

## Alexander Scriabin: New Age *En Avant de la Lettre*

Robert F. Slesinski

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The following reflections have been spurred by a most remarkable evening in a concert hall, viz., the season-opening concert of the Cape Cod Symphony in Hyannis, Massachusetts, which, among other symphonic masterpieces chosen to bring about a pairing of the visual with the sonant, specifically highlighted Alexander Scriabin's<sup>1</sup> daring "Prometheus: Poem of Fire," Op. 60, composed over the years 1908–1910. In their own time, numerous illuminati of Russia's Silver Age and beyond expressed their appreciation of Scriabin in the standard literary genre of "publitsistika" (essay criticism), figures like Viacheslav Ivanov, Pavel Florensky, and Aleksei Losev, much in the manner of Sergius Bulgakov, who notably penned critical essays on Picasso after visiting the private art gallery of S.I. Shchukin in Moscow, "The Corpse of Beauty" (*Trup krasoty*), and on Pushkin's dramatic play "Mozart and Salieri" upon re-reading it.<sup>2</sup>

This marvelous encounter with the Muses, which I enjoyed on 22 September 2012, made a prior "intellectual" reading of the views of the aforementioned Silver Age illuminati become existentially real – the bodily senses truly were "seduced," as it were, by the nectar of the gods. The "early" Scriabin is most

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<sup>1</sup> According to present transliteration standards, we should be referring to "Aleksandr Skriabin," but he is better known on the English-speaking stage as "Alexander Scriabin."

<sup>2</sup> For these review essays, see *Tikhie dumy* (Quiet Thoughts) (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1976; reprint of the original edition of Moscow of 1918): "Trup krasoty," 32–52; "Motsart i Sal'eri," 63–70. For his footnote commentary of Scriabin see nn. 8 and 16 below.

noted for his lyrical piano compositions – sonatas, études, preludes, nocturnes – that can only be described as being “Chopinesque” in quality. As his style matured, especially under the influence of enthusiasts of the Theosophical Society of Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), the Belgian Society of which he was a member, Scriabin evolved toward the atonal in search, as it were, for a “mystical tone,” calling it the “chord of pleroma” (*akhord pleromy*), more commonly known as either the “mystic chord” or “Prometheus chord,” all in view of evoking a preternatural stillness beyond man’s conceptualizing abilities attuned to the tenets of theosophy that would render music a creative exercise in *theurgy*, a work, indeed, of the divine in the human.<sup>3</sup> But it is precisely this theosophical pretension of Scriabin that would alienate him from the aforementioned Silver Age luminaries. His exalted sense of his artistic self could only serve to foster this estrangement: “I am the apotheosis of world creation; I am the aim of aims, the end of ends.”<sup>4</sup> In this line, his ninth sonata has even been called “the Black Mass.”

Ironically, this genial pianist and composer died young. Born in 1872 he died in 1915 at the age of forty-three of septicemia brought on either by an infected boil on his lip or by a shaving cut. But other particulars of his life also bear noting. He was a classmate of the equally acclaimed pianist and composer Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) with whom he sparred over the matter of “synesthesia,” a phenomenon of physiology wherein a sensation in one part of the body stimulates one in another sphere of the body, as, for example, in the specific case of Scriabin, colors being associated with specific musical tones. Whether Scriabin himself was ever a true synesthete remains an open question, but his claim that harmonious

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<sup>3</sup> For an incisive overview of theosophy in Russia, see Maria Carlson, “No Religion Higher Than Truth:” *A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875–1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) and on Scriabin (Aleksandr Skriabin) in particular, see pp. 8, 159, 191, 193, 245n. 5, 246n. 14.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted by his biographer Faubion Bowers in *Scriabin: A Biography* 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1996).

tones correspond to specific colors is not subject to speculation.

On this score, Scriabin's "Prometheus: The Poem of Fire," his final large-scale composition, is a clear testimony to this thesis. Scored for a large orchestra, an organ, a choir, and virtuoso piano, the work also calls for a "clavier à lumières" or "luce,"<sup>5</sup> i.e., a "color organ" that would provide the necessary colors for the composition's varying tonalities, an effort, alas, that proved technologically unfeasible at the time of the work's composition. The Cape Cod Symphony Orchestra presentation conducted by Maestro Jung-Ho Pak, under the guidance of musicologist Anna Gaby and lighting designer Justin Townsend, on the other hand, offered its audience a true-to-form *luce* performance of Scriabin's daring "theosophical" composition.

At the same time, the staging could not but draw one into the "New Age" that would supplant, as it were, the traditional Christian world order. The very title of the symphony sustains this point of view. Prometheus, an interloper into Zeus' divine world, stole his "fire" and bequeathed it to man, thus enabling human civilization to come into its own. Ancient philosophy in the person of Plato acknowledges this with his deft and playful pitting of the brothers Prometheus ("the Fore-Thinker") and Epimetheus ("the After-Thinker") against one another in his accounting of the rise of Greek civilization in his *Protagoras* (320d–322a). For the modern West, no better symbol for human striving, particularly for scientific knowledge, exists than in the ancient figure of Prometheus, but also with a *negative* concomitant – the risk of over-reaching, as immortalized in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which is straightforwardly subtitled "The Modern Prometheus."

But Scriabin's planned masterwork *Mysterium*, if it were to have been brought to fruition, would have surely eclipsed "Prometheus: A Poem of Fire" in its magnitude. Planned for staging in the foothills of the Himalayas, this multi-media composition was envisioned to cause an "Armageddon" and thereupon effectuate a universal spiritual transfiguration of the

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<sup>5</sup> Italian for "light."