repulsive. Yet the potency behind the expressive power of a music performance, such as Horowitz’s, remains distanced from “fantastical characterization” simply by focusing on technical mastery while retaining its romantic qualities. Not talking about this kind of performance in academic discourse makes it easy to avoid the uncomfortable issues. For a long time, the best of both worlds existed, the scientific musical theory remained academic and performances by real performers preserved the romantic contained in a different space. One could enforce the other without having to answer through discourse. What is strange about this lack of engagement or connection is not diffidence between the two, but what it covers up: the degree of insecurity about influence and importance. Untangling those covert emphases on music theory meant not only undoing the continuity of a “scientific” method adopted in musicology during the cold war, but also uncovering the precarious glue holding together European dominance within music history. Taking seriously Scriabin’s mysticism was far too risky and could force a direct confrontation with perceived ownership of universality as governed by the inheritance of religiosity. At the end of the day, musicology confronted these problems through

many avenues in the 1990s, but there is a persistence of these inclinations that remains.

In short, Scriabin's presence in historical canonization required an amputation—the mystical concerns that Scriabin thought inalienable were cut away to allow his compositional techniques to be appropriated for the stories of others. The importance placed in consensus music history on the emancipation of dissonance makes Scriabin an important figure mainly because of his harmonic innovations. He became a minor figure in a Whiggish account of progress in compositional technique (narrowly defined). Taruskin's rebuttal has sought a more critical historiographical account of a specific kind of religiosity with regard to Scriabin and Russian music. What he uncovers is the peculiarity of how few accounts there are of anyone trying to understand how Scriabin's music broaches this topic of spirituality. It is no wonder that discussions of Scriabin soon fell silent.¹⁰⁰

Taruskin does provide a close reading of his own, specifically in relation to the music of Richard Wagner, but the main scholarly work in this area comes from his pupil Mitchell Morris, whose dissertation on Scriabin's early works up to the Poem of Ecstasy provide the first account of this kind.¹⁰¹ While Morris and Taruskin offer a solid foundation into understanding Scriabin's connection to Wagnerian agendas present in much of his earlier music, there is still a need to explore further the degree of influence of the Symbolist and spiritual agenda on Scriabin's later works.

The Scriabin dilemma is a sort of an elephant in the room—how can music cause apocalyptic change? Understanding this today does not necessarily mean having to believe in the extremities of such an ideal. But also, I don't mean to ask only why someone would think like

¹⁰⁰ In *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*, Simon Morrison offers a brief examination of Scriabin's *Mysterium*, but focuses much of his attention on operatic iterations of Symbolist literature. Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2002), 9.

¹⁰¹ Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*. Mitchell Morris, *Musical Eroticism and the Transcendent Strain: The Works of Alexander Scriabin, 1898-1908* (Ph. D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1998).

this. Instead, how are we to make sense of how this music functions? The first step, of course, must be taken in stride—acknowledging Scriabin’s apocalyptic event. This does not mean necessarily to discount its existence in reality—nor does it mean a requirement to believe in his vision. Rather this means exploring a conception of reality we may not experience nor understand. Scriabin’s death mid-composition of his *Mysterium*, complicates any acknowledgement by the composer himself of that dissonance between reality and imagination. But what we do not have in a final act of transcendence, we do have in preparations, not only of the Preparatory Act itself from *Mysterium*, but of Scriabin’s other compositions. This is significant because the composer himself saw his own earlier works, for both piano solo and orchestra, to be preludes to his magnum opus. The music itself would prepare the listener. Here is where we can contend with that tension between imagination of the ideal and the reality of transcendence.

In light of Schloezer’s assertion of Scriabin’s romanticism, he goes on to explain the composer’s religiosity in the following manner:

Scriabin refused to separate art from religion; in his view religion is immanent to art, which itself becomes a religious phenomenon. Scriabin’s case is unique in that he, an artist of genius, was determined to transcend his art, to cease to be an artist, to become a prophet, a votary, a predicant. Yet such appellations would have been unacceptable to Scriabin, for he refused to admit that his design reached beyond art, that he violated the frontiers of art and thus ceased to be an artist. On the contrary, he argued that the commonly accepted view of art was too narrow, its true meaning lost, and its significance obscured. It was his destiny to restore art to its original role; consequently he was much more an artist than any other, because to him art was the religion of which he was the sacristan.¹⁰²

Put plainly, Scriabin saw music as religious rite and his own role as pianist was akin to priest. He was not alone in these thoughts regarding music during Silver Age Russia. These views and his person fit comfortably within the auspices of second generation Russian Symbolists where he

¹⁰² Schloezer, 234. Also Taruskin, 309.

found sympathy amongst this collective in trying to harness music's power beyond itself. Here, his views of art transcending its confined boundaries of aesthetics were shared by fellow artists and poets. In 1909 Scriabin moved to a flat in the Arbat where his frequent guests were Konstantin Balmont, Jurgis Baltrushaitis, and Vyacheslav Ivanov, amongst others. While the poets he was in contact with were diverse within the movement, Scriabin's affinities are more closely tied to that second wave Symbolism where actual sacred engagement and revelation was believed possible. These poets—Vyacheslav Ivanov, Alexander Blok, Andrei Bely among them—were interested in poetry, art, and music taking the shape of *theurgy*, or a sort of white magic. In this sense, poet becomes prophet, poetry becomes incantation, and music becomes divine revelation.

Schloezer's comments simply clarify and confirm Scriabin's religious aspirations amongst the Symbolists, where he would bring about his own attempts to fuse some of these ideas with his own craft. But even though there are two different waves of Symbolism in Russia, both fall under the same propensity towards spirituality, as does the genre in looking west towards the rest of Europe. The philosophical concern within the Symbolist agenda, however, remains central to the concerns of the music and its place.

* * *

It is extremely important to take into account purely performative aspects of Scriabin's pianism when looking at works such as *Vers la Flamme*. As we know, the main tenets of Russian Symbolism drew heavily upon Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* and therefore performance manifested itself as one of many different facets in an art that combined a multitude of symbols. In poetry, of course, symbols were derived from more than just metaphoric means. The rhythm, meter, and sounds of words became symbols along with the plethora of meanings from the

words. The dark sounds of vowels would in many cases indicate just as much as the name of a color—take azure, for instance—radiating an image from the text while still already exhibiting other symbols in metaphor and subject connected to that color. Close attention was also paid to typography and lithography in publications of Symbolist Journals. This can be seen in the elaborately adorned editions of *Zolotoe Runo* where the eye is drawn not only to the pictures, fonts, paintings, and borders, but also placement of poetic text on the page. In looking at the technique involved in Scriabin's music, it is clear that these were certainly important features that would appear on that score itself, but also that within the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, technical performance of a piano piece would also carry significant symbolic weight.

Scriabin's interest in the technical construction of his works must also be traced to his general physical presence and musical education. Certain anecdotes revolving around the beginnings of his career prove useful. First and foremost, Scriabin is part of a tradition featuring specifically pianist-composers who made an impact on nineteenth-century music; his most notable predecessors in Europe were Frederic Chopin and Franz Liszt. In Russia, Scriabin was considered one of the finest pianists in his day and was seen avidly performing and promoting his works in concerts and salons. (His tenure as a student at the Moscow Conservatory had resulted in his receiving the Gold Medal from Vassily Safonov's class. Though noted most prominently as a composer in our minds, he did not receive the Gold medal for composition, primarily because of his poor relationship with Anton Arensky.) While Scriabin is certainly recognized without question as an important pianist by critics and performers alike, his career almost didn't come to fruition. In an attempt to further his technical ability, Scriabin began to compare himself with his classmate Josef Lhévinne (later the influential teacher of generations of pianists from the Juilliard school, so dominant in today's tradition). Scriabin, a man of slight

build with very small hands, strenuously practiced extremely virtuosic passagework. As pianists, generally we are taught that hand type should not matter when considering the acquisition of technique—a true sense of equality is presented in pedagogy. But in reality, different pieces and differing types of technical demand will result in many pianists finding some aspects of piano work more difficult and others easy. For Lhévinne, one simply needs to listen to his recording of Schulz-Evler's transcription of Johann Strauss, Jr.'s *Die blaue Donau* in order to hear that the ease of executing lightning fast octaves were not a problem for him, combining with an incredible degree of control and dexterity. This flashy Lisztian virtuosity, no doubt, left a considerable impression on the more physically delicate Scriabin. Mutual comparison amongst pianists as to their physical ability inevitably takes a psychological toll, with the added pressure of academic and vocational expectations pressing up against the desire for a place in the limelight. Such pianistic competition can lead to various forms of self-disciplining that can result in permanent physical and psychic damage—or sometimes the opposite: a variety of performance narcissism capable of reaping the benefits of excellence in musicking. A certain degree of both self-awareness and narcissism is necessary for a pianist's career, and as we'll see they color the aspects of what we understand as the cult of the “master” musician as sort of a virtuosic “*Übermensch*.” We can easily see how such needs to “transcend towards excellence” may have affected Scriabin's own view of himself.

Psychological effect aside, Scriabin's comparison of himself to Lhévinne spurred damagingly vigorous practicing, the kind that demanded an appropriation of technique beyond the physical means of his own hands. Practicing in this manner, with such extreme determination, can cause severe injury. Ultimately, this is what happened to Scriabin—like Schumann had before him, he injured his right hand. Scriabin thought his career was over,

resulting in depression and deep reflection about his own ability (and composing his first piano sonata and two works for the left hand alone as an emotional response). Eventually he recovered, and was able to perform again.

Having gone through such a traumatic experience, Scriabin must have paid particular attention to how his hands were working so that his compositional writing fit accordingly.¹⁰³ Also, because of his small hand size, which may have been a partial cause of his injury, it must be accounted for that he would have required many different fingerings and gestures in works that weren't his own. Gesture and hand movement in correlation with technical demand and ability can readily produce a visual image seen by the audience and performer. As I intend to show, many of these gestures can produce symbols.

Scriabin's hand size indicates that many of the large stretches in a variety of his preludes, études, and sonatas were rolled and arpeggiated by the composer, even if he did not indicate such. The few recordings we have of Scriabin's Welte Piano rolls indicate that he does arpeggiate such passages, providing clear examples of physical embodiment by a composer-performer in relationship to the score as written. He, of course, could have indicated the arpeggiations for all of these chords, but part of the publication of a codified score indicates an ideal that the music aspires towards while also acknowledging the variability of individual performance as dictated by rhetorical means, ideas, and musical charisma.

Scriabin's small hand size also resulted in another peculiar but an incredibly important aspect to his playing as it related to his compositional process. Because he was unable to reach many passages and chords, Scriabin directed much of the musical attention away from these as matters of deficiency and instead allowed a blossoming of pedal technique. No longer was the

¹⁰³ For a more extensive study of Scriabin's piano performance, see Anatole Leikin, *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2011).

difficulty of sustaining notes with small hands an impediment to the sounding of musical poetry; instead, this allowed him to open up a different sonic world, giving him the chance to spend considerable time experimenting with the coloration, overtones, harmonic exploration, and timbral resonance. In studio classes, his teacher Safonov used to tell his students not to look at Scriabin's hands but his feet instead. With so much attention centered on pedaling, the placements of harmonies deserve special attention particularly when considering how harmonies bleed over in particular passagework. Scriabin's interest in emphasizing the color of harmony through held pedaling becomes apparent in much of his compositional practice. There is also a clear indication that, like the arpeggiated chords, there is an expectation of a certain degree of liberal use of pedaling in Scriabin's piano music even when such is not indicated.

With all of this in mind, as well as with a world-class education at the Moscow Conservatory, Scriabin maintained a piano technique worthy of analysis as related to the meaning in his music. It is important to note that there is a technical use of the mechanics of the hand characteristic to those within the class of his piano teacher.¹⁰⁴ Safonov himself was a student of Louis Brassin, Nikolai Zaremba, and the famed pedagogue Theodor Leschetizky. A distinct Russian piano school of playing came particularly late in the nineteenth century, but its development was highly indebted to the influence of Liszt through Pavel Pabst, the Rubinstein brothers, Leschetizky, Brassin, and Henselt, among others. In a way reminiscent of the influence of Glinka on the kuchkists in St. Petersburg and Tchaikovsky in Moscow, these figures in piano brought forth a generation of pianists forging their own identity in Russian pianism. As

¹⁰⁴ This is directly related to the tradition or school of playing a pianist adheres to and usually takes a nationalistic tone. (For example, it is easy today to hear of a pianist talking about learning within the Taubmann school.) For this reason, many pianists find listing their pedigree as an important means of distinguishing their style of performance (not to mention allowing some degree of agency). See Christopher Barnes, trans. and ed., *The Russian Piano School: Russian Pianists on the Art of the Piano* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2008).

Scriabin's teacher, Safonov directed his student into a distinctive nationalistic style of performance, while instilling his own school of technical mechanics.

Safonov published a pamphlet entitled *New Formula*, which was based on his teaching method.¹⁰⁵ These fingerings and figurations that he propagated clearly make their appearance in pianistic writings of Scriabin but also in his other students such as Alexander Goedicke, a noted organist and composer, and his cousin Nikolay Medtner. Goedicke once mentioned Safonov's keen ability to correct weaknesses in the technique of his students so that the physiognomy of their playing would change within a matter of months.¹⁰⁶ With this, it becomes clear how much Scriabin's playing is not only derived from Safonov's method, but remains dependent on it as a whole. Of Safonov's technique in his *New Formula*, what stands out the most is an emphasis on the pianist's need to maintain the most natural position of the hand.¹⁰⁷ This involves the importance of independence of the fingers, evenness of touch, agility, and beauty of sound. This mode of playing requires strength in all the fingers without the collapse of any joint all the while avoiding all tension in the fingers, wrist, and arms that may otherwise restrict movement and create too harsh of a tone. Achieving this relaxation and natural movement was the result of maintaining the natural position of the hand as much as possible. In his exercises, Safonov paid special attention to five different positions of both hands that instill this sort of intuition. (Sometimes, to achieve this, Safonov would even suggest rather unorthodox fingering of moving the thumb under the fifth finger in scalar passages in order to maintain this aspect of hand position and motion.) This necessary demand on natural hand position gives pieces by students of Safonov a shape that always fits in the hand and is naturally pianistic. However difficult the

¹⁰⁵ Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music* (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1995), 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 8

¹⁰⁷ Wassili Safonoff, *New Formula for the Piano Teacher and the Piano Student* (Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, 1916).

passages are in the music of Scriabin or Medtner, both of Safonov's prized composer-pianists, the notes chosen are always meant to avoid awkwardness for the hands. Even in extremely difficult passagework, it is very hard to deny the natural pianistic nature of Scriabin's compositions.

Understanding these pedagogical and performative aspects of Scriabin's physiognomy as pianist are crucial in making sense of his compositional technique and ultimately the way in which the embodiment of his music plays out. In this sense, it is valuable to see a direct compositional connection to *Vers la flamme* itself as it related to the material seen in Safonov's *New Formula*. Indeed, there is a rather significant point that highlights the pedagogical pedigree mentioned above. As we know, before becoming a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Safonov was a student of Louis Brassin, a Belgian pianist who took up residence in St. Petersburg. While the name of this pianist is not as familiar as that of Liszt, Brassin was well known up until the 1930s for his popular transcription of Wagner's Magic Fire Scene from *Die Walküre*. This transcription was ubiquitous in many piano repertoires in the late nineteenth century, but like many of Carl Tausig's popular transcriptions, fell out of favor in the general repertoire of modern pianists. Brassin's arrangement of Wagner's Magic Fire Scene exhibits a technique where the hand remains in the natural position, as seen in many of the difficult passages involving sixths in the right hand. This shows the wide reaching importance of this technique in Safonov and his students as it did in his own teacher. The transcription surely must have passed through the hands of Scriabin at some point, especially considering its popularity and Wagner's influence.

The mentioning of this transcription in regards to Scriabin's technique brings to mind the close connection between *Vers la Flamme* and Wagner's Magic Fire Scene. Again, Wagner is

the most important composer of the period who continually returns to prominence in musical circles, especially when related to Russian Symbolism. Both *Vers le flamme* and the Magic Fire Scene share something rudimentary in common, especially with their iconic depiction of fire and magic. Fire as an image typically shines bright, but always consumes and eventually dies out. In both pieces, the fire that is depicted is supposed to continue to burn. In the Wagner, the scene depicts Wotan calling Loge to encircle the sleeping Brünnhilde with Magic Fire so that she will be protected before a hero (and only a hero) can cross it. With this, the Magic Fire is supposed to remain constant. The same is the case for the depiction in *Vers la Flamme*. It's not a simple fire, but instead, as I will describe later, an alchemical flame consuming and burning eternally in order to represent the metaphysical. This is the image Scriabin wishes to cultivate at the core of this musical work.

* * *

Vers la Flamme was one of the last works Scriabin composed and, along with *Prometheus* and the Preparatory Act for *Mysterium*, was one of the closest musical examples to his goal. It is a prelude in every sense except in its title, however generically ambiguous it may be. And even better, being a prelude without musical genre distinction places it outside the confinement of convention. In true Symbolic fashion, Scriabin employs the use of a vague programmatic title, *Towards the flame*, that courts the listener to desire a meaning and purpose. As listeners, we are left trying to decipher what an approach towards fire is about. Metaphorically, this is that moment of approach, in music and image, towards truth. There is a strong tension here between objective and subjective that Scriabin is attempting to breach with the music. You are forced through a subjective lens to try to understand something that reaches into the universe. This is inevitably confusing, so starting with a hermeneutic that engages

directly with interpretation and signification can help. The ekphrastic description I gave of Horowitz's performance—with all of its imaginative and descriptive embellishments—forces a kind of synaesthesia immediately upon the listener. While connotation in a simplistic sense may seem to approach a one-to-one relationship for understanding possible content, an ekphrasis can provide a much more rounded synaesthetic feel. In fact, it is the symbolic inherent in synaesthesia, demanded by use of your imagination, that keeps the work from being mired down in a basic indexical meaning: this music's abstraction, along with Scriabin's mystical intention through vagueness and ambiguity, attempts to transcend any such programmatic reduction, forcing listeners to explore their own imagination. This interpretive approach through ekphrastic words is a little crude, but can do its magic, so to speak. With the bombardment of meaning from this music, "towards the flame" can imply a literal fire that will consume, burn, and incinerate. The fire's metaphor is the heat of burning passion and desire to attain universal knowledge. And also "eternal truth" as a dangerous yet ephemeral flame—beyond grasp, where if you are not careful, you will dissolve into ash while wearing your earthly garb. But while this flame is supposedly beyond mere human grasp, it is not impossible for the superhuman. Scriabin, here, already fashioned himself in this way. In this sense, an approach towards the flame stands for the complete annihilation of the Will in preparation for transcendence. Just as the element of water cleanses and baptizes, here the flame purifies. The importance of Symbolism in general here is that the music itself must axiomatically have no singular meaning, but instead a multiplicity of meanings that are at once synthesized. (This should recall my discussion of Rachmaninoff and synaesthesia in the previous chapter.) The characterization of an alchemical or magical flame that conjures things into reality is as much pertinent and one in the same. Approaching the flame's ephemeral qualities is like grasping the *thing in itself* within reality, and reaching beyond

the phenomenal world and into the noumenal.

In many ways, this is why this piece is so difficult to perform. The act of playing this piece plays out the very meaning in the work itself. Namely, it demands a challenge to the body that requires maintaining conscious control, while allowing an unyielding disengagement through unconscious process. A building of tension throughout the work demands a level of concentration that is highly intensive because of the degree of subtlety involved. Little by little Scriabin writes in gestures that become increasingly more difficult to play; they begin with the illusion of ease, and like a flame, eventually they engulf the entirety of the work. Tremolos focusing on the fourth and fifth fingers in both the left and right hands played quietly and loudly demand a degree of excellence requiring large amounts of preparation, both in practicing this piece but also in similar works from the period (Chopin's Étude in A Minor Op. 10, No. 2 immediately come to mind, as do the trilling passages of Beethoven's last piano sonatas). This need for subtle dexterity along with the ability to use the wrist in chordal passages constitute standard technical devices pushed further by their degree of preparation. These notes cannot be simply banged out, so to speak, and require a certain conviction and delicacy endemic to Russian piano playing—a rounded, resonant sound, carefully controlled by the tips of the fingers with complete relaxation of the arms. Any tension in the arms and shoulders will make this ineffective. Subtle changes to these difficulties make this especially trying. Of course, a seasoned pianist will have had the regular performances on the concert stage to work out these aspects of the body and any nerves that come along with them. All of this, nonetheless, requires a certain kind of immersion in the musical work that allows the “compositional arc” to move seamlessly. A complete and utter concentration is crucial—in many ways, this is that “struggle between life and death,” that sounds so silly, but contextually will make more sense. *Vers la flamme*, like

what Rimsky-Korsakov noticed about most works by Scriabin, features impeccable voice leading. But it is the defamiliarized harmonies and melodies of what is an otherwise very conventional pianistic composition that makes the performance very difficult with regard to concentration. This fact is one of the reasons why for so many young pianists, even today, the late sonatas are so complicated and difficult. The intensely familiar is so heavily obscured and defamiliarized that it seems almost unintelligible. There is a difference here when compared with Schoenberg's serialism, but especially other more deliberately "atonal" composers. Scriabin's pianistic demands are at the highest caliber, maintaining compositional innovation similar to Rachmaninoff's own piano writing. His late piano style in particular is densely colorful and polyphonic specifically in a *romantic* vein, still very similar to Chopin's compositional writing, just far more chromatic. A look at Scriabin's entire *oeuvre* shows a style, originally criticized for sounding too much like Chopin, eventually evolve into this more defamiliarized, abstracted style. He does not get there arbitrarily. Scriabin's emphasis on octatonic and whole tone colorations, mixed with a flurry of other chromatic collections reminiscent of an incredibly ripened Wagnerian score, further creates a world slightly recognizable but uncomfortably easy to get lost in. For a pianist who understands the direction of lines within the polyphony, shaping and coloring them with varying finger weight and gestures becomes confusing. This is especially pronounced in Sonatas No. 7 and 10. For *Vers la flamme*, difficulty is primarily centered on the act of building tension while engaging in the acrobatics of crossing hands and controlling sound production. This struggle of concentration results in a meditation beyond the normal conventions. In Horowitz's performance, this tension between struggle and mastery ultimately defines the performer's position between human and super-human. Horowitz's ability to rhetorically make the music speak in a way that evokes this tension is what makes his

performance stand out. It is a form of pianistic individuation in the same vein as spoken by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche before. In this sense, the virtuosity—minus Horowitz’s joking around—places the pianist above mere musicianly action. The only level of description we may be left with is veneration, being unable as we may to replicate this performance in that manner ourselves. This individuation, and subsequent transcendence, is what Vyacheslav Ivanov couches in terms of transcending the petty “I”.¹⁰⁸ It is here that the subjective moves to the universal. Of course, all of this is dependent upon being involved in or acculturated to this practice of music reception or performance and mode of thought.¹⁰⁹

Scriabin certainly saw himself in this fashion. The Wagnerian element in his music can be couched, then, within the confines of Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian dialectic.¹¹⁰ For musicians such as Horowitz, the synthesis of these two is what makes the actual performance happen. The Apollonian side of Horowitz’s performance deals strictly with virtuosity from the point of view of mastery of content and technique. The preparation that has taken place, both in the interval of time learning *Vers la flamme* and in the whole of his life as a pianist, create a solid foundation for the unconscious mode of performance through a conscious learning process. The acts of these two modes of preparation create an intuition so sturdy that performance can only be disturbed by the pianist’s own conscious interruption. The Apollonian element of performance is the most consistently alluded to when understanding virtuosity because its work is much more easily observable. The Dionysian side of performance is harder to pin down. It is the element of performance happening within the act itself. The synthesis of these two is what makes a

¹⁰⁸ Taruskin, 320.

¹⁰⁹ What is dangerous about this sort of veneration in our day, of course, is when it bleeds outside of the confines of its own cultural practice and infects other perspectives what counts as acceptable forms of performance. A performer’s mastery and charisma can be a double-edged sword. Granted, this is what it seems to mean to be superhuman...

¹¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*

performance of this sort contain the kind of charisma that I talked about above. Again, with the Dionysian element, intuition is crucial, but here it is what engages directly with embodiment of the performance itself. In this sense, this is what makes the act of performance function like a ritual. The performer is able to become lost in the music at the moment of performance. This is the very thing that makes music “drastic,” if we are to use Carolyn Abbate and Vladimir Jankélévitch’s observation of music in real time.¹¹¹ Mastery of the Dionysian element of performance involves a kind of immersion into what makes it seem humanly out of the ordinary—it is a kind of meditation. By far the most difficult part of being a pianist is mastering this side of shaping intuitive performance. An overwhelming confidence in the self and the actions of the musico-rhetorical process are necessary for this to succeed without the body rebelling against previously prepared forms of technical execution. This kind of individuation, though, also draws on all other intuitive and unconscious elements about the content of the music not directly spoken of. This is what makes every different performance seem new and fresh even if the music has been performed before. While the use of these terms, Apollonian and Dionysian, seems exaggerated when considering the mythos of pianistic, let alone classical performance, they provide an aura necessary for this type of intuitive practice. Besides citing Russian Symbolist interpretation of Nietzsche’s definitions in the *Birth of Tragedy*, it is easy to find the tradition in this sort of description in the work of such a revered pedagogue as the Soviet pianist Heinrich Neuhaus (who inherits these ideals from Scriabin’s generation) in his *Art of Piano Playing*.¹¹² Modesty aside, there is no lack of confidence in barreling towards the fiery passions

¹¹¹ Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Spring, 2004).

¹¹² Neuhaus uses pedagogic approach that he says must use imagination. His example is very similar to the synaesthetic process I explain in the previous chapter. In it, he describes the opening gesture of the second movement of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata as opening like a flower; but he explains it in the following manner: “Please remember that I never ‘illustrate’ music, i.e. in the case in point I do not say that the music represents the flower; I say that it can create the spiritual and visual impression given by a flower, it can symbolize it, and call

of music performance where there is no fear of incineration. This reflects a sincere, quixotic ideal of romanticism. From this place comes a metamorphosis of the real and the symbol through individuation, where mere laughter of discomfort transforms into a kind of Nietzschean laughter: where the artist, for a brief moment, *becomes Zarathustra*, having descended the mountain (that high place of hermitage) and among the people, laughs—not out of sarcasm but out of self-confident superiority.¹¹³ The performer’s belief in being high above in their ability—as *Übermensch*—is the crucial part of Scriabin’s musical practice. I don’t think this is a stretch of the imagination; on the contrary, it is an attempt to approach the condition of music by transcending imagination.

If we are to add the Wagnerian metaphor, with its philosophical ramifications of Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian dialectic, back to our symbolic discussion of *Vers la flamme*, there is a direct correlation between this fire and the Magic fire of *Die Walküre*. The pronounced downward semitone gesture that comes part way through the beginning, mentioned in my description of the piece, is no longer an empty two-note cell, but is now a *leitmotif*, the same one that shows up in the Magic Fire scene that concludes Wagner’s opera. The *leitmotif* is surrounded by the persistent chromaticism and dissonance already established. While Scriabin was particularly critical of Wagner’s operatic performances, the synthesis of the arts within the confines of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, along with myth and mysticism made the composer’s work an ideal precursor to his own project.¹¹⁴ Leonid Sabaneyev described Scriabin’s interest specifically in Wagner’s Magic Fire Scene at the end of *Die Walküre* as a significant source of

forth in imagination the image of a flower.” Heinrich Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, trans. K.A. Leibovitch (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973).

¹¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1978).

¹¹⁴ This idea also appears in Don Louis Wetzel, “Alexander Scriabin in Russian Musicology and its Background in Russian Intellectual History” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Southern California, 2009), 138

inspiration, specifically to the composer's composition *Prometheus*.¹¹⁵

Along with knowing Wagner's score intimately, Scriabin undoubtedly played the popular transcription, mentioned previously, by Belgian pianist Louis Brassin. This transcription not only shows up in the repertoire of Russian pianists at this time, but Scriabin's own teacher, Safonov, was Brassin's student and likely assigned the work to his own pupils.¹¹⁶ For a pianist, this transcription places a part of a powerful and magical moment of the Wagnerian tetralogy within a virtuosic performance much in the same vein as a Liszt operatic transcription, showcasing a high degree of technical prowess. This scene, as transcription, functions as a fragment inciting the imagination towards the staged opera, and in turn, the world the Wagnerian myth inhabits. In the primary section of the transcription itself, the pianist must employ an incredibly difficult usage of sixth, fifth, and octave intervals that require a nimble dexterity in the right hand, while playing the prominent downward **m2** motive. When performed correctly, the music not only sparkles in tone, but the right hand itself moves, as well, in a quick semi-blurred gesture that resembles a sort of synaesthetic interaction with the sounds produced—sort of like sparks flying on the piano keys themselves.

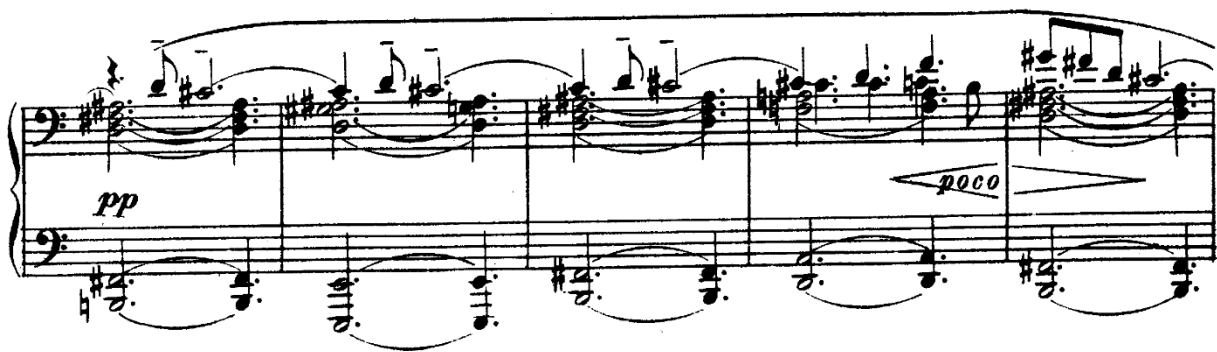


Figure 2.1. Alexander Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72—measures 27-31.

¹¹⁵ Leonid Sabaneev, *Scriabin* (Moscow: Skorpion, 1916), 252-53. Also paraphrased in Wetzel, 138.

¹¹⁶ Both Rachmaninoff and Medtner, classmates of Scriabin, had this in their repertoire. Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Brookfield, Vermont: Gower, 1990), 438 and Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music*, 7. Pianist Josef Hofmann also would have had this in his repertoire.

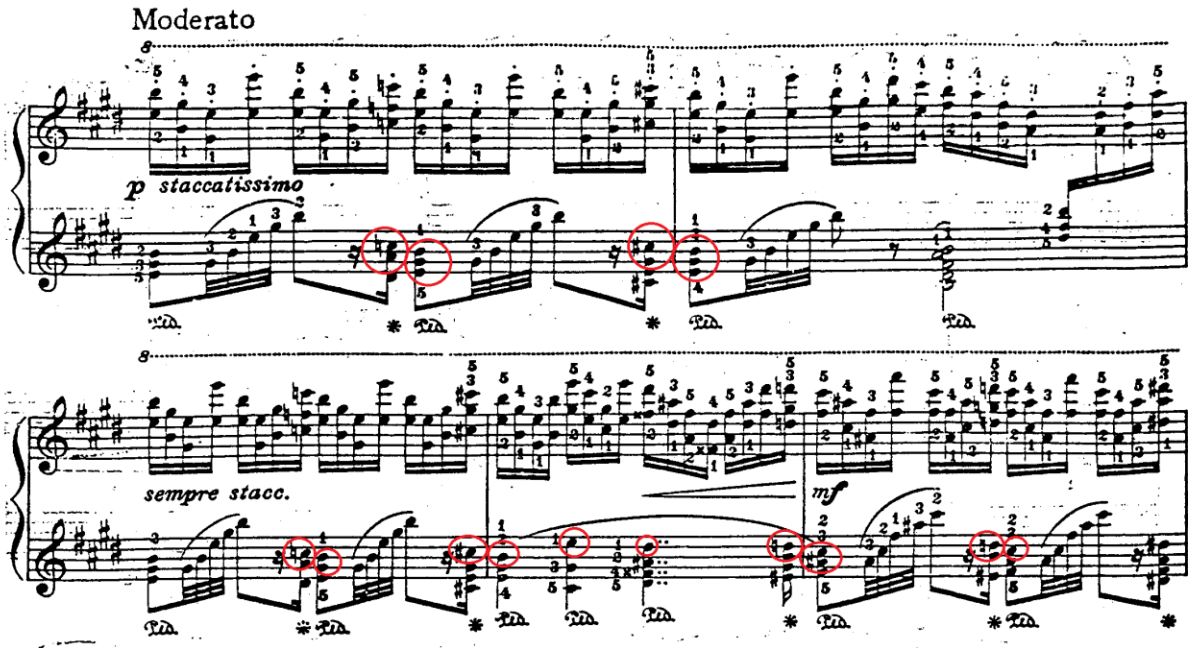


Figure 2.2. Richard Wagner, “Magic Fire Scene” from *Die Walküre*, arranged by Louis Brassin.

These gestural elements are supremely important to understanding symbolically how *Vers la flamme* functions as incantation of a priestly theurgic nature. They also show the previously mentioned influence of technical prowess Scriabin developed on his own and within Safonov’s studio as they pertain to musical content. In the beginning of *Vers la flamme*, the upward semitone motive appears twice in the pickup and first two measures as fragment, it is followed by its completion in that melody I characterized as ring-like or serpentine. From a basic standpoint, it is a circular motive with its melody starting at D, moving upwards, then tracing back down below D returning back.

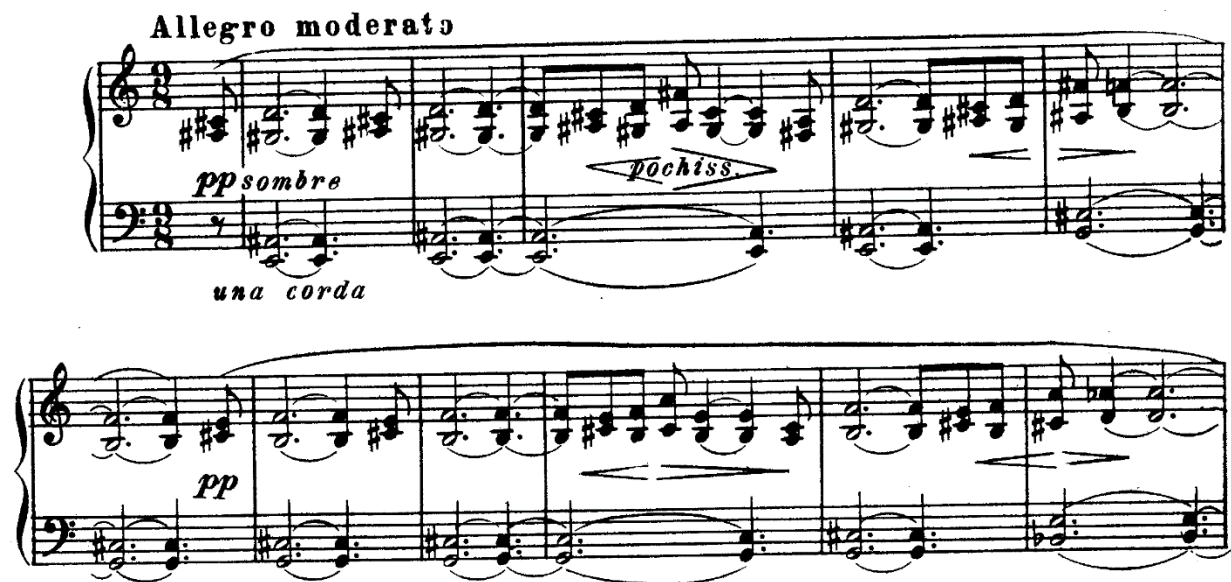


Figure 2.3. Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72—opening 11 measures.

Gesturally, the same shape appears in the fingering within the hands, which maintain a sound, quiet posture. The middle fingers leads upward and then playing outward, only to return to the middle. The second finger and the thumb move outward similarly, but in a downward direction on the keyboard. The opening and closing of the hand retains the circularity. Still, another circular image appears in the movement of the hand itself. While maintaining a relaxed position, the hand must navigate between black and white keys; the wrist and hand, both in their natural position, trace a small circle counterclockwise in gesture. Without any exaggeration, the compositional writing naturally draws a circular shape in the hand's movement.

The symbolic ramifications become much clearer. The semitone motive, by virtue of its connection to the character Loge and the Wagnerian association of fire and chromaticism, represents the flame. The circular motion of the hand and the drawing of its shape can thus be seen as the symbol of eternity brought forth by the circle, which starts at one point and returns back to the same place only to return down the same path again and again. This is especially pronounced in the passages that repeat this motive. There is a Wagnerian reference here to the

Ring and to Fate, but in Scriabin's iteration, the symbolism of harmonic instability does not necessarily preclude corruption. Here, the shape of the circle as eternal is in direct association with the imagery, matching closely to my previously mentioned, subjective ekphrasis: it evokes ouroboros, the self-consuming dragon, and alchemical symbol. Like the Magic Fire Scene, the semitone in the opening is played twice and then is followed by a rising melodic figure that returns downward. The entire melody in the Wagner proceeds to play again but is moved up in register. This same ascent happens in measure 7 of *Vers la Flamme*. Scriabin's allusion to Wagner, from an entirely melodic standpoint, is extremely subtle, as mentioned before, but from a standpoint of the piece itself, the raising of pitch indicates a slow increase of tension, a sort of synaesthetic raising of temperature.

Besides the Wagnerian allusion to magic, it is significant to flesh out the more superficial peculiarities regarding the harmony. As we remember, it is the notion of harmonic construction, and the general misconception of Scriabin's craft, that plays an important role in the controversial issue of Scriabin's canonization as precursor to atonality. The particularity here is in regard to what the harmony is and what it is doing. There is an absence of consonant, stable harmonies, which is true for the rest of the piece as well. The harmony simply meanders around unresolved chords, giving it its distinctive unsettled feeling. However, as with Schoenberg, this is not arbitrary. The chromaticism is, again, the symbolic referent to the Wagnerian *leitmotif* of Magic Fire and Loge—with that semitone motive consisting of a minor second, as just one tiny cell of chromaticism that permeates this piece. This trope not only makes an appearance in Wagner, but many other facets of mainstream compositional practices, for example Franz Liszt's extremely difficult transcendental étude *Feux Follets*, a depiction of phosphorescent flames over a swamp that Liszt illustrates by alternating major and minor seconds played on 32nd notes.

Along with chromaticism's ability to conjure up the image of a fire, the general appearance of octatonic and quartal harmonies are where the connection to images of magic and mysticism come into play. The instability of octatonic harmonies, which are most apparent in measures 41 through 74, do not merely suggest magic, but invoke it from historical allusion. This trope comes from Russian music beginning with Glinka's *Ruslan i Liudmilla* and eventually finds its way into works of Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov.¹¹⁷ The quartal harmonies, which first appear in measure 96 in the right hand, sound unusual and mysterious upon arrival.

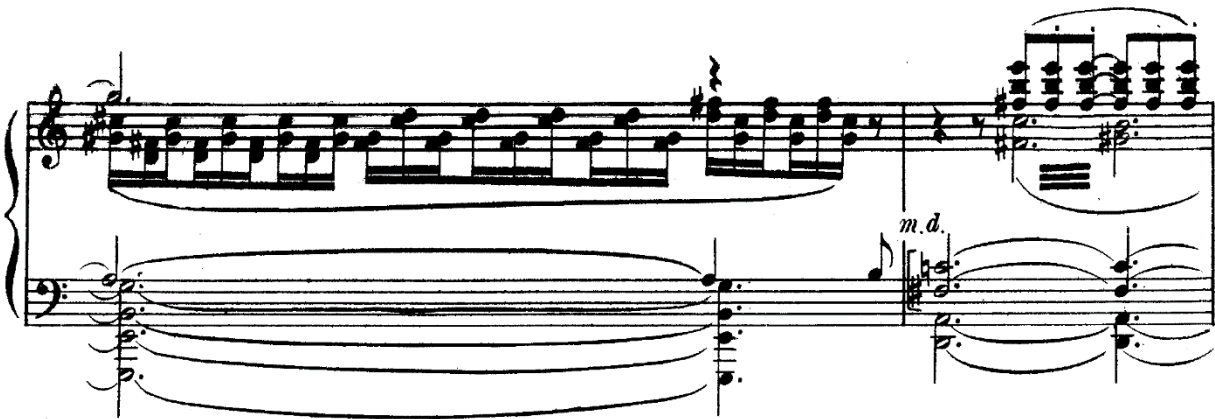


Figure 2.4. Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72—measure 96.

There is a familiarity to the stacked nature of these chords, lending a similar feeling to a triad, but it is the intervallic spacing and the symmetry of perfect intervals that leaves an ambiguous impression. This first-time entrance highlights these quartal chords as a significant harbinger or call, unusual in sound. Placed in fanfare-like style, like a transcription of trumpet or horn, evokes what could be a biblical reference to the Book of Revelations. The chord announces that there is more to come (as in Revelations, the coming of rapturous transformation). The chords on the piano does not have the timbral advantages of a trumpet or horn, but Scriabin compensates for this by placing them prominently in the top register. Perfect intervals already indicate sounds

¹¹⁷ See Richard Taruskin, "Chernomor to Kaschei: Harmonic Sorcery; Or, Stravinsky's 'Angle,'" *Journal of American Musicological Society*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), 72-142.

performed by brass instruments using the overtone series. This topical construction is key because it allows for a certain degree of familiarity to become defamiliarized. This, plus the expectation of a triad instead of symmetrical fourths (where the interval is expanded), creates the impression of something new bursting out of an already phenomenally codified world. This is central to what makes Scriabin so difficult to perform—such defamiliarization, while perfectly logical pianistically, comes forth as stylistic familiar, but extends beyond a recognizable sense of musical meaning. This is what makes this moment mystical and carries the listener into a place where it might be possible to conjure the metaphysical. The harmony's manifestation towards the end of the piece highlights the same tensions also being built out of other conventional practices.¹¹⁸ The octatonic and chromatic harmonies preceding all of this change irresolutely as they appear and disappear, bringing more tension with unusual sound until the quartal harmonies erupt. But these eruptions of quartal harmonies happen without extra emphasis from dynamics—this is a sort of paradox, since they erupt musically but simply emerge sonically. Underneath them, an accompanimental gesture of a tremolo playing alternating tritones and minor thirds quivers in the left hand. These tremors or fluttering intervallic flames characterize and add an unsettling, almost demonic, element to the moment. On top of this, the left hand is required to trill the fourth and fifth fingers while the thumb and second finger trill above. On the one hand, this is quite difficult to play; on the other it is again reminiscent of Liszt's *Feux Follets*, where the weaker fourth and fifth fingers are rapidly challenged in a similar manner. In Liszt's piece, the quiet, yet deceptively hard technique reflects its title, *Will-o-the-wisp*. But the image of the flashing phosphorescent light that leads a journeyman astray inhabits a different symbol. Here, in

¹¹⁸ As we know, this is why the work of Heinrich Schenker becomes such a fixation in Europe. See Joseph Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out," *Critical Inquiry* 7/2 (Winter, 1980): 311-331.

Vers la flamme, the illuminating light from the flame characterized by the left hand tremolo leads towards mystery in trustworthy manner.



Figure 2.5. Franz Liszt, *Feux follets*—measures 18-20.

Supporting all of this is the unsettling feeling of Scriabin's unresolved harmonic constructions, already present in the suspended French sixth in the very first measure, a tonal instability instilling desire and almost demanding to resolve—without being given resolution. It works differently from the deviations outside tonality seen in a work like Debussy's *Prelude l'après-midi d'un faun*, where unresolved chords become the basic color and source of stability. *Vers la Flamme* carries a much stronger and closer connection to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* with respect to transcendental impetus. Debussy's harmonies can remain in a dream whereas Scriabin's must transform reality. In Wagner, of course, the respelling of a half-diminished chord constantly leaves the piece far from resolving on a cadence. The resultant effect of desire in *Tristan* brought about a work where tonal expectation brings constant tension that must release in the end. *Vers la Flamme* unfolds like this but the resolution reaches beyond the end of the piece itself. The form of the entire piece can be described as simply growing from the opening melodic gesture while the growth mimics what can be understood as a flame getting larger (or nearer). The notes and rhythms in the beginning are sparsely presented, but increase as it moves forward. At measures 41, 77, and 97, clear junctures can be seen where those changes occur. At these points the music speeds up and the notes are placed farther apart. That tension continues to build, past those quartal harmonies, until finally *Vers la flamme* explodes forward in the last four

measures, which demand the widest and most resonant sound from the pianist, and the full expanse of the keyboard.



Figure 2.6. Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72—final bars.

It is this tension that is crucial in depicting the image of a continually consuming flame rather than fire that simply burns out. What is also significant about the final chord is that it isn't a triad, but rather just an octave E in the lowest part of the bass and a C-sharp above. The effect of the building chromatic tension and the incessant quartal harmonies gives this simple minor third a voluminous feeling of resolution, as if more harmonies and overtones and sounds are present or that more will come forth.

From a basic standpoint, the action of the entire piece seems rather simple. It depicts a growing flame by simply making the music grow through harmonic tension. The motivic development of that semitone cell—a fragment of the larger circular melody—is crucial as well. This ubiquitous motive steadily progresses, ascending to the next pitch, acting as a leading tone but never going anywhere beyond two notes. As for the circular motive, after hearing it in the beginning, one expects it to come out from the semitone motive every time it is presented. Scriabin, however, takes care to present it this way only at specific times. After appearing twice in the beginning, the circular motive disappears until measure 77. This measure is when the first instance of alternating sixteenth notes in clustered, dissonant seconds are played, building the

tension of the fire. The circular motive appears again only with musical representations of burning flame and magic. Here, it is played in the same register with the exact same notes as in the beginning, but this time proceeds to repeats itself. The repetition builds from what seems like a never-ending loop.

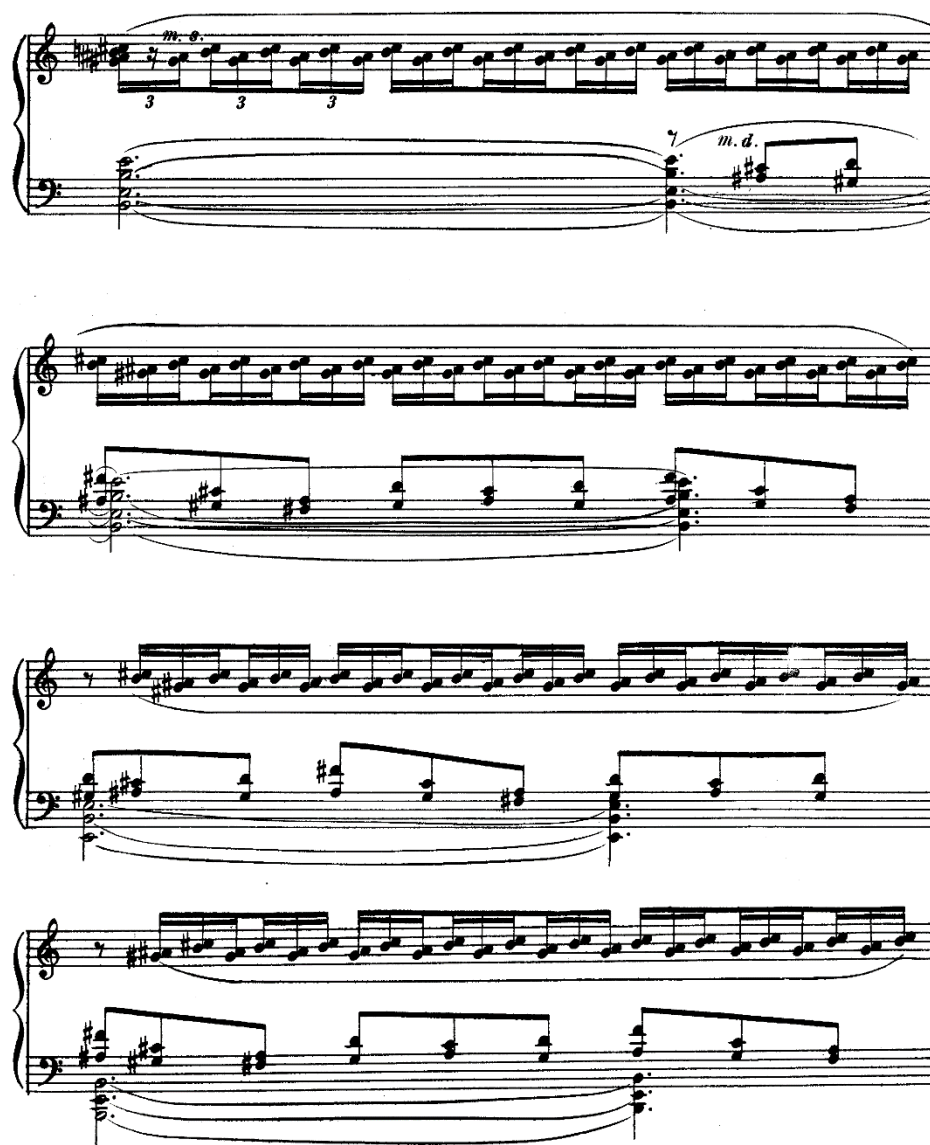


Figure 2.7. Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72—measures 77-80.

This incessancy creates the image of eternity through its constant tracing of a circle. As mentioned above, this circular image is also produced by the gesture of the hand, which traces a circle in its movement around the keyboard. The effect of this, from the pianist's viewpoint,

looks like the gesticulation of a magician standing in front of a fire and casting a spell by drawing the symbol of the circle in the air. At this point, the music is thickened by the appearance of many symbols. As mentioned above, the circle gesture is also symbolic of ouroboros, and as the dragon that eats its own tale, it represents eternal life. In codifying its purpose, Carl Jung describes ouroboros specifically as an archetype of alchemy.¹¹⁹ The symbol of ouroboros with its relation to the occult makes the alchemical properties of the flame much more obvious. Other Russian Symbolists took it upon themselves to explore a plethora of occult practices, including Kabbalah and Rosicrucianism, and they spent much time and effort trying to find some semblance of meaning in magic and alchemy. A prime example of this from a novelistic stand point comes from occult practices seen in Bryusov's novel *The Fiery Angel*, which clearly exhibits Symbolist knowledge of these contents within Symbolist prose. In studying magic, the importance of alchemy remains clear, but it is the symbols alchemy possesses that lend the occult its potency. Of course, alchemy in general deals with extracting gold from other metals. This concept of extraction has direct association with the means by which one accesses the metaphysical, and can be seen as an obvious symbol of reaching the noumenal. The practice of alchemy is also related to the philosopher's stone, sought after by many alchemists and capable of yielding eternal life. Here, the circular motive as a symbol is an amalgamation of many of these things at once. The motive appears by means of the flame depicted in the music, which in turn calls to mind ouroboros, alchemy, the philosopher's stone,

¹¹⁹ Carl Gustav Jung, *Dreams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 200.

On a side note related to this form of symbolism: it is important to note that one of Jung's patients and friends was Emil Medtner, someone in regular contact with Scriabin. He was the brother of Nikolai Medtner; he was also the head of a Symbolist publishing house called *Musaget*, and had a major influence on instilling German ideals into Russian Symbolism in general. Medtner suffered from *dementia praecox*, which he attributed to his constant nightmares, many of which featured the image of Ouroboros. Medtner had mentioned the importance of this image to Symbolist writer Andrei Bely and also confided to Jung about such dreams. Magnus Ljunggren, *The Russian Mephisto. The Study of the Life and Work of Emilii Medtner* (Stockholm: GOTAB, 1994).

and many other things, thereby becoming the metaphysical manifestation of eternity. After its appearance and repetition in measure 77, the circular motive does not appear again until 108. Prior to this, the results of the circular motive brings forth the mystic motive of the quartal harmony seen in measure 97.

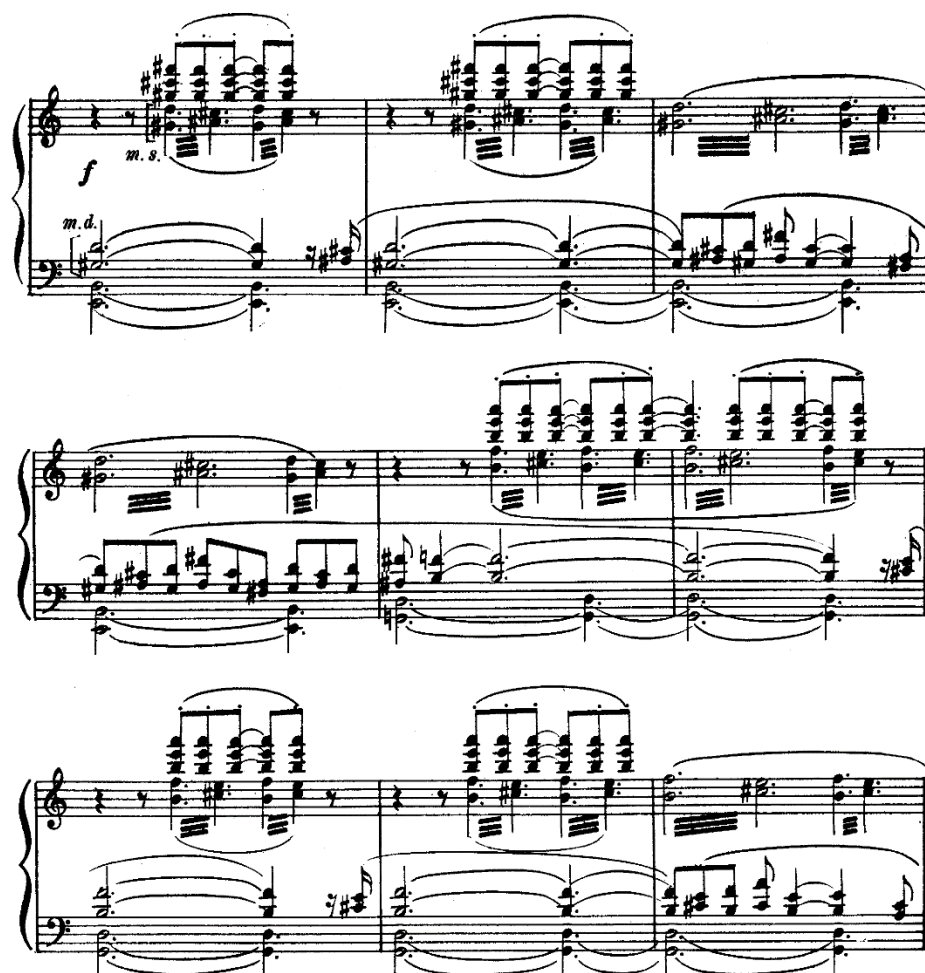


Figure 2.8. Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72—measures 107-115.

This mystic motive, with its properties of a defamiliarized horn call, is derived from Scriabin's own idea of the mystic chord built on fourths, which represents the eternal mystery itself being conjured up. It is important to note that this mystic chord isn't presented entirely as Scriabin had in his other examples of it. By presenting only a portion of it, the harmony still remains a fragment for the imagination and something of a mystery. This is, after all, still a prelude and a

form of preparation. Also, the rhythmic instability of the mystic motive, which undulates with its syncopations, gives a sense of uncertainty. The reappearance of the circular motive occurring in measure 108 is juxtaposed with the mystic motive, which is constantly building upward. With this, the circular motive moves up in pitch in measure 114, building along with the mystic motive. From this point onward, as expected, the flame continues to get larger and larger. The piece finally explodes in measure 133 with an incessant repetition of the mystic motive and climbing sustained notes held in the bass. These notes imply, for once, a deceptively consonant sound, which gives a nod towards the mystic chord in the quartal harmony of measure 135. The result of the ending is the eventual conjuring of a metaphysical power resulting from symbols and spells within the flame depicted throughout the piece. This metaphysical power that is supposed to be derived entirely from the music is what Scriabin had wished to evoke.

The difficulty of understanding Scriabin's music becomes more than apparent when analyzed carefully. In my analysis above, I found it necessary to continue returning and restarting from the beginning. This is the difficulty of trying to reimagine and recapture a moment of transcendence evoked by a piece of music. I liken this to be akin to trying to light a match but having the flame constantly extinguish—the alchemical flame remains far more elusive and difficult to light. The issue at hand is the matter of its esoteric nature as related to Symbolism, which ultimately remains beyond the grasp of a novice. As I have continually reiterated, *Vers la Flamme* is not simply a programmatic depiction of a flame. Much like the written poetry of Symbolists, *Vers la Flamme* was composed with more than just the intention of creating an image, but also evoking an entire world view and ultimately drawing forth the noumenal through invocation. This evocation and invocation of a worldview was the prototype for what was supposed to come in *Mysterium*, where the art and metaphysical world were to

collide. Scriabin saw himself as a sort of Promethean figure, who would bring the world to the apocalypse through a transcendental apotheosis. This can best be described in Scriabin's own words in the following excerpt from a draft of the libretto to *Mysterium*:

When my star ignites as fire
And magical light enfolds the earth,
Then my flame will be reflected in people's hearts
And the world will grasp its calling.¹²⁰

Prometheus and fire were readily accessible images in preparation for Scriabin's apocalyptic aspirations. *Vers la Flamme* and the Symphonic poem *Prometheus* exhibit the closest connection to what Scriabin wished to enact. The flame in *Vers la Flamme* is supposed to be a symbol of what he intended to draw forth. Without any of this symbolic imagery through hermeneutic analysis, *Vers la Flamme*, remains a mystery to pianists and audiences alike who are unfamiliar with the context and the images conjured up by the piece's peculiar construction and unusual harmonies.

* * *

Of course, I cannot help but try to ignite this flame again and begin once more. The metaphor of Magic Fire digs deeper still in relation to *Vers la flamme*. The intertextual connection with Brassin's Magic Fire Scene can easily show how *Vers la flamme* functions as a transcription—or prelude—to something much larger and greater. This has a greater cultural resonance within the context of Russian orthodoxy at the turn of the century. In the Wagnerian story, Brunnhilde is surrounded by the Magic Fire and Siegfried—the hero—is the only one who is able to cross this fire. Read within a Symbolist context, Siegfried, here, is symbolically the super-human trying to reach Brunnhilde, the symbol for the “eternal” feminine. This falls

¹²⁰ Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*, 186.

squarely in line with Russian Symbolism's especial interest in Vladimir Solovyov's concept of the Divine Sophia. The symbol of Sophia in this context represents the return of Christ in the feminine form of wisdom.¹²¹ Not only does this place Scriabin within Symbolism's interest in Gnosticism, but also firmly places the composer's intention within Russian Orthodoxy. Solovyov, whom the upstart Scriabin scoffed at, was nonetheless influential on the majority of the spiritual age before 1917. In general, Scriabin's intentions, however, do not diminish the affordances of his music and the connection his listeners in the period would have to these concepts.

The Imagined Universal

It is not hard to consider Scriabin's place as charismatic performer juxtaposed with Wagnerian mythos having further symbolic resonance with an already loaded cultural backdrop in Russia before the revolution.¹²² In many ways, Scriabin's place as Russian and Orthodox seems to confine him within a specific context. But Solovyov's concept of Sophia already makes claims to the universal. The coming of Sophia, the return of Christ as the Holy Ghost, is also directly correlated within the universal as related to Russia. In Solovyov's conception, the Russian people, or *narod*, altogether represented the embodiment of this and would be savior of the entire world.¹²³ The prophecy of Russia's divine prospect already heightens the importance of revolutionary incitement and the need for spiritual rebirth so prominent within the intellectual and artistic discourse. As we have already seen with the previous chapter on Rachmaninoff, these

¹²¹ Judith Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) and Samuel Cioran, *Vladimir Solov'ev and the Knighthood of the Divine Sophia* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977).

¹²² This remains a somewhat contentious issue when considering the relationship between Boris de Scholezer and Scriabin's other philosopher confidante, Leonid Sabaneyev. The latter asserted Scriabin was not a revolutionary whereas the former asserts: "Scriabin believed in the disparate nature of the historical process, a view typical of his revolutionary state of mind..." Sabaneyev, Scriabin, 66. Schloezer, 96. Also for a fuller discussion see Wetzel, 137.

¹²³ Ibid. Also see Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Godmanhood*, trans. Peter Zouboff (London: Dobson, 1948).

symbolic metaphors are themes that find their way into programs. Just as the coming of the divine feminine shows up in multiple forms in both symbolist poetry—the desired and distant lover, the approaching wind—these symbols are made use of here specifically as musical *leitmotifs* as well.

But Scriabin takes care to obscure many of his leitmotifs. The two-note semitone motive, can simply remain that—just two notes. Yet it is possible to draw a connection based on previously known programmatic implications brought forth by unconscious imagination. The connection to make between *Vers la flamme* and the Magic Fire Scene soon becomes clear. But the point is that this is supposed to remain intuitive and unconscious. But without any knowledge of such a shape, the familiar gesture will simply resonate without inhabiting any meaning. In this sense, the fragmented melody *and* the fragmented allusion reach further than direct representations that force you to think consciously. This is the familiar hypothesis Schopenhauer propagates about music and its ability to represent the will.

This practice is already embedded in the performance culture itself. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and their philosophical ideals are not even necessary to show the mechanics of how pianist, composer, musician, or listener may already acquire abstract knowledge through an unconscious process of meaning and representation. A pianist learns a lot of different repertoire and is constantly exposed to music, as are many people who may be involved contextually in that period. My discussion of Brahms in the Rachmaninoff chapter is apt here.

Scriabin, in general, does his best to defamiliarize the most obvious gestures. He hides them, however, in plain and obvious sight, even visually in the score. While harmony plays the biggest role in this process of defamiliarization, its fetishization in techno-musicological analysis requires us briefly to decentralize its obvious significance to highlight other important elements

happening. Scriabin's process was not only interdisciplinary but multi-faceted in its technical approach. *Leitmotif*, especially here, seems to be the most obvious place to start with respect to Symbolism and the symbol's role. Again, I described the first two ascending notes of *Vers la flamme* as a fragment of a larger melody; in the most basic sense—the most abstract and formal—it is simply two notes, a semitone. For those who do not wish to look beyond that, it can remain that. But there are different ways to look at these two notes encapsulating the promiscuity of the “symbol” in music. The first is the one that I already described: it is a part of that serpentine melody that follows it—the notes slither their way around the keyboard as they emerge, but are even written in a way where they wrap around a central point. The second is that it is the inversion of the *leitmotif* that shows up in Wagner's Magic Fire scene and that it will start inverted to remain hidden, but will reveal its true nature by turning upside down. A change of perspective, it seems, is one way to see a fragment of hidden truth. Related to this are descriptions of these gestures noted by Martin Cooper as *zovi* (summons) or *prigovori* (spells).¹²⁴ Another possibility comes from topic theory: it is a fanfare, from a trumpet or horn. This can be the call to arms in revolution, a call in the hunt, or the strange horn in the Book of Revelations calling for the end of the world. Scriabin will make this clearer to the performer in directions such as “like a fanfare,” written in French.

¹²⁴ See Martin Cooper, “Alexander Skriabin and the Russian Renaissance,” *Slavonic and Western Music: Essays for Gerald Abraham*, ed. Malcolm H. Brown and R. John Wiley (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985). But for more detail see Susanna Garcia, “Scriabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype in the Late Piano Sonatas,” *19th-Century Music* 23/3 (Spring, 2000): 277, and Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 316.



Figure 2.9. Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72—measure 81.

The rhythmic shape of this gesture is orchestrated specifically by Scriabin with trumpet in his other works such as the third symphony, *Poem of Ecstasy*, and *Prometheus*. Then there is the ascending direction of the two notes. From tonal speech, this ascending pitch mimics the nature of a question in language.¹²⁵ The beginning is already mysterious, but to sound in tones the vocal quality of an asked question adds more to this. It can be a specific question (what? or why?) or symbolically represent a question. The symbolic unraveling is endless. But I think it is worth mentioning also the less obvious, but familiar, possibility.

Here is where musical gestures become important. The pronounced octatonic harmony present in this music from beginning to end signifies magic, but it is coupled with seemingly innocuous motives that can easily be revealed as much more. That two-note semitone motive, played twice in the beginning, can be characterized as an obstructed, chromatic fragment of the beginning of the Russian orthodox chant *Christ is Risen*. The stepwise motion already presents this in chant style. And the theme of this melody not only places this piece in the Russian Orthodox context, it connects well with the other symbols that evoke revolution, change, resurrection, *et cetera*.

¹²⁵ Granted, this notion would not apply to all languages and certainly Russian itself varies.



Figure 2.10. Rachmaninoff, Suite No. 1, fourth movement—Quotation of “Christ is Risen.”

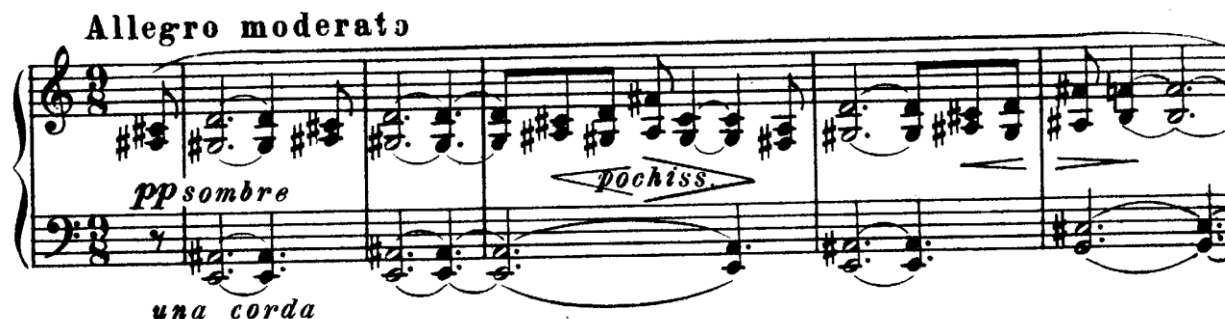


Figure 2.11. Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72—opening five measures.

But if this is *Christ is Risen*, the harmony that surrounds it is unusually sinister. And how the fragment completes itself is nothing like the chant melody. But this is sort of the point, as a symbol, this fragment cannot be just this one thing; instead it must be a part of a larger whole while also possibly being others. Not only the part of the larger melody, but a metaphysical part of a melody that lies beyond the text and sound of this music, so much so that it simply calls out but dissolves into something else. In this way comes a reconciliation of differing parts, what sounds sinister in a symbol that is holy—between carnal and spiritual, good and evil. The fragment then is, as Mephistopheles says when explaining himself in Part I of Goethe’s *Faust*: *Ein Teil von jener Kraft, Die stets das Böse will und stets das gute schafft* (Part of that force which would do evil evermore, and yet creates the good).¹²⁶

The Easter hymn implies a return and resurrection of Christ (a symbol potently associated

¹²⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 159.

with the apocalypse) and the magic fire scene brings the coming of Siegfried, emboldened with love, penetrating the ring of fire surrounding Brünnhilde, which brings about the twilight of the gods. The two symbols combined together further implicate that other layer of symbolic meaning—Solovyov’s prophetic poetry describing the coming of the Divine Sophia—that is, the return of Christ in the form of the eternal feminine. This in turn relates all those images at once—magic fire and Brünnhilde—to the coming of the “woman clothed in the sun” in the Book of Revelations signaling the return of Christ.

Wagner’s own use of leitmotifs conjures symbolic layers similar to what I am describing in Scriabin. For instance, to go further, the ominous serpentine melody contains hidden in it a small motive—C#-A#-D—that Scriabin repeatedly uses in other works.



Figure 2.12. Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72—opening five measures with hidden motive circled.



Figure 2.13. Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72—measures 79-80 with hidden motive circled.

This three-note motive, embedded carefully in this melody, shows up in the 7th Sonata, the 10th Sonata, and other miniature pieces.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 7. The first system is marked "avec une cèleste volupté" and "p". A red circle highlights a three-note motive in the right hand. The second system is marked "très pur, avec une profonde douceur" and "pp".

Figure 2.14. Scriabin, Piano Sonata No. 7—measures 29-43, second theme with hidden motive circled.

The image shows three systems of musical notation for Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 10. The first system has dynamics "f" and "p" with "cresc." markings. The second system has dynamics "p" and "f" with "cresc." markings. The third system has dynamic "p". Red circles highlight the hidden motive in the right hand across the second and third systems.

Figure 2.15. Scriabin, Piano Sonata No. 10—measures 76-87, with hidden motive circled.

Figure 2.16. Scriabin, Piano Sonata No. 10—measures 220-221, with hidden motive circled at climactic moment.

This is not simply a random collection of notes. We can soon discover that this is the very prominent motive that opens *Prometheus*.

PROMETHEUS

The Poem of Fire

Alexander Scriabin, Op. 60
1872–1915

The musical score for Alexander Scriabin's *Prometheus, Op. 60* is shown, featuring the opening 14 measures. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves for each instrument. The tempo markings are *Lento, Brumeux, m. m., 60*, *più lento*, *a tempo*, and *avec mystere*. A red circle highlights a specific motive in the 8th measure of the 8 Corni in F part, with the instruction *con sord. calme, recueilli* written above it.

Figure 2.17. Scriabin, *Prometheus*, Op. 60—opening 14 measures with motive circled.

And still more light shines as the fire lit reveals more from this motive. Isolated, it sounds surprisingly familiar. Musically speaking, its intervallic construction sounds like a question, one that needs resolution with an answer—it is an antecedent phrase in need of a consequent. Just gesturally, such a motive connotes the basic feeling Scriabin may project towards the universe. Yet there is more symbolically. These three notes, at the beginning of *Prometheus* and embedded in Scriabin's other late works, outline a melody from the last movement of Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 135—*muss es sein*.

DER SCHWER GEFASSTE ENTSCHLUSS.

Grave. Allegro.

Muss es sein? Es muss sein! Es muss sein!

Grave ma non troppo tratto.

Figure 2.18. Ludwig van Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 135, last movement—“*muss es sein*” motive prominently displayed.

Suddenly the orchestral opening of Scriabin’s *Prometheus*, after the utterance of the chord of Pleroma, can sound like a large orchestrated fragment of Beethoven, albeit very briefly. The very question “must it be” is readily resolved in Beethoven but here Scriabin gestures towards the same existential source. This is like the opening of Pandora’s Box and can spiral further still if we want, spreading like an uncontrolled fire, illuminating all in its path.¹²⁷ If we squint and peer closer, the very shape of this motive, when condensing these intervals, is exactly the same as Wagner’s “Fate” *leitmotif* in the Ring, which itself inherently implies “must it be”.

Figure 2.19. Richard Wagner, “Fate” *leitmotif* from *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

¹²⁷ Another example: Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 110—a work composed on Christmas day, the Gregorian Calendar’s equivalent of Scriabin’s birthday on January 6th in the Julian Calendar—uses this motive in its opening and its climactic fugue.



Figure 2.20. Beethoven, Piano Sonata, Op. 81a “Les Adieux,” second movement—opening measures.

In relation to this, Beethoven’s Sonata Op. 81a, “Les Adieux” also utters this “fate” in a movement title “The Absence,” where “must it be” and a sense of desire for return feature prominently. Scriabin, even, provides a very suggestive hint with a work titled *Nuances*, Op. 56, No. 3 prominently displaying the “Fate” *leitmotif* in a suave, velvety texture.

3. Nuances



Figure 2.21. Scriabin, *Nuances*, Op. 56, No. 3—opening measures.

If this symbolic layering seems like it is digging incredibly deep in interpretation, it is worth considering the cryptic frontispiece to the score of Scriabin’s *Prometheus*, Op. 60 painted by Jean Delville.

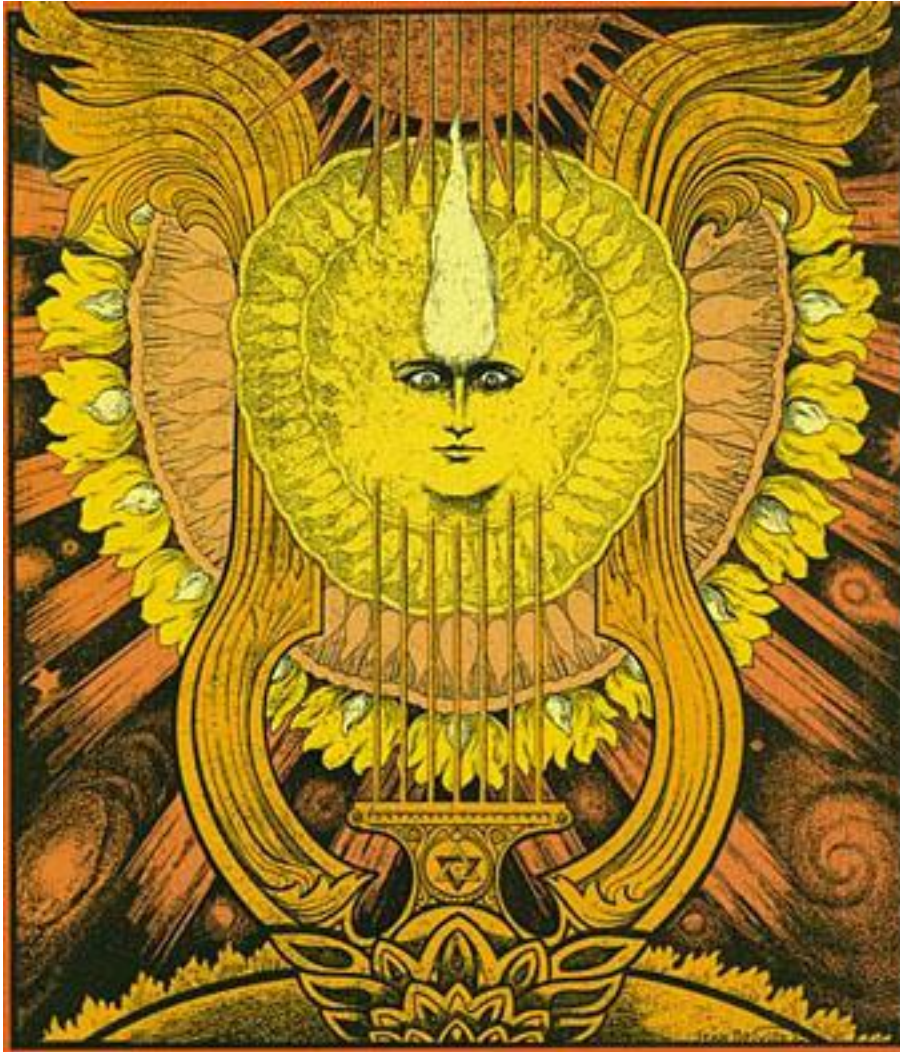


Figure 2.22. Frontispiece for Scriabin's *Prometheus*, Op. 60, Jean Delville, 1907/1910.

This image encapsulates the synthesis of endless meanings that is embedded in Symbolist art. An androgynous face at the center of the cosmos, surrounded by flames, placed upon an orphic lyre. The image is not merely Prometheus, but also Orpheus, Parsifal, Apollo, Dionysus, and so on. Beethoven cast as both Orphic and Promethean figure resonates strongly with how Scriabin cast himself, especially when we uncover this. Take the following array of other paintings by Jean Delville, in comparison with the frontispiece above, as having subtle similarities—juxtaposed with stark differences—as a prime example of this motivic style:



Figure 2.23. *Orpheus*, Jean Delville, 1893.



Figure 2.24. *Parsifal*, Jean Delville, 1885.



Figure 2.25. *Parsifal*, Jean Delville, 1890.



Figure 2.26. *Prometheus*, Jean Delville, 1907.

All of this symbolism must be deeply embedded, indeed, and this is the point of Scriabin's craft. We can even see the "muss es sein" and "Fate" motives as fragmentary allusions of the motives mentioned in the previous chapter on Rachmaninoff, including Schubert's *Der Doppelgänger*, Bach's cross, B-A-C-H, Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead*, *et cetera*. Considering these would indicate a reference to the self, Christ, death, life, return, resurrection, and so on—all major themes related to the attempt at reaching the noumenal in Scriabin's musical, artistic, and religious endeavor.

This becomes a muddle of many references. But they will not appear on the surface—they are unconscious allusions. These symbols and motives in the music are defamiliarized enough to function in such a way that chromatic or octatonic harmony abstracts them just enough. In *Vers la flamme* this defamiliarization of these motives crucially places any recognition directly in the unconscious. These gestures, even if they are as small as two notes, still have shapes that the unconscious can call upon. This is a matter that places extreme importance on familiarity of repertoire. For a pianist, countless hours are spent practicing, absorbing, playing, and listening to music in order to develop a distinct intuition. For example, even if Scriabin did not think consciously of using Wagner's Magic Fire Scene, the fact that he at minimum knew the Louis Brassin arrangement that so many of his classmates performed would be enough to embed such a prominently placed two-note motive. Being a part of a specific culture, and its many artistic and religious practices, also develops this intuition and unconscious behavior, whether one can be aware of it or not. It is, of course, Scriabin himself who highlights this line of thought when he and Rimsky-Korsakov intended to prove the existence of

synaesthesia to Sergei Rachmaninoff by showing him his own unconscious use of color associations in his works.¹²⁸

Synthesizing all of these many symbols together invoked by the music, creates a muddle of expression. A listener, in fact, cannot think consciously of all these things in simultaneity. This is one of the reasons that subjective, "impressionistic" critical accounts so often meet chilly receptions among the "serious"-minded. But is it wrong to suggest or even notice these elements of intuitive musical engagement? And in that moment's instant, where all of these differing things coalesce at the same time into that muddle, is there a way to properly record that unexplainable feeling? Ultimately, this describes perfectly how an expression of the inexpressible can have so much content with so little indicators of representation. In fact for Schopenhauer's philosophy, naming all of these things detracts from the noumenal. But this is why Scriabin *is* interested in Gnosticism, even if we are not. He is trying to tap into this unconscious knowledge without moving straight into representation. In this case, this is why Scriabin casts himself the prophet, priest, or sorcerer, and not simply a bystander. He has to engage directly with the materials at hand, both as composer and performer. And even at that, he may very well be doing that unconsciously. Because, as he saw himself, being superhuman means being endowed with powers others do not have and being able to act where others would be spiritually deficient.

If we are to consider *Vers la flamme* within the setting of preparation for the apocalypse, it fits within the context of ritual itself. Here, Victor Turner's observations on ritual are useful. In his book *Forest of Symbols*, Turner asserts:

¹²⁸ See previous chapter. Oskar von Riesmann, *Rachmaninoff's Recollections* (New York: Macmillan, 1934) and Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 488.

The communication of *sacra* and other forms of esoteric instruction really involves three processes, though these should not be regarded as in series but as in parallel. The first is the reduction of culture into recognized components or factors; the second is their recombination in fantastic or monstrous shapes; and the third is their recombination in ways that make sense with regard to the new state and status that the neophytes will enter.¹²⁹

The interaction between an individual and community through this very process describes the nature of what Scriabin is doing in his music to invoke the noumenal. It is the third stage that would bring about apocalyptic revelation. Prior to that the first stage can be understood as the conventions of art already familiar and established. But it is this second stage that we are most readily connected with in Scriabin's music. Through this liminal stage, seen in Scriabin's late works, he introduces not only familiar compositional practice with defamiliarized harmony, he also presents many symbolic motives that are also defamiliarized. This mode of preparation itself characterizes this process.

The synthesis of the Apollonian and Dionysian in the entire process of learning a piece of music is what gives a pianist such as Horowitz or Scriabin that element of charisma. But it is Scriabin's role as predicant and mediator of this music that is crucial to his endeavor. After understanding the ritual and the synthesis of many symbols, once we step back and take it apart, we can make conscious connections to all of these differing elements. But this is where, in doing the analysis, we are not performing—in this sense, we are not performing the rite itself. This is something musicians must grapple with, the tension between performance and preparation. This is why *Vers la flamme* is a prelude; it is an act of preparation. But as a musician, especially performing on the concert stage, one cannot think about everything at once. Even in the most stripped down formal sense, a musician must still go through a process of practicing and understanding basic elements of convention—those that they also can analyze through music

¹²⁹ Victor Turner, *Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 106.

theory—and turn them into unconscious processes. Intuition is such an important part of performance because it expedites the process in the brain when it needs to be used quickly. It is a basic element of survival to call upon unconscious process in order to act immediately. In this way, Schopenhauer's theory of the Will is entirely unconscious thought, within one subject. But if there are things that *are* and exist in the world that are part of this will, then it is no wonder that some syncretic connection is made and that Scriabin would posit this in universal terms and through a collective unconscious. This is, as we've seen with the discussion of synaesthesia in the previous chapter, a complicated and problematical issue.

For Scriabin to embed and defamiliarize symbols that people may already have at their disposal through unconscious understanding, there is an even richer abstract interaction that takes place. The symbol may be familiar but very far beyond conscious recognition. I think the point here is that within a community (one familiar with a certain amount of art and music), symbolic information is drawn upon consistently, and unconsciously, in all walks of life, creating the impression of universals, and they are primarily felt or intuited. Scriabin's music suggests believing the unbelievable. Even when the music is the only means towards that burning vision, it requires a leap of faith in our imagination. Vladimir Horowitz's performance of *Vers la flamme* may not be an actual struggle between life and death, but the metaphor and meaning contained in the music counts for performers and listeners. It is through this reverie of performance that Scriabin's music avoids incineration and transcends the flame of oblivion.

III.

A Reminiscence of Nature's Forgotten Melodies

Слезы людские, о слезы людские,
Льетесь вы ранней и поздней порой...
Льетесь безвестные, льетесь незримые,
Неистошимые, неисчислимые, —
Льетесь, как льются струи дождевые
В осень глухую порою ночной.
Ф. И. Тютчев¹³⁰

Time slips by. Droplets fall slowly and gently, frozen by a bitter cold embrace. From foreboding silvery grey above, all turns to white while the night feels black and endless. Gold that once shimmered in the sunlight has vanished; those leaves that turned long ago—browned like the inside of an old book—are now buried. Autumn has passed. Nature all around is dead silent. The winter feels so long and dark after the fall. The plaintive cry of the approaching wind quietly intones a sobering song in the lull of sleep, while a white blanket of snow covers the grave and barren world. Suddenly, in a shrill soprano, the wind sings loudly its icy tune in a dissonant, indecipherable tenor; the prophetic moaning hearkens the chaos of tempestuous, unbound blizzards and snowstorms that will continue to transform the landscape. The twilight of October, where red burned across a bleeding horizon, was now distant and far away. And through the freezing winter and lifeless slumber come dreams of reminiscence—for the warmth of the past, for the return of spring that melts and floods the streams and rivers, and for a dawn that ushers in the rebirth of life. The heart yearns achingly to look upwards into the firmament and to see the light blue azure clothed in the sun, all the while dancing in the arms of a tender breeze. But everything is frozen—in time and memory. The world remains unbearably cold while heaven weeps sorrowfully upon the earth.

¹³⁰ Tears, human tears, that pour forth beyond telling./Early and late, in the dark, out of sight,/While the world goes on its way all unwittingly./Numberless, stintless, you fall unremittingly./Pouring like rain, the long rain that is welling/Endlessly, late in the autumn at night. – Fyodor Tyutchev

How do we make sense of emotion and feeling that flows from music that is too difficult to put into words? The little bit of prose above tries to capture the content of the musical work I am discussing. This is my sincere, yet *naïve* attempt at establishing some semblance of meaning in your mind—albeit by using worn out clichés and turns of phrase. Through this quixotic invocation, I can only hope in vain to remind you of an imagined wintry scene rather than the warmth and comfort you may be experiencing as you read. I hope only that you take in the beauty of nature as you imagine, maybe watching snow fall outside, or perhaps feeling the chill in your bones from an unrelenting cold. It is here, I hope, where we can find a sense of the mood for a solemn piece of music about the past.

In total tranquility and privacy, Nikolai Karlovich Medtner first performed his *Sonata Reminiscenza*, a work of deep recollection and emotion about the past. He and his wife Anna found sanctuary in a small cottage in Bugry, a village just southwest of Moscow. During such a harsh winter, it was much easier to survive in the countryside than in the city. The familiar world they knew was undergoing drastic change. They were able to escape difficulties through the charity of a friend, but the future seemed uncertain. This generous friend was another Anna—Anna Troyanovskaya. With its Homeric aura, her name seemed oddly fitting: her dacha provided fortification from the outside, a veritable wall protecting them not only from the unforgiving cold and snow, but also from the threat of war. Of course, this would not last forever. But at that moment, there was shelter and warmth. The composer and his wife remained in this safe haven, away from a world that was falling apart. Looking back upon this time from later era, their generous host recalled their stay and the music she heard:

“It was January evening when a proper lamp was burning on the piano, something we thought a rare luxury and comfort. Nikolay Karlovich called us to him, we stood by the piano, Anna’s head rested on my shoulder, and he played to us for the first time in full his *Sonata Reminiscenza*. Our total solitude in the forest, the winter behind the dark windows

of his room and the richness of the piano sonority under his hands—all this made an absolutely magical impression on us.”¹³¹

Such magic was all the more important as a refuge from the turbulence and confusion of the civil war following the Great October Revolution of 1917.

Sonata Reminiscenza is arguably the most famous work by a man who remains otherwise obscure within the history of western classical music. “Why nobody plays Medtner?” asks Vladimir Horowitz, “He is a wonderful composer.”¹³² And despite his present obscurity, he was deemed by his close friend, Sergei Rachmaninoff, to be “the greatest composer of our time.” The music of Nikolai Medtner has made a quiet resurgence in the past few decades thanks largely to the wide circulation of new recordings by pianists such as Geoffrey Tozer and Marc-André Hamelin, as well as several important publications, including the first biography in English by Barrie Martyn and the appearance of Medtner’s piano sonatas and fairy tales in affordable editions by Dover.¹³³ In addition, the composer’s own unpublished Columbia recordings from the 1930s appeared on CD and revealed a formidable pianist from a lost era. At the dawn of the new millennium, there is a push for recognition of a composer who was mainly neglected in the last century.

There is something in this composer’s music that remains appealing to classical musicians and audiences alike. Medtner’s music is old-fashioned in style. And yet, he composed during a time that saw the emancipation of dissonance through Arnold Schoenberg, along with the successes of his more avant-garde countrymen, Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofiev. There is certainly an appeal today to reminiscence, especially within a music culture that holds so firmly onto past repertory.

¹³¹ Barrie Martyn, *Nikolai Medtner: His Life and Music* (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1995), 135.

¹³² Vladimir Horowitz was speaking to American pianist Eugene Istomin. Nikolai Medtner, *The Complete Piano Sonatas Series I* (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), ix.

¹³³ Despite the pioneering efforts of Hamish Milne in the 1970s.

Medtner's music was old-fashioned. Many critics have called him "The Russian Brahms." And while he disliked being labeled such (not out of disrespect to his German counterpart, but to assert the difference of his style), he shared the same conservative musical views. Medtner was not alone. His perspective on art was common amongst a number of his peers during the burgeoning stages of musical modernity. Alexander Glazunov described him as "guarding the eternal laws of art."¹³⁴ But the weight of such accolades from important figures did little to persuade the public. The pull of the current in the mainstream was far too great. Fewer and fewer people were sympathetic to his cause later in his career. And outside of his brief renown in Russia, Medtner faced an uphill battle. The likes of Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schönberg, his *bêtes-noires*, stormed the European scene. The avant-garde set the tone for styles and trends, but for the historical narrative as well.

Medtner's music maintains not only aesthetic traditionalism, but also politically reactionary sentiments. By 1919, *Sonata Reminiscenza* was composed during a time when he saw the destructive force of the Bolshevik revolution. This left the composer straining in search for a past that was lost. He gravitated even more towards traditional forms and, most importantly, what he thought of as tonal fidelity. In this sense, Medtner's *Sonata-Reminiscenza* is itself an evocation of lost tonality through a depiction of the past. The craft of his art deals specifically with the idealization of nature through music. His musical language emphasizes a conservative lyrical style that portrays the snow-covered Russian countryside where he sought refuge from the turmoil of the city. This is in stark contrast to music of the avant-garde, which sounded to him like the disordered noise of urban life. In many ways, such wayward focus away from nature is what fomented the violence of the revolution. Through recurring leitmotifs within the sonata,

¹³⁴ Ibid., xi.

Medtner creates a narrative where the music constructs a belated version of pastoral nostalgia. In this melancholic reminiscence, he is grappling with the encroachment of modernity and the chaos of the revolution. Medtner finds solace in composing *Sonata-Reminiscenza* by reinscribing spirituality and idealism in music through a tonal style that represents a natural order he felt was disappearing.

To understand the immediate sadness of this work it is important to contextualize the events that preceded Medtner's first performance. The coming apocalypse that was so consistently alluded to seemed to have arrived. After Lenin stormed the Winter Palace, he consolidated power and turned his attention to a counter-revolutionary effort. The new order was being established in Moscow. It had already been two years and civil war continued between the Red Army and the White Army. Life in Moscow and Petrograd was unsafe and desolate. Many other people moved out of the city, too, finding safety in the countryside. (The peasants still used the old money and also accepted gold as payment for food and other resources, all of which was much harder to come by in the chaos of the city.)¹³⁵ The civil war was the culmination of an onslaught of harrowing events inflicting Russia—the 1905 Revolution, Russo-Japanese war, the First World War, the abdication of the throne by the Tsar, and the 1917 Revolution. The lace factory owned by Medtner's father was confiscated, crippling the patriarch of the family with depression. The estates of many friends and colleagues, including that of Margarita Morozova (Scriabin and Medtner's patron), were confiscated as well. Amongst all of this, disease ran rampant. There was a typhus epidemic, killing scores of people. Medtner's brother Karl was stricken with typhus. One after another, different sicknesses spread, Medtner caught pneumonia, his wife Anna, previously, fell seriously ill, too; his sister Sofiya contracted smallpox and his

¹³⁵ Martyn, 128-146.

mother caught pneumonia and died. All of this occurred within a short amount of time in 1918. This was followed by even more anxiety and grief. Karl, who had previously been an officer in the Tsar's army, was now a part of the Red Army engaging in the counterrevolution. However, these soldiers were scrutinized and deemed controversial. And not unlike Robespierre's reign of terror that followed the French Revolution, paranoia ravaged the new powers in charge. All former Tsarist officers were to be gathered, rounded up, and shot. Karl was placed in prison awaiting this very fate. When Medtner found out, he frantically found his way to where his brother was held. And on the eve of the execution the guard was persuaded that the brother of a distinguished musician should not be put to death. Amidst all of these troubles, and with all of the food shortages, Medtner continued his duties as professor at the conservatories in Moscow and Petrograd and continued to concertize. But things took a turn for the worse again—correspondence with his brothers Karl and Emil had been cut off. Karl, after his brush with death, continued serving for the Red Army. Eventually they found out that he had died at the front lines.¹³⁶ These were trying times for everyone in Russia, and Medtner's family was one of many experiencing persistent strife in such a short amount of time.

* * *

To make sense of this sonata, it is important to parse through the intricate genre implications involved. Understanding the *Sonata-Reminiscenza* generically seems rather straightforward: it is a one movement sonata that adheres to a rather complex, yet conventional sonata form. And if we are to do a brief sampling of performances of this work, pianists as famous as Emil Gilels, Sviatoslav Richter, Grigory Ginsburg, and Evgeny Kissin have included it in their own recordings and recital repertoire. This past decade and a half has seen its inclusion

¹³⁶ Martyn, 128-134.

in the repertoire of young pianists as well. What's unique is that as a stand-alone piece, this sonata has received considerable playing time. But it has been performed exactly in this context only—as an individual sonata.

The *Sonata-Reminiscenza* is in fact the beginning of an entire cycle that Medtner published as his opus 38 set titled *Forgotten Melodies*. The sonata itself does, and most importantly is supposed to, stand by itself, but it also must be a part of the rest of the cycle. This inclusion of *Sonata-Reminiscenza* within the *Forgotten Melodies* cycle transforms the genre: it is a large-scale work contained in itself, but is part of an entire opus that is much larger. In this sense, it acts as a prelude to the cycle—it is quintessentially a *romantic fragment*, a piece complete in itself, but also part of a larger whole.

Moreover, the opus 38 cycle of *Forgotten Melodies* is the first of three—two more sets of piano pieces published as opuses 39 and 40 are also labeled *Forgotten Melodies*. In this way, Medtner layers fragment upon fragment: individual pieces are a part of one entire opus, while each opus is part of an even larger set together—and yet, each opus can similarly be separate. This larger connection is tied together primarily by name. But there is also a similarity of thematic content. For example, all three sets contain mostly dances and lyrical works, while opus 38 opens with a sonata and opus 39 ends with one. Also, as I will discuss later, the content of these opuses cover the same ground in connection to material related to the period and the revolution: reminiscence, tragedy, and rebirth.

The ambiguity of genre and overarching form in these cycles is deliberate. This underscores not only the versatility of picking pieces out for performance, but also the breadth of meaning Medtner wishes to cover on a larger scale. In this sense, Medtner is using romantic fragmentation to explore a kind of hybrid of piano sonata, piano miniatures, dance suite, song

cycle, and a Wagnerian theatrical model. Individual pieces are presented as self-contained songs or dances, but also as tableaux with related themes. Medtner creates melodic unity in each cycle through *leitmotif* that connects everything in Wagnerian fashion in order to generate one large narrative. With each individual opus of the *Forgotten Melodies* being contained in approximately 45 minutes of music, the three cycles seem to make up a trilogy.¹³⁷ In a sense, this is sort of an attempt at a pianistic answer to Wagnerian drama.

All of this is further exemplified with a propensity towards generic hybridity. Overall, “cycle” is the best and most accurate description because, as mentioned above, each entire opus contains a collection of individual pieces that are thematically connected. Yet, in going against this, each of the pieces function as movements of one whole work. The indications of thematic connection are most prominently observed as follows—for example, by titles in opus 38: *Sonata-Reminiscenza* begins the set while the final work is titled *Alla Reminiscenza*; moreover, these two works use the same musical thematic gestures and melodies. The melodic and motivic connections happen throughout this opus in all the other pieces (or movements).

The sonata as a genre itself is typically a self-contained multi-movement work. But by this time—especially through the influence of Franz Liszt—single movement iterations were common and Medtner had already written many previously. The main distinctive characteristic is the narrative emphasis implied by sonata form. Through this, melodic and thematic material is disseminated and develops temporally through a conventional harmonic framework allowing for narrative structure to take place on a large scale. Not surprisingly, as mentioned above, this allows *Sonata-Reminiscenza* to be performed as a work on its own and is sometimes grouped generically in catalogues of Medtner’s *oeuvre* as being amongst sonatas, even though it is also

¹³⁷ Medtner himself premiered all three on January 28, 1921. Martyn, 143.

part of a work that is outside of the genre.

As a cycle, the *Forgotten Melodies*, especially with such a title, implies specifically a *song cycle*. This indicates an emphasis on vocality—namely, that the cycle is made up of songs, lieder, and so on. Medtner’s own propensity towards writing actual song cycles can easily be seen as an influence here. Typically, he connects them under a specific theme, where there is poetry under a common subject, thread, or poet(s). This set does not actually function as a “song” cycle *per se*. There is, of course, no singer here. But it evokes the same qualities and elements in an abstract form—actual songs show up in the cycle as *canzonas*. And lyricism and the lyrical style remain the predominant function for each of the pieces. All of this is wrapped under a common—albeit abstract—poetic subject.¹³⁸

Much like this allusion to “song cycle,” each of the *Forgotten Melodies* sets function as a suite. Amongst the pieces (or movements) are numerous individual dances. The “suite” itself can typically be understood as a musical extraction (or abstraction) from a larger work. This, again, can highlight a connection to some semblance of romantic fragmentation. For example, a collection of ballet numbers can be drawn together to make up a suite, as would incidental music for a play. The containment and abstraction can also be seen in the dances themselves and the styles they evoke, specifically that they are not necessarily meant to be *danced to*. Again, imaginary and fragmentary elements are important for sources of meaning. The different types and styles of dance in *Forgotten Melodies* are also contained dance numbers in their own right. This abstraction naturally implies a larger-scale narrative or musical work as its sort of “imaginary root,” the emphasis here would be on choreographed dance. Ballet, while certainly

¹³⁸ It is interesting to note that there is a song cycle by Claude Debussy entitled *Ariettes oubliées* (Forgotten Songs) based on poetry by Paul Verlaine (French Symbolist poet). It is not likely that Medtner had interest in this set, considering that he was not fond of Debussy; however, it is significant to consider that they are part of the same cultural impetus.

not the genre used here directly (choreographed dancing is not expected to accompany this music), is nonetheless important as a means of association, in the sense that the dances in the *Forgotten Melodies* evoke a larger narrative structure, story, and connected thematic material, all of which make for crucial imaginative possibility. This collection of dances can easily have a correlation to diverse tableaux in a ballet.

Similarly, a suite also evokes the idea of incidental music that may accompany a drama or play. Much like ballet, there is no indication of this genre in this set; however, the same imaginative potential applies, this time with spoken and acted-out drama. An easy comparison can be made between this cycle and *Peer Gynt* by Edvard Grieg—the Norwegian composer was held in high esteem by Medtner and his *milieu*.¹³⁹ The incidental music sets the atmosphere for Henrik Ibsen’s fairy-tale-inspired play and the two suites that Grieg subsequently extracted can make for a reflection upon the drama—or it can also be completely autonomous from it. Medtner’s *Forgotten Melodies* evokes a similar fairy-tale atmosphere with canzonas and dances evoking songs of water nymphs and dances of forest spirits. And similarly, as miniature piano pieces, *Forgotten Melodies* also seems to function like Grieg’s lyrics pieces.

Opera as a large-scale work is probably the most obvious connection, especially considering Medtner’s great enthusiasm for Wagner’s operas. Generically, the emphasis is on drama and song. In this sense, much like the other genres mentioned, musical numbers and tableaux can be seen as extracted from a larger whole, emphasizing imaginative potential. The

¹³⁹ Ibsen was extremely well-lauded and respected by Russian Symbolists. Part of this could be the use of and attention to symbols in Nordic folklore, though there is a lot more to the use of symbolism than manifests and shapes his drama. Grieg easily fits within this framework, especially with the idiomatically “northern” element of his music. Magnus Ljunggren, *The Russian Mephisto. The Study of the Life and Work of Emilii Medtner* (Stockholm: GOTAB, 1994), 51 and 72. The Medtner family friend, poet, and author, Andrei Bely, dedicated his “Northern” Symphony in prose to Grieg right before dedicating his fourth Symphony titled “Goblet of Snowstorms” to Medtner. See Andrei Bely, *Kubok Metelei: Roman i povesti – simfonii* (Moscow: Terra, 1997) and Anton Kovač, *Andrej Belyj: The Symphonies, 1899-1908: A Re-evaluation of the Aesthetic-Philosophical Heritage* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1976).

Wagnerian influence is no more evident than in this *Forgotten Melodies* set. Even the very idea of hybridity and complication of genre—outside the simple categorizing of the opus as a cycle—is an entirely Wagnerian venture. With Wagner’s music dramas, they are operas, but for all intents and purposes they are also symphonic in nature. The thematic and melodic material Medtner uses and develops in the *Forgotten Melodies* function in the style of leitmotifs that constantly recur. Similarly, Medtner’s melding of sonata (its Beethovenian implication being reminiscent of Wagner’s use of symphonic style) with cycle or suite and other styles constitutes a similar ambiguous melding venture to that of Wagner’s own work, but one contained within the confines of the pianistic palette.

Finally, it is simple enough to look back at Medtner’s other piano works to make generic connections. First, his predominant focus has been on writing fairy tales. As mentioned above, the *Forgotten Melodies* set employ this style through the use of dances and canzonas with subject matter that involves mythical creatures. In this sense, the *Forgotten Melodies* function in a fantasy realm that fuses the reality and melancholy of reminiscence with the otherworldly symbols of fairy tales. Another genre that stands out comes from Medtner’s first opus, his *Stimmungsbilder* or Mood Pictures. The *Forgotten Melodies* as a cycle functions very similarly. The *Stimmungsbilder* is simply a series of pictures, or tableaux, which set a specific mood; however, they are devoid of any direct inscription of subject, minus the occasional poetic epigram, leaving everything to the imagination to the listener. Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* makes for the easiest example of programmatic implication that is drawn up in the imagination. An even better example would be Rachmaninoff’s Preludes and Études-tableaux, as discussed in a previous chapter, where the composer relied heavily on inspiration from pictorial sources, particularly Arnold Böcklin.

Exploring the possibilities above does not imply that the *Forgotten Melodies* are directly connected to any one of these genres. Instead, they are indirectly related to them in some nebulous fashion, and at the same time not related to them at all. This is sort of complicated by the nature of musical composition of this period—it is not so neatly confined as we may wish it to be. When placed in a procrustean bed, Medtner's *Sonata-Reminiscenza* would function as a sonata on its own and would not be a part of a cycle at all. With all other complications contextual to the period, it functions as a sort of prelude or overture—calling upon themes, ideas, imagery, and musical material from the other works. In this way, the act of reminiscence itself is placed upon the listener or performer, who recognizes melodies exactly, or hears echoes of similarity. So too is this implied when confronted with the ambiguity of genre and the need to draw upon other possibilities embedded in the mind, either from previous experiences or hearings. In this sense, even the entire process of hybridity evokes a remembrance of Wagner's epics.

This Wagnerian reference also draws upon a classical model that easily reinforces the idea of a return to ancient ideals in art and theater. Medtner's keen interest in Nietzsche's early writings, primarily the *Birth of Tragedy*, are directly related to this and emphasize the importance of bringing about a rebirth and reinvigoration of older artistic forms. In this sense, reminiscence as a subject is not only a melancholy means of mourning loss, but also a pointed reminder and attempt at recapturing lost feelings for the past, the ultimate goal being to mobilize the spirit.

As with any allusion to Greek mythology, the pastoral and nature play a large role. Returning back to the subject of dance, Medtner's titles—*Danza Festiva* or *Danza Rustica*, for example—seem to even hearken back to peasant dances, idealized and abstracted. They are markers of bucolic reminiscence simply by virtue of their rustic style bringing forth imagery of

“dirt on the feet.” Medtner may have found inspiration for *Danza Festiva* from a picture of a village festival by Flemish painter David Teniers.¹⁴⁰ The subject of idealized peasant music, while grasping onto classical Greek models for looking backwards, further utilizes the Wagnerian mode of inscribing nationalism. But while Medtner’s music does much to exhibit its Russian melodic intonation, the score indicates a sense of neutrality that aspires outwards towards the universal. In this sense, Medtner is infusing his own model of universalized nineteenth-century tonal conventions with Russian folk style in order not only to reflect the past, but also to reinvigorate music with a specifically Russian archaism. This is especially the case with Medtner’s rather odd assortment of titles within all three sets of the *Forgotten Melodies*. Editors of Medtner’s music today are always quick to point out the composer’s spurious use of spellings throughout his works,¹⁴¹ the most obvious examples being *Canzona Fluviala* and *Danza Silvestra* in opus 38 and *Danza Jubilosa* in opus 40. First, the use of Italian already implies an interesting adherence and enforcement of universalized practice—he chooses not to follow Beethoven’s nationalism through use of German names, and Medtner certainly doesn’t follow Scriabin’s example of using French. The use of Italian hearkens back to a sort of “eighteenth-century classicism”—not out of some diffidence to Beethoven, but instead as further implying that these works truly are “old” and “forgotten.” What is unique about Medtner’s use of Italian is that he typically uses it “incorrectly.” But all of this may be somewhat deliberate, and even if such was brought to his attention, he may have opted to keep the erroneous spellings. For

¹⁴⁰ Though it is unclear whether this may be David Teniers the elder or younger. This little bit of information comes from the 1936 booklet accompanying Medtner’s on gramophone recording—probably information he gave directly after the performance. Martyn, 137.

¹⁴¹ The most significant example comes from Japanese publisher Zen-on, being one of the only critical editions of *Forgotten Melodies* Op. 38, where the editor Satoru Takaku explains the peculiar spellings as being mistakes. Dover reprints of the Piano Sonatas edited by Marc-Andre Hamelin and Geoffrey Tozer make note of this in tempo indications, as well. Even Barrie Martyn emphasizes these without delving further. Nikolai Medtner, *Forgotten Melodies, Op. 38*, Satoru Takaku (ed.) (Tokyo: Zen-On Music Company, 2003). Nikolai Medtner, *Complete Piano Sonatas*, Vols. 1 & 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1998).

example, the words mentioned above should be spelled as follows: *fluviale* and *silvestre* denote more proper usage, whereas *jubilosa* seems to be more related to *giubilo* in Italian and the Latin *jubilo*. Medtner's spellings call to mind the use of neologism as a means for inflecting archaic sensibilities in these works. This is most notably employed in poetry by Symbolists, such as Vyachslav Ivanov, in order to evoke archaic overtones, but most importantly to complicate the connotation of words with a sense of lost meaning. Older Italian's direct line to Latin (the imagining of a vulgar, coarser version) gives a pastoral, yet classical feel for the music in order to create a sense of the past. But the significant thing here is that it remains *not* in the present—it is the past, whether imaginary or real.

Forgotten Melodies as a title already evokes an idea of music from the past that is lost. But this was not the only title of the work. Medtner used Природа (*Priroda*) or “Nature” as his overarching title. In fact, the program for the recital premiering opus 38 on January 28, 1921 in the small hall of the Moscow Conservatory contained the following phrase: из цикла “Природа” (*iz tsikla “Priroda”*) or “from the cycle *Nature*.”¹⁴² If anything, this affirms that all the different opuses made up one cycle as a sort of trilogy. The use of “Nature” in the program for a performance hints at a much more programmatically inclined work. Just as Anna Troyanovskaya described, they were in the forest in the middle of winter—surrounded by nature and not in the city. All of the classical pastoral implications, whether in Wagnerian or Nietzschean form, become clearer, though much more concisely put with such a title. With all of this said, there is a constant theme here, involving Medtner's keen and consistent use of double meanings. The obvious connection must be made that “from the cycle *Nature*” not only refers to a larger music work, but also about nature itself and its constant cycle between seasons, not to mention life and

¹⁴² Nikolai Medtner, *Forgotten Melodies, Op. 38*, Satoru Takaku (ed.), 23.

death. Medtner will continue to use this kind of language profusely. The content of the music, then, is about the cycle of nature, but it also implies that with death comes rebirth. The meaning here is thus fivefold: the rebirth of spring after winter, the rebirth of life after death and loss, the rebirth of Russia after the revolution, the rebirth of art after decay, but most of all the rebirth of tonality and bringing back what he deemed the inherent natural “rules” lost after its collapse.

Returning to the notion of *Sonata-Reminiscenza* as “prelude” or “overture” to opus 38, it is necessary to unpack the details regarding the other works in the set. During that very first performance of the set in Moscow at the end of January, the program gave a list of the pieces, after that phrase explaining “from the cycle Nature,” which goes as follows: *Sonata reminiscenza a-Moll, Danza graziosa A-dur, Danza silvestra fis-Moll, Danza festiva D-dur, Canzona fis-Moll, Alla Coda A-dur*. Compared to the final version published, here there are different titles, a different order, and in the case of two of the pieces different musical material or even a different key signature. Also, one of the pieces in the set is missing: *Danza rustica*. What this indicates is that Medtner, even when premiering this work, was still tinkering—performance when incomplete was not an issue and did not change the affect or effect of the music. He was still deciding on the most effective way of presenting his ideas. At one of his recitals, Medtner again changed the order. In some of Medtner’s own penciled-in notes, he suggested to himself to change the key signatures of one of the pieces in case he decided to end it in a different key and he even considered making the set contain as many as nine or ten pieces.¹⁴³ The eight pieces that make up the final version of the opus 38 cycle that went to publication are as follows: *Sonata-Reminiscenza, Danza Graziosa, Danza Festiva, Canzona Fluviala, Danza Rustica, Canzona Serenata, Danza Silvestra, Alla Reminiscenza*.

¹⁴³ Martyn, 135-138.

The rather curious changes to the score—and the subsequent performance of an incomplete cycle—bring to mind a rather curious (and important) feature. Medtner, while aware of differing performance styles, was always keen to point out that there was one true way to perform a piece of music, even if his own performances and recordings indicated otherwise. He was very attached to the idea of a platonic and absolute ideal form for music. The sense of perfection, however, was always something that would be beyond our grasp. This has almost always been returned to as his credo of sorts. He began his first opus, the *Stimmungsbilder*, with the first lines of the following poem called *The Angel* by Mikhail Lermontov:

По небу полуночи ангел летел, И тихую песню он пел, И месяц, и звезды, и тучи толпой Внимали той песне святой.	From heaven at midnight an angel took wing And soft was the song he did sing The moon, and the stars and the cloude on his way Paid heed to that heavenly lay,
Он пел о блаженстве безгрешных духов Под кущами райских садов, О Боге великом он пел, и хвала Его непритворна была.	The bliss of the innocent spirits he told Whom paradise-bower enfold. In praise of the great God of heaven he sang, And straight from his heart the song sprang.
Он душу младую в объятиях нес Для мира печали и слез; И звук его песни в душе молодой Остался - без слов, но живой.	A young soul he bore to her birth, and he wept The woes which the world for her kept, And in that young soul there still echoed for long The sound, without words, of his song.
И долго на свете томилась она, Желанием чудным полна, И звуков небес заменить не могли Ей скучные песни земли.	For long in the world no repose she could find, Strange desires were haunting her mind, The music of heaven she heard at her birth Still drowned the dull songs of the earth. ¹⁴⁴

Medtner also placed this poem in its entirety at the beginning of his introduction to his book he published later attacking avant-garde music, titled *The Muse and the Fashion*. While this certainly establishes the composer's conservative, almost religious devotion to music, what is

¹⁴⁴ Mikhail Lermontov, translated by Patrick Thompson and edited by Alfred J. Swan. From Nicolas Medtner, *The Muse and the Fashion: Being a Defence of the Foundations of the Art of Music*, translated by Alfred J. Swan (Haverford, Pennsylvania: Haverford College Bookstore, 1951).

interesting about this is that it continues to enforce this notion of reminiscence as sort of a musical life goal. In this sense, by writing a piece about reminiscence Medtner is inscribing his spiritual agenda. Reminiscence, by its very first definition in a common dictionary, is a matter of “apprehending a Platonic ideal as if it had been known in a previous existence.”¹⁴⁵ If we take this into account, any and all recollection or remembered experiences are things that we cannot recapture entirely in perfection. For Medtner’s own musical agenda, he is not simply talking about basic memory, but a larger, and to him, more important issue: a recapturing of spirituality and religiousness in society. *Forgotten Melodies* then are real lost melodies from above in the ethereal heaven, and seeing as how he had another title, he is implying these melodies are one and the same with *Nature*. Here, we can make the connection that these lost melodies have a certain style to them: they are within the parameters of tonality. Tonality, therefore, is itself a reflection of nature and is inherently natural. The “melody,” then, is a symbol for a natural, truer form of music.

Again, double meaning is important here. The title *Forgotten Melodies* is, in fact, a reference to a much more innocent occurrence. Medtner wrote down melodies for these sets in 1916 and actually forgot them. He returned to them by 1918 when he began composing these sets. The significance of these years should hold a considerable amount of weight in meaning—he wrote down these melodies before the revolution and found them again after the change in the regime and in life. While this did in fact occur on its own (or naturally), there is an ounce of deliberate forgetfulness here that was already a part of the composer’s process. Medtner already had a habit of coming up with melodies, writing them in notebooks, and then forgetting them. He

¹⁴⁵ “Reminiscence” in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, 2003).

even explained that motives and ideas that continued to return, even after forgetting them two or three times, were, to him, the most authentic.¹⁴⁶

Medtner's actual forgetfulness is quite prevalent. In a work about reflecting on the past titled *10 Lessons in Autobiography*, the poet Bruce Whiteman explores a story about an encounter with Nikolai Medtner and his friend Alfred Laliberté.¹⁴⁷ The story goes as follows:

“When he left Russia after the revolution, Medtner settled eventually in England. By this time he had become friends with Alfred Laliberté, who had been a pupil of Scriabin's, and who was devoted to Medtner and his music. Laliberté spent several summers in England, living near the house in Somerset where the Russian composer and his wife resided. Laliberté had his own key to the house, and if he arrived to find the Medtners out (a long walk was part of Medtner's established daily routine), he was able to let himself in to await their return.

On one such occasion Laliberté sat down at the piano and began to play the music which was open on the stand. The Medtners returned, and Nicolas stood listening as Laliberté continued to the end of the piece. When he was finished, Medtner exclaimed how beautiful the music was and enquired of Laliberté what it was that he had played. Laliberté thought he was joking, and with a knowing smile answered the obvious, that it was Medtner's own piano sonata in G minor (the Opus 22). At this, Medtner looked very embarrassed and had to admit that he had not recognized his own music.”¹⁴⁸

This habit of forgetfulness, while an amusing yet embarrassing story for the composer, was already a natural part of his compositional routine. But it points to an important element to Medtner's musical philosophy: that great music need not be held onto at the fore of the mind, rather a greater, more distant “music”—a platonic ideal of music—embedded in the deep down holds greater importance to recapture rather than remembering the immediate details of everyday life. It is that mundane, everyday life that reflects the “dulls songs of earth” in the final line of Lermontov's poetry that so moved Medtner. Even his own music, which he was so proud of, could not compare to a “greater music” within the depths of human memory. After the

¹⁴⁶ Anatoly Alexandrov's reminiscences in Z.A. Apetian, ed. *N.K. Medtner, Vospominaniya, stat'i, materialii* (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1981), 102. Also in Martyn, 135.

¹⁴⁷ Laliberté happened to be the piano teacher of Whiteman's mother.

¹⁴⁸ Bruce Whiteman, *10 lessons in Autobiography* (Guelph, Ontario: Gryphon Press, 1981).

completion of his first piano concerto (also during the tumult and upheaval of the revolution), Medtner wrote to his brother Emil about the death of their mother saying, “She was so sorry she wouldn’t hear my concerto, but I am sure that she is now hearing better music than mine, because she died with a smile.”¹⁴⁹ This sincere religiosity, which is at the root of Medtner’s conservative musical ideals, germinates from not only the same seed as the extremities of Scriabin’s messianic transcendentalism, but also from the last vestiges of romanticism that have remained within the dogma classical music culture.

Within this framework, the *Forgotten Melodies* and its association with nature is a direct commentary on the state of music. The fear, in Medtner’s mind, was that musicians and audiences were starting to accept anything as art and are thereby forgetting any connection to a celestial, divine song that is the source of inspiration. Regardless of his own forgetfulness, even of his own music, he could not forget *those melodies*. To him, this was the purpose of his crusade against modernism. It was not simply a question of art, but also a means of faith and a way of life. At the beginning of Medtner’s preface to *The Muse and the Fashion* he makes this fact very clear:

“I must warn the reader. It is not in my words about music that I believe, but in music itself. It is not my thoughts about it that I want to share, but my faith in it. I am addressing myself primarily to the young generation of musicians who in studying music and perceiving its laws, believe neither in its unity nor in its autonomous existence. We must study and we are able to master only what we believe in. The musical lyre in our imagination (or rather in our consciousness) is in constant need of revision, which is possible only where there is faith. This revision is sort of a tuning of our imagination according to the way in which the lyre itself is tuned[...] It has taken centuries to tune up this musical lyre and all its strings and modes have been adjusted both by the output of the great geniuses and the thought of theoreticians, but not in any accelerated or ‘revolutionary’ way; therefore let all contemporaries be patient and lenient with every tuner who, like myself, is trying to put its strings in tune; and may they forgive me that tiresome and unpleasant hammering out of each note by which every tuning is normally accompanied.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Letter from Nikolai Medtner to Emil Medtner on May 14, 1918. Z. A. Apetian, *N.K. Medtner: Pis'ma*, (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1973), 176. See also Martyn, 128.

¹⁵⁰ Medtner, *The Muse and the Fashion*, 1-2. Nikolai Karlovich Medtner, *Muza i moda*, (Paris: Tair, 1935).

From this brief passage, Medtner asserts his strong belief in music and, by using deliberately metaphoric language, explains that his role is to help “retune” music itself. Already, from the onset, the reference to “geniuses” of the past implies a retrieval of older styles and traditions that were disappearing at that present day. He equates the revolutionary changes—abrupt stylistic shifts—as being a slip in the tuning of music’s “lyre.” Medtner’s explicit emphasis on tuning highlights not only the idea that the sudden changes of the day are an incorrect and improper means of expressing art, but he especially equates dissonance and atonality as being actually out of tune, as well.

What complicated things for Medtner is the overtly Hegelian worldview that emanates throughout this text. Notions of progress and spirit become much more troubling in a world experiencing upheavals and revolutions. With each violent change occurring during this period, the emphasis on a harsher, more austere view of reality found more prominence. Notions of what constitutes “progress” soon splintered in various directions with greatly differing worldviews prominent during the period. What is important here is the emphasis on ideology first as the issue at hand when considering Medtner’s opposition to modernism. Medtner was himself, in fact labeled a modernist early in his career, even if today it is much easier to see him as completely outside of progressive trends. For example, in Sergei Prokofiev’s earlier days, he found Medtner’s music the most new and most exciting, trying very much to emulate his style. In his early diary entries, Prokofiev recalls bringing Medtner’s opus 8 fairytale to his piano lessons at the Moscow Conservatory, only to be shunned for bringing music that is too “modern.”¹⁵¹ Of

¹⁵¹ “I had wanted to play Medtner’s Fairy Tale, Op. 8...but Yesipova did not care much for the piece and eventually conceived a hatred of it. Finally she went so far as to shout at me and went on grumbling for quite a time afterward”—from May 6, 1910. Anthony Phillips, trans., *Sergey Prokofiev Diaries, 1907-1914: Prodigious Youth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 160.

course, not too soon after, when Prokofiev himself pushes these boundaries further, he found his early idol adamantly opposed to his music.

Completed a decade after the *Forgotten Melodies*, *The Muse and the Fashion* is an accumulation of all of Medtner's thoughts and views into one theoretical argument. These thoughts, however, have been strongly influenced by intellectual *milieu* that surrounded him, most prominently Russian Symbolism, for which his brother Emil was a major contributor, music critic, and editor. Emil's *Modernism and Music*, written under the Wagnerian penname *Vol'fing* or *Wölfing*, was an acerbic predecessor to Medtner's own book. Emil explained much of these changes happening in music through anti-semitic, racialized theories, going as far as to even claim that Richard Strauss and Max Reger were Jewish and that this was a major plight in musical progress.¹⁵² Whether or not Nikolai Medtner himself believed these things in this manner is uncertain (his wife was in fact a converted Jew), but the defense against new musical changes is the same.¹⁵³ In the end, *The Muse and the Fashion* did not contain any racial theory and focused entirely on music by itself.

Medtner's diatribe in this book ultimately was the main point of his crusade. With works like the *Forgotten Melodies*, he was trying to speak through his music in order to express his world view. At some point, this was not enough and he found that he needed to put this all in prose. The book itself was not widely sold or picked up at all and was only published in Russian, only eventually translated into English at the end of his life by his close friend Alfred J. Swan. In hindsight, it is easy to characterize Medtner's book as being an extended jeremiad about the loss

¹⁵² Vol'fing, "Modernizm i musika," *Zolotoe runo*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1907): 63-71 and *Zolotoe runo*, vol. 3, no. 5 (1908): 60-65. Also Vol'fing, *Modernizm i musika* (Moscow: 1912).

¹⁵³ Nikolai's wife, strange enough, was involved in a complicated love triangle with him and Emil, having been married first to the latter. Emil's virulent anti-semitism in his writing—influenced primarily by Wagner, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and Otto Weininger—cannot go unnoticed, however oddly entangled and psychologically complicated his situations was. See Ljunggren, *The Russian Mephisto*.

of musical spirituality. The writing, however, explicitly attempts to do far more. Medtner constantly refers to his text as an exorcism, a choice example being the following: “And so, I repeat, my exorcism is principally of that stifling explosive ideology which in our days has destroyed the connection of the artist’s soul with his art. It concerns a dark nature of contemporary musical speech which has cut itself adrift from the human soul.”¹⁵⁴

Rachmaninoff read the initial draft of the *The Muse and the Fashion* and found a voice to commiserate with regarding his own compositional craft.¹⁵⁵ This was also the case for many other musicians. In a letter to Medtner, Rachmaninoff goes on to tell him: “What a lot of interesting, witty, profound—and opportune—things there are in it! Even if this ‘sickness’ should somehow pass, which I confess I do not in truth see happening, your description of it will remain for all time.”¹⁵⁶ While an important musical document, as Rachmaninoff affirms, this book and these views have remained outside of musical discourse and historiography about the period, effectively keeping quiet an otherwise conservative and reactionary strain of musical practice, musicians, and composers. Publication during Medtner’s lifetime was already itself difficult—it appeared in France, but in Russian, not French. With so little chance to even make his book available, Medtner became decidedly agitated exclaiming, “I begin to think my book will not only be not understood by anyone but generally will not even be read. To hell with it—I did what I could, and I don’t want to think about it anymore.”¹⁵⁷

With hindsight we can see that the ultimate goal of Medtner’s enterprise, his musical craft and work, and his philosophy was unfulfilled and unsuccessful. Even historically, this

¹⁵⁴ Nikolai Medtner, *The Muse and the Fashion*, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Rachmaninoff also read Emil’s *Modernism and Music*, finding the musical arguments to be also along the same line as Nikolai’s (which he firmly approved of), but taking great offense at the awful anti-semitism and racism inherent to Emil’s argument.

¹⁵⁶ Letter from Rachmaninoff to Nikolai Medtner, December 8, 1934. Z.A. Apetian, ed. *S. Rakhmaninov. Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Sovietskiy kompozitor, 1980), 33-4. See also Martyn, 216.

¹⁵⁷ Letter from Nikolai Medtner to Emil Medtner, September 7, 1935. Z. A. Apetian, *N.K. Metner: Pis'ma*, 472.

endeavor to reinvigorate an older style seems foolish, yet presents a more complicated history of music without the simple straight line of narrative progress that is typically reduced from the period. The irony of all of this is that Medtner's views fall exactly in line with the endeavors of classical music performance culture, which continues, to this day, to uphold an air of "spirituality" and "universality" of music from the past—even deliberately excluding most music from 20th century repertoire, let alone the 21st century. While these views are obviously problematic today, they highlight a consistent pattern of ideology needing to express an older style—tonality—as being *the* natural order of music.¹⁵⁸

Keeping all of this in mind, the *Forgotten Melodies* function as a musical precursor to what eventually comes forth in *The Muse and the Fashion*. With its look backwards and deliberate use of older styles, Medtner presents a work that carefully presents its case for a rebirth of the past. It is important to note that this is indeed his attempt at a musical exorcism, much in the same way he describes ten years later. He does not present a lamentation about the past that is gone, even if he begins the set with *Sonata-Reminiscenza*, which ultimately has a somber and sad mood. The music in the rest of *Forgotten Melodies* is on an upward trajectory, pushing higher and higher in its optimism, striving to reach for a celebration of an ideal music. Medtner ends the opus 38 set with A major, transforming the minor material from the sonata. And with all three opuses in *Forgotten Melodies*, he ends with a final work titled *Danza ditirambica*, where he tries to capture Greek dance in the dithyramb. Here, spirituality and religious purity through music are brought forth through Dionysian celebration.

Before presenting a closer reading of *Sonata-Reminiscenza* and the rest of the *Forgotten Melodies*, it is necessary to make sense of the trajectory of all of the cycles. In the opus 38 cycle,

¹⁵⁸ The persistent interest in the works of Heinrich Schenker highlights this.

as mentioned above, *Sonata-Reminiscenza*, begins as the prelude. But also as a larger scale work within the set, it provides the ground for reminiscence. Throughout the sonata occur melodies that we are to recognize as forgotten. Parts or transformed versions of these motives and melodies show up in the pieces that we encounter later on in the set. After the sonata, the works/movements that follow are the pieces of music that are in the past. *Danza Graziosa* is an intimate graceful lighthearted dance, followed by an outdoor celebration in *Danza Festiva*, dithyrambic and bacchanalian in its enthusiasm. These are then followed by *Canzona Fluviala*, song of the river, being a deliberate reference to the water nymph of Slavic tales, Rusalka (similar to Ondine and Lorelei, or the sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*). *Danza Rustica*, as its name implies, follows as a rustic dance, colored with the feel of an intoxicating waltz. *Canzona Serenata*, a serenade and song during night time leads to the magical yet frightening *Danza Silvestra*, a dance of the forest, where sylvan creatures, especially *Leshii*, a forest spirit, are present. Finally, he ends with a coda, *Alla Reminiscenza*. The *Sonata-Reminiscenza* and *Alla Reminiscenza* present a frame of reminiscence. The narrative journey present throughout this cycle gives the sense of a return, which ultimately gives the impression that all the dances and songs are within the memory. The mythological symbols implied by the music, though not deliberately mentioned, are contained within the dream world and can remain fantasy, while also remaining real in historical memory. In this sense, Medtner contains the magical and mythological elements of nature, water nymph and forest spirit, within the past as symbols, but does not exclude them. So ultimately, the most abstract parts of the set—the sonata and coda—remain on the outside, while all of the parts that evoke dream in reminiscence hint at the programmatic.

The opus 39 set that comes after consists of the following: *Meditazione*, *Romanza*, *Primavera*, *Canzona Matinata*, and *Sonata-Tragica*. All five pieces use sonata form with only the final piece being labeled as the genre name. While still hinting at the programmatic, these movements are much more abstract compared to opus 38. What is particularly interesting about this cycle of pieces is that Medtner slowly transforms the harmonic language from piece to piece. The *Meditazione* begins in an entirely octatonic fashion reminiscent of Scriabin's later works. Throughout the piece, the octatonicism—which typically represents magic in Russian music, and does so here—pushes forward leaving the harmony unresolved and pent up until it is finally released as a major chord at the end. The entire meditation is the conjuring of a spell, not unlike Scriabin's *Vers la flamme*, though much more conservative in style. In the *Romanza*, we hear a haunting melody and accompaniment to a song inhabiting a highly chromatic and decadent harmonic scheme. The song eventually morphs into a waltz, which accelerates, swirls, and explodes into a fury at its end. The *Romanza* is immediately followed by *Primavera*, which is a depiction of spring. Medtner subtitles this *Frühlingsmärchen*, or “Spring fairy tale,” giving an immediate impression of a story being told about spring. In *Primavera*, Medtner gives a virtuosic depiction of the dramatic change that occurs when spring comes in Russia. It is a rebirth of life; all the quiet of the bleak, dead winter disappears and rushing streams act as accompaniment to the vibrancy of life and all nature around. The joyous sounds of spring and the permeating sense of love are depicted by stacked chords resolving comfortably throughout the piece. Finally, the cycle ends with the *Canzona Matinata*, a song about the morning, which immediately jumps without pause into the *Sonata-Tragica*, a piece depicting tragedy. In these two final pieces, Medtner writes in the strictest manner with all dissonance resolving to consonance in the most conventional manner possible.

Throughout this set Medtner is focusing on spirituality. He does this by transforming the harmonic language of the cycle so as to reinforce tonality and sonata form. The result of this is that Medtner outlines a narrative that is analogous to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. Essentially, if we were to give the opus 39 cycle a subtitle, it would be *The Rebirth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. With this, the music Medtner depicts the changing musical climate in Europe during the turn of the century. The *Meditazione*, with its octatonic harmony, reflects the meditations on spirituality and the occult so prevalent during this time period. The *Romanza* then follows with its chromatic song morphing into an unstable waltz. Here, much like Ravel's *La Valse*, Medtner depicts the destruction of 19th Century ideals and reality.¹⁵⁹ The waltz, the symbol of 19th-Century bourgeois culture, is destroyed by the incessant chromaticism throughout the work. The vestiges of 19th-Century culture are destroyed by the decadence that permeated this time. These two pieces, the *Meditazione* and *Romanza*, can be understood as the Dionysian element so prevalent in *Fin de Siècle* society. Medtner, being the purveyor of musical theurgy Bely made him out to be, then treats the rest of the cycle like a prophecy. *Primavera* is supposed to symbolize the rebirth of culture. But it is told as a tale, implying that it is not necessarily happening just yet. The *Canzona Matinata* is a song about the morning and symbolizes youth, which is then supposed to represent culture in its early stages after rebirth. And finally to culminate, the *Sonata-Tragica* represents the maturity of that culture, making a reference to Greek tragedy. Adhering to the Nietzschean model, Medtner insinuates that the Dionysian element inherent within the European subjectivity during this time needed the Apollonian element to keep it in check.

¹⁵⁹ See Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1981): 3-5.

Here, Medtner's music is meant to be theurgic in that all of the thoughts, memories, and reminiscences of the opus 38 cycle are being dealt with in real time. Medtner does not leave the *Forgotten Melodies* stuck stagnant and static, wallowing in dreams and reminiscence. He places the music in the present day with all of the decadent harmonies. What's even more interesting is that Medtner later composes a song titled *Winternacht* (Winter night) Op. 45, No. 5 that uses the same opening meditative gestures and arpeggios. The impression here is this meditation is on the winter and darkness itself—or to look at this metaphorically, the bleak winter and abyss are the night time of a culture dormant and ready to burst forth in the future.



Figure 3.1. Nikolai Medtner, *Meditazione* from *Forgotten Melodies*, Op. 39—opening eight measures.

Winternacht
Worte von J. EICHENDORF

ЗИМНЯЯ НОЧЬ
Слова И. ЭЙХЕНДОРФА



Русский текст С. СЕВЕРЦЕВА

Op. 46 № 5

Lento $\text{♩} = 42$

poco quasi cadenza

f *ten.* *pp* *mf* *poco più mosso* *m. d.*

una corda *tre corde*

accelerando e cresc.

P *sf* *mobile*

dim. e ritard.

М. 29308 Г.

Figure 3.2. Medtner, *Winternacht*, Op. 46, No. 5—opening nine measures

It is all the more fitting that the setting for opus 38 is in winter and the content is about dreaming. The opus 39 cycle acts as a sort of spiritual incantation where the transformation backwards towards strict conventions—such as tonality and the sonata form—can, through listening to and performing this music, bring back older styles and balance out the Dionysian and Apollonian elements in European life. This deals directly with his fear of a world that was losing its

spirituality and where his conservatism in compositional practice could try to steer music, life, and art in what he considered the right direction.

Placing both opus 38 and 39 together creates its own two part structure. This can be seen by the framing of two sonatas—opus 38 beginning with a sonata and opus 39 ending with one. These two cycles consist of music that represents the present. And while the theurgic element of the cycle seems to bring forth the *Sonata-Tragica* as the rebirth of Greek tragedy as a symbol of rebirth of musical culture, it also highlights the tragedy of contemporary musical life. Even the *Primavera*, where rebirth occurs, must be contained within a tale. In this sense, the fairy tale, a direct symbol of nation, becomes the means by which to bring change. This is not surprising since the bulk of Medtner's compositions happen to be fairy tales. The textual element and story-telling function as an incantation that brings that rebirth. What is unique about the fairy tale is that while it evokes spring in the Russian sense, where snow melts and life bursts forth, musically speaking it remains somewhat neutral. It is built mostly on pentatonic melodic styles but neither overtly Russian nor not Russian.

Finally, opus 40 consists of only dances: *Danza col canto*, *Danza sinfonica*, *Danza fiorata*, *Danza jubilosa*, *Danza ondulata*, and *Danza ditirambica*. This is in stark contrast to opus 39, which contained almost no dances; rather, the only such evoked was a dysfunctional one based on the waltz, which was prevalent and popular in Medtner's day. Also, this waltz was contained within the *Romanza*, an ambiguous title, implying a song or story, which may not specifically be a dance *per se*. The entire set constitutes a sort of return to the past that has already been achieved. In this sense, the dances and canzonas that occur throughout the entirety of the *Forgotten Melodies* function as symbols of the past. In opus 38, these dances and canzonas are entirely in the past, framed within the dream of reminiscence and containing mythological

and magical subject matter as symbols; in opus 39, it is in the present, and hence no dances or canzonas until the end where through an indication of theurgy, the *Canzona Matinata* represents “forgotten melody” and brings forth tragedy; and in opus 40, all the music is in the future, after the rebirth of all the ancient rhythms and melodies, symbolized here by the dances and canzonas.

The final dances present in opus 40 have interesting characteristics in comparison to the earlier works. Similar to *Primavera* in opus 39, they are Russian works that at the same time seem to lack any overtly Russian style. In fact, they seem much more neutral with respect to nationality—that is, they can be taken out of their Russian stylistic context and remain a more generic folk style. This uncovers another hidden narrative implied by the music. There is a universalizing effect that happens throughout the trajectory of the *Forgotten Melodies* cycle. The first set not only overtly displays very Russian mythological topics, but also presents a decidedly Russian intonation. The next set slowly moves away from this, hinting at Russian style indirectly, but focusing more on Wagnerian and other influences, whether through chromaticism, octatonic style, or subtle pentatonicism and images of spring in *Primavera*. And finally, the music for the final set is folk-like, but not markedly Russian, as at the beginning. If anything, it is ambiguously Russian. This is in fact how Medtner’s fairy tales work in general, save for one which is actually titled “Russian Folk Tale.” Medtner’s goal is to make a music, melding his Russian-ness and his propensity for German styles into a universal idiom.

* * *

As the title “*Reminiscenza*” implies, the opening of the first set is a sonata about recollection. It is a melancholy reflection on something lost. About a decade or so before Medtner composed this, there was a vibrant cultural life in Russia. The end of the 19th century saw the culmination of Romanticism; the culture of music in Europe was at its heyday. Thanks to

the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer via Richard Wagner, the aesthetic priority of music was given the utmost importance in the arts. Other artistic media aspired towards the condition of music because of its propensity towards the transcendental strain through abstraction. Or to put things more plainly, Schopenhauer saw music as a direct representation of human will and, through Wagner's guiding example, artists attempted to harness music's awesome power to bring forth greater clairvoyant truth. Nowhere were these philosophical and aesthetic ideals more important than within the artistic community of the Russian intelligentsia. It was from here that the Russian Symbolist movement blossomed, taking its cue from French Symbolism, German Idealism, Wagner, Nietzsche, and so on. We have seen this story play out in the previous chapters with the music of Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. The primary focus there was on spirituality through transcendental artworks.

This was the environment within which Medtner worked, along with his brother, Emil, who was an active participant in the Symbolist *milieu*. As music critic for Symbolist journals such as *Vesy* and *Zolotoe Runo*, Emil made a concerted effort to influence the direction of discourse and creativity. But his primary agenda was to bolster his brother's career. At this time, two waves of Russian Symbolism came to fruition: one with a focus on aesthetic concerns and another that followed with spiritual aims at transforming the world that seemed headed towards apocalypse. Unlike his compatriot Alexander Scriabin, who saw his duty to bring forth this apocalypse through music, Medtner was never outwardly a Symbolist *per se*. Music's unquestioned beauty and spiritual content in itself was his primary concern. Others within his artistic circle, however, read into Medtner's pieces an incantatory quality. Andrei Bely, for example, describes Medtner's first opus as "musical theurgy," (or a sort of white magic) reading some musical gestures as representing the chaos of snowstorms, a symbolic harbinger of

impending spiritual change. Bely professes this in an article titled “O teurgii” or “On Theurgy” in Dmitry Merezhkovsky’s journal *Novyi put’* (New Path).¹⁶⁰ The idea of Bely’s interpretation here was to describe the musical symbols in a way so as to give a coherent understanding of impulses within the music. (This is in fact backed up by Medtner’s own fascination with trying to inscribe Dionysian imagery of snowstorms in his own song setting of Pushkin’s poem *Winter Evening*.) Bely is acting as both poet and theorist. While the poetry, paintings, and music amongst the Symbolists were never explicit, the theoretical ideas of many within the movement were in discussion and debate. Bely’s interest in Medtner’s music was most certainly the result of the heavy influence Emil had over him in the early stages of his career, but it is important to remember that he came to his theoretical conclusions and observations on his own.¹⁶¹ Bely’s interest in Medtner’s *Stimmungsbilder* Op. 1 is of particular significance.

As I mentioned previously, this set functions as a sort of model or precursor for the *Forgotten Melodies*, and through Bely’s Symbolist reading, provides a far more important backdrop for this world Medtner recalled. And while, yes, the *Stimmungsbilder* is a *first* opus, that should not exclude it from serious discussion; after all, it was admired by Rachmaninoff, who mentioned that the composer had set the bar incredibly high for himself with the work. And their friend Alexander Goldenweiser (writing under the pseudonym A. Borisov) said the following in a review: “Not many composers can boast of such an Opus 1 as Mr. Medtner’s

¹⁶⁰ Andrei Bely, “O teurgii,” *Novyi put’* 9 (September, 1903).

¹⁶¹ The musicological discourse tends to focus little on Bely’s interests in Medtner, yet I think it is perhaps time to take seriously what was specifically theurgic that he recognized. Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 7-9. Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 317-318.

Stimmungsbilder; these are not tentative experiments in composition but the works of a mature and original talent.”¹⁶² Here is what Bely said of the work:

The first number of the collection expresses exactly that feeling which inspired Lermontov to write his famous lines:

Выхожу один я на дорогу;	Lone I walk upon the road;
Сквозь туман кремнистый путь блестит;	The stony path gleams through the mist;
Ночь тиха. Гечсыз dytvktn ,jue?	The night is still. Wilderness heeds God,
И звезда с звездою говорит.	And star speaks with star.

But this division between nature, solemnly peaceful in the embraces of night’s dark blue ether, and the soul, poised above the crevices, is felt somewhere deep inside when one hears the chords flowing, as though soaring to heaven. . . In subsequent passages. . . where Lermontov either broke off or, surrounded by chaos, prognosticated, Medtner, inspired by love, aspires to make his way through the mist. Like any profound, active, power of prayer—Medtner’s endeavor, like his compositions, is *theurgic*.¹⁶³

Bely is talking about the first piece in the set: *Prologue*. As noted, Medtner placed an epigram at the top of the score of Lermontov’s *The Angel*, the same he used in the beginning of his diatribe in *The Muse and the Fashion*. Bely, himself an amateur pianist who undoubtedly saw the score, uses a different Lermontov poem to refer to the same platonic ideal evoked by both. Of course, this *Prologue* in the opus is not only for the musical suite itself, but also deliberately a hidden program: it is a prologue to life. The poor soul being carried above in *The Angel* is of course destined for a life of dole and will only experience the dull songs of earth in comparison to those of heaven—always striving to remember that heavenly song.

¹⁶² A. Borisov, “Bibliografiya,” *Musikal’niy mir* 4 (1905): 4.

¹⁶³ Bely, “O teurgii,” 116-7. The following English translation is quoted entirely from Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*, 8-9.

ACHT
STIMMUNGSBILDER

ВОСЕМЬ
КАРТИН НАСТРОЕНИЙ

Prolog

I

Пролог

По небу полуночи ангел летел
И тихую песню он пел...
Слова М. Лермонтова

Op. 1 № 1

Andante cantabile $\text{♩} = 60$

Piano

*pianissimo
sempre pedale legatissimo possibile*

Figure 3.3. Medtner, *Stimmungsbilder* Op. 1, first movement—first six measures plus Lermontov epigram.

The music depicts this song in the right hand thumb (alto line), which is then echoed in the left hand thumb (tenor line), carefully placed with triplets above in hemiola. The effect is that of being suspended in the air. Even without Bely's discussion of theurgy, this music is inherently synaesthetic. Even a cursory glance shows that Christian symbolism of triplets (trinity) and E major—four sharps (*kreuz* in German) in the shape of a cross—already are embedded in the score. But the sound and intent is what Bely is after most: the feeling of music in this way functions like prayer for God's mercy and this is why it is so venerated; it's put in simple, pious terms, reflected through nature—struggling between light and dark, reaching for a return to the

past, before life, where the soul is one with God and heaven—is what makes this music theurgic. This is why Bely found Scriabin’s composition style so contrived; he explains this in a humorous manner when describing the details of a conversation he had with the mystic composer: “All the while the little white fingers of his pale little hand kept jabbing out chords of some kind in the air: his pinkies took the ‘Kant’ note, his middle finger would trace the ‘Culture’ theme, and all at once—whoops!—a leap of the index finger over a whole row of keys to the one marked ‘Blavatsky.’”¹⁶⁴

There is an inherent orthodoxy to Bely’s transcendental Symbolism and theurgy, (he was certainly more drawn to Vladimir Solovyov’s Sophia than Scriabin), which is why Medtner’s music was so attractive to Bely. If we remember, Medtner’s process through composition was to attempt to recall this heavenly music. For Medtner, sincerity in religiosity was not just to be referred to, but *to be enacted in life*. For example, upon re-reading Lermontov’s *The Angel* two years after having written his *Stimmungsbilder*, Medtner realized all of the words to the poem fit entirely in the melody of the *Prologue*, wherein he promptly set it as a song.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Andrei Bely, *Mezhdu dvukh revolyutsii* (Leningrad, 1934), 348-349. Quoted entirely from Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 317.

¹⁶⁵ Martyn, 17.

АНГЕЛ

СЛОВА М. ЛЕРМОНТОВА

Der Engel

Worte von M. LERMONTOW



Deutsch von F. FIEDLER

Op. 1 bis

Andante con moto
sempre pianissimo

По не - бу по - лу - но - чи ан - гел ле -
Um Mit - ter - nacht schweb - le - mit lei - sem Ge -

sempre pianissimo e legato

Con pedale

- тел и ти - ху - ю пес - ню он
- sang Ein En - gel - den Him - mel ent -

Figure 3.4. Medtner, *The Angel*, Op. 1bis—the opening six measures.

Through Medtner, we see that Bely's conception of theurgy is very different in comparison to Scriabin's and presents a concept of religious magic that not everyone in the Symbolist *milieu* agreed upon. This relationship between Bely and the Medtner brothers ultimately resulted in collaboration, in which Medtner set Bely's poem *Epitafiya* (Epitaph), a setting then published in *Zolotoe runo*, the only musical composition ever to appear in entirety in a Symbolist journal.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ *Zolotoe runo* 3/1 (1908).



ОГЛАВЛЕНИЕ.

Художественный отдѣлъ.

ОБЗОРЪ ВЫСТАВОКЪ.

Стр.

48 снимковъ съ картинъ выставокъ „Союзъ русскихъ художниковъ“, „Вѣнокъ“ и „Посмертная выставка К. А. Савицкаго“ 5—30

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Заглавный листъ художественной части—С. Ключникова.

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ANNONCES.

Figure 3.5. *Zolotoe runo*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1908)—Table of Contents featuring Medtner's setting of Bely's *Epitaph*, Op. 13, No. 2.

„Золотому блеску вѣрилъ.“

(Изъ Эпитафiи ПТ.)

СТИХ. А. БѢЛАГО. („Золотое Руно“ Мартъ 1907)

Н. МЕДТЕРЪ. Соч. 13. № 2.

Andante con moto.

CANTO. *mf* *dimin.*
Зо-ло-то-му блес-ку вѣ-рилъ, а у-меръ отъ сол-нечныхъ ог-нѣй.

PIANO. *mf* *p*

mf *dimin.* *p*
Ду-мой вѣ - ка измѣ-рилъ, а жи-вѣ про-жить не су-

pp
мѣль. Не смѣй-тесъ надъ мерт-вымъ по - э-томъ: сне-си-те е-му цвѣ -

1499

Figure 3.6. First page of Medtner's setting of Bely's *Epitaph* as it appears in *Zolotoe runo*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1908).

This poem by Bely, and its musical setting, continues to follow the same religious and theurgic

impulse as the *Stimmungsbilder*:

Золотому блеску верил,
А умер от солнечных стрел.
Думой века измерил,
А жизнь прожить не сумел.

I aspired to soar in sun-light,
Its arrows of fire made me fall;
Heaven and earth I measured
But how to live not all.

Не смейтесь над мертвым поэтом:
Снесите ему цветок.
На кресте и зимой и летом
Мой фарфоровый бьётся веноч.

Despise not the poet who lies here,
But gladden his grave with flowers;
For my porcelain wreath is crumbling,
From the frost and the mid-summer showers.

Цветы на нём побиты.
Образок полинял.
Тяжёлые плиты.
Жду, чтоб их кто-нибудь снял.

All moldy is the ikon
And the flow'rs decay;
The grave-stones are heavy,
Ah come and lift them away!

Любил только звон колокольный
И закат.
Отчего мне так больно, больно!
Я не виноват.

I loved the peace of the sunset,
And the bell,
And ah, then, why must I suffer?
None can ever tell.

Пожалейте, придите;
Навстречу венком метнусь.
О, любите меня, полюбите -
Я, быть может, не умер, быть может,
проснусь - Вернусь!

Oh take pity upon me,
My faded wreath calls to you,
And implores you to love me,
For my soul has not perished,
But yet will be born anew.¹⁶⁷

Here, again, is the same theme of reminiscence that so permeates the other poetry. Medtner's setting and the music's ineffability, then, make for a very potent means of expression. The relationship between text and music ultimately has connotative moments (the resonance of bells and the feeling of desire through chromaticism), but the sense of longing and sadness in the minor key brings performer or listener to an emotional experience similar to prayer, as in the *Prologue* of the *Stimmungsbilder*. Medtner, composing within the conventions of the period, felt music's language needed no explanation for symbols of sonic events, nor any alteration beyond a

¹⁶⁷ Translation from Henry Drinker, *English Texts for the Songs of Nicholas Medtner* (1946), xi.

natural “tuning” of compositional process. Basically, you needed to adhere closely to the rules of tonality and voice-leading and carefully mediate the use of dissonance as mode of expression. Like the discussion in the previous chapter on Scriabin, synaesthetic and unconscious understanding of the music brings forth its meaning, but, here, with a closer devotion to an ideal rather than defamilization of conventions. This is where Medtner and Scriabin part ways most dramatically. Medtner’s music, through the same Wagnerian conception of the future, instead uses the evocation of the past as a means for a return to God and the music of heaven. For Medtner and Bely, Scriabin went astray by obscuring the conventions of music far too much: even if motivic and harmonic practices remained strict in compositional rules, the result was an *unnatural* conception of music. This is the ultimate difference between Scriabin’s and Medtner’s conceptions of theurgy and how it worked. The theurgy Bely described in these early works is, for Medtner, in service of a spiritual change that was to take place at the dawn of the new century, where the future brings the rebirth and resurrection of a natural and platonic ideal of the past.

* * *

This was the world Medtner lived in until the revolution. By 1920, the apocalypse so consistently alluded to during the *fin de siècle* arrived in a series of tumultuous events— the 1905 Revolution, the Russo-Japanese war, the First World War, the abdication of the throne by the Tsar, and finally the 1917 Revolution. The civil war between the Reds and Whites followed, along with a famine and typhus epidemic. Death and destruction was everywhere and the optimistic spirit of the age was crushed by the juggernaut of change. In addition to these broader hardships, as noted, Medtner’s own experiences included family death, confiscated property, and an uncertain future.

Sonata-Reminiscenza is Medtner’s response. The piece contains a complex and expanded sonata-form that highlights very specific events. It begins with a slow and quiet introduction, a melancholic theme of reminiscence that returns in the middle of the sonata and again at the end.



Figure 3.7. Medtner, *Sonata-Reminiscenza*, Op. 38, No. 1—“Reminiscence” theme.

What follows is the first theme group, which begins with a melody outlining a stark *Dies Irae* pattern (to be followed by a living folk style dance).



Figure 3.8. Medtner, *Sonata-Reminiscenza*, Op. 38, No. 1—first theme group.

The second theme, in the dominant, presents a languid scalar melody in the tenor line, descending in the style of a lament.

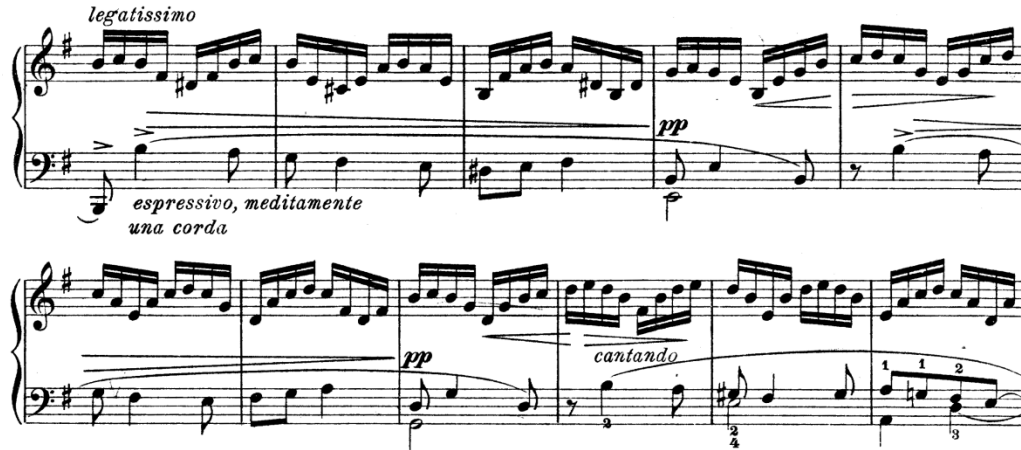


Figure 3.9. Medtner, *Sonata-Reminiscenza*, Op. 38, No. 1—second theme scalar passage in tenor line.

These two melodies in the first and second theme groups, respectively, along with the theme of “reminiscence,” constitute the primary symbolic material in this piece. The “reminiscence” theme, with its persistent yet slowly unfolding sixteenth note gesture, comes across as snow slowly falling upon the ground, or the outpouring of tears. The sadness portrayed through the minor key and the calm yet mobile repetitive four note phrase of this gesture is very similar in style (if not in motive) to the opening of the third movement of Rachmaninoff’s *Suite No. 1* which evokes imagery from a poem by Fyodor Tyutchev with the following opening line: “Tears, human tears, that pour forth beyond telling,”

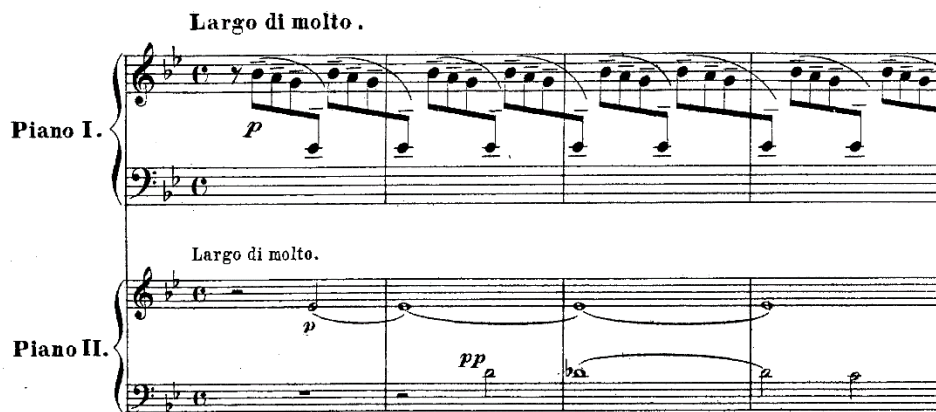


Figure 3.10. Rachmaninoff, *Suite No. 1* in D minor—opening four measures.

The first theme, *Dies Irae*, symbolizes death, but also winter. It is a representation of a world once teeming with life that is now empty. In addition to the melancholy, there is a sense of cultural and spiritual stasis that permeates outwards. Already it is important to mention here that the musical gestures implore multiple meanings. As mentioned above, they come forth without direct indication—the symbolism occurs unconsciously. Like Bely, however, I am attempting to parse what the music intones.

The languid, lamenting second theme, characterized by a descending scale that begins with a dotted rhythm, is brought forward gently in the left hand with a twirling right hand accompaniment. Symbolically, this is the wind, but much more subdued than the snow storms Bely discusses in his analysis. The quality of lament suggests a cry from the wind for something lost. The musical imagery here of the wind is a significant trope in Symbolist poetry and takes shape as the approach of a divine woman or the “eternal feminine.” The idea comes from the influential works of Vladimir Solovyov, who spoke of the coming of Divine Sophia, the second coming of Christ in female form, and his descriptions of his encounters with Her played an important role within the Symbolist movement, as well as Russian spiritual life.¹⁶⁸ (Bely and Alexander Blok, for example, saw their love interest in Lyubov Mendeleeva as being the incarnation of this divine woman.) The symbolism also evokes Gretchen as savior at the end of Goethe’s *Faust*, but also, and most importantly, the “woman clothed in the sun” that signals the return of Christ at the end of revelations, which also is signified by the wind. The downward lament of the melody ultimately suggests a return that cannot happen. Along with the twirling

¹⁶⁸ Judith Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) and Samuel Cioran, *Vladimir Solov'ev and the Knighthood of the Divine Sophia* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977).

accompaniment gesture, Medtner places this lamenting theme symbolically within a normal sonata-form convention—the second theme is a feminine theme.

Musically speaking, the descending scalar melody as *leitmotif* refers back to previous works invoking similar important ideas, especially his Sonata in F minor op. 5, written much earlier. Here, he includes the same descending melody that begins with a dotted rhythm but in the soprano line.¹⁶⁹

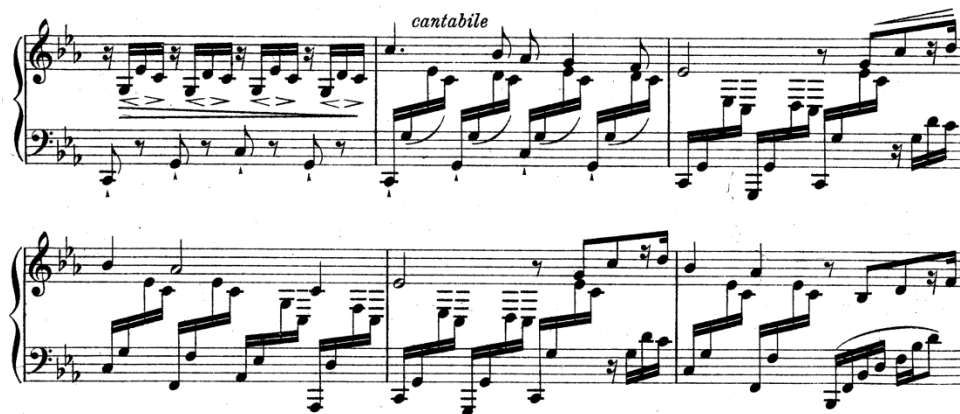


Figure 3.11. Medtner, Piano Sonata in F minor Op. 5, first movement—second theme in soprano.

This, too, is a “feminine” second theme, described by his brother Emil as the “sound of dawn” representing the year 1901, thus understood as referring to the spiritual hopes and optimism of the new century.¹⁷⁰ In this particular sonata, the C minor of this theme transforms into F major at the climactic end of the piece.

¹⁶⁹ There is also an important connection here to make with this theme to Liszt’s *Vallee d’Obermann* and the Sonata in B minor, both of which address transformation in Senancour’s *Obermann* and Goethe’s *Faust* respectively.

¹⁷⁰ Ljunggren, *The Russian Mephisto*, 17.



Figure 3.12. Medtner, Piano Sonata in F minor Op. 5, last movement—second theme transformed into choral climax of the work.

Through this, the divine feminine is symbolically represented first as the approach of the wind, especially with its constant sixteenth notes, and finally as the sunlight at dawn bringing the woman clothed in the sun and the return of Christ. In *Sonata-Reminiscenza*, the second theme and its multiple meanings, similarly comes across as the approaching wind in the winter landscape, but within this setting, the sunlight of dawn is enveloped and obscured, both by the darkness of winter and by the representation of night that is also evoked by death.

What follows the two themes of the sonata is a starkly violent development. Here, the second theme is placed again in the tenor register of the piano and is accompanied by increasingly loud and dissonant chordal arpeggiations. The languid wind of the second theme transforms into the chaotic Dionysian snowstorms mentioned previously as the harbingers of change. The violence, however, indicates a much harsher reality regarding the apocalyptic symbolism.



Figure 3.13. Medtner, Sonata-Reminiscenza Op. 38, No. 1—development with second theme in tenor line.

What Medtner unfolds in the rest of this sonata is a narrative that winds through other thematic material but ultimately culminates in a climactic return of the second theme. But this is immediately followed by the reminiscence theme bringing the entire sonata to a melancholic close. The second theme, with its apocalyptic hope of a return of Christ, does not come forth in triumph. The music resolves, covered in falling snow, the sun obscured by the gray clouds in the sky. In framing the sonata-form with this reminiscence theme, Medtner consigns the events within the *Sonata-Reminiscenza* to the status of memory.

Figure 3.14. Medtner, *Sonata-Reminiscenza*, Op. 38, No. 1—ending.

From a later perspective, Medtner’s musical craft and philosophy were ultimately unsuccessful. Even at the time, this endeavor to reinvigorate an older style may have seemed unrealistic or foolish in an era producing the likes of Stravinsky and Schoenberg. Yet, historiographically, it points to a more complicated musical world, departing from the simple straight line of narrative progress that is the usual reductive portrait of this period. Moreover, the persistence of Schenkerian work in music theory during the 20th century, not to mention the veneration of “past masters” in classical music culture, shows that this more conservative approach to music lives on today. It is a residue of romanticism still pertinent in fashioning musical subjectivity for ensuing generations. Medtner’s brief resurgence in the 1990s should not surprise anyone considering its vitality as a fresh new style in an old practice with old repertoire.

However, the religious impulse in Medtner's music, and all the other composers associated with the Symbolist movement, cannot be ignored as a defining characteristic in musical modernism.

* * *

This trend towards spirituality in music during the *fin de siècle* is a bright, divine spark that shines on the horizon of 20th-century art. At the end of this long journey discovering the music of Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, and Medtner, one encounters a rich and vibrant world of music, in many ways previously unseen, unheard, and unexperienced. It is my hope, however, that in this study, I have illuminated some new paths towards understanding musical imagination contextual to the period. In addition, work on these specific composers provides a strong emphasis on an important facet of religiosity inherited by western classical music today. The triumvirate of these Russian composers and the Russian Symbolist movement show an engagement with the transcendental strain in European artistic culture that deserves far more reflection and research and has broader historiographic implications for Musicology and Slavic Studies.

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