Scriabin’s music and ideology through the analysis of the Fifth Sonata

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Abstract

Scriabin was a composer and pianist born in at the end of the 19th century, when European ideology and music were in the midst of a crisis, torn between conservative and progressive forces. This thesis will analyze the original place the controversial character of Scriabin took in a musical land in reconstruction, and how the Fifth Sonata holds a pivotal place in his overall work.

The specificities of Scriabin’s work will be put back into their historical and sociological context, in order to understand the birth of his musical ideas, representative of his life philosophical quests. Scriabin wrote ten piano sonatas, where the Fifth Sonata can be seen as a mediation to its musical maturity. Its analysis will serve at illustrating the singularity and the historical determinations of Scriabin’s art in music history.
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Introduction

In his book *Poetics of Music*, Stravinsky refers to Scriabin questioning the times when Russian music, at the end of the 19th century, seemed to be “on the eve of a dictatorship of conservatism.”¹ He introduces the musical changes to come by asking: “For frankly, is it possible to connect a musician like Scriabin with any tradition whatsoever? Where did he come from? Who are his forebears?”²

This thesis will gather historical references and use musical analysis to answer this question, trying to grasp the complexity of a controversial character, who was described as a “mad genius”³ in his times who even asserted, “I am God... I am the instant illuminating eternity, I am the affirmation, I am Ecstasy.”⁴ He is now considered as “a singular Russian artist whose art brilliantly reflected the cultural climate of his era,”⁵ an era of transition, when music was looking for itself, at the end of the romantic movement, after the death of Wagner and just before *classical music* cut itself from the general public⁶.

Scriabin pursued an important reflection on the future of tonality and developed his own language, in somewhat disregard of Russia’s musical environment⁷. In the book *Alexandre Scriabine ou L’ivresse des sphères*, Jean-Yves Clément claims that Scriabin “leaves a revolutionary musical corpus, as important as those of Schönberg, Bartók, Stravinsky or Prokofiev, who will dedicate his Rêves for orchestra to him in 1910”⁸.

To understand the form and specificities of Scriabin’s work, we will first put it back into its historical and sociological context, in order to understand the birth of his singular musical ideas and isolate the characteristic of his oeuvre. As stated in the Scriabin Companion, “The Fifth Sonata is a critical work in Scriabin’s stylistic development in many respects”⁹ and as we will show later, is representative of his life philosophical and musical quests. The analysis of this piece will serve at illustrating the singularity and the historical determinations of Scriabin’s art in music history.

² Ibid., 98.
⁴ Ibid., 15.
⁵ Ibid., 15.
⁸ Ibid., 13 «Scriabine est pour nous un compositeur de premier plan ; il laisse une œuvre d’une profonde origina- lité, la puissance d’expression stupéhante et totale- ment révolutionnaire,totalement révolutionnaire, au même titre que celles de Schönberg, Bartok, Prokofiev, qui appréciera beaucoup Scriabine et lui dédiera ses Rêves pour or- chestre de 1910, ou Stravinski »
1. **Biography - From religion to art as religion**

**Childhood**

“*I come from a noble and military family,*”¹⁰ Scriabin used to say when asked about his origins. Alexandre Nikolaievitch Scriabin was born on January 6, 1872, in Moscow, on Christmas’ day, according to the Russian calendar. His mother was a pianist and his father a diplomat. His grandfather comes from an aristocratic family with medieval roots, from the time when Russia was under Tartar domination. The tatars, many of them illiterate, frequently surrounded themselves with scribes; it seems that the name of Scriabin comes from a distant ancestor occupying this function. Over the centuries, the Scriabins settled in Moscow and supplied several generations of soldiers and diplomats. Turning the back on family customs, the grandfather Alexander allowed his son to study law. The mother of Scriabin died when he was 11, struck down by phthisis. Already separated from his mother while she was alive because of a risk of contagion. His father was named interpreter in Constantinople, soon at war against Russia, and will see him very little. Scriabin was raised by his grandmother, his great-aunt and his aunt.

Scriabin was a prodigy and a lonely child: at the age of five, he already had impressive skills as a pianist. His aunt said: “*In the evening, Sacha [Scriabin] never wanted to go to bed without kissing his little upright piano, like other Russian children embrace icons,*”¹¹ showing what Scriabin’s attitude to music will be “*that of a visceral, life lasting bond.*”¹² These extraordinary gifts are soon noticed by Anton Rubinstein, former piano professor of his mother, “*who predicted an exceptional career for him.*”¹³

In 1862, composer and pianist Anton Rubinstein created the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. In parallel, the famous Mighty Five or New Russian School was born, united by the same Russian nationalism and against the influence of western music. All of this will remain far from the concerns of Scriabin, totally foreign to the slightest musical nationalism and fascinated by an artistic absolute free from all concessions. Nor will he be interested in the post-romanticism of Tchaikovsky, whom he considered as conservative as his own art was revolutionary.¹⁴ It is also revealing that these musicians of the Mighty Five were not exclusively musicians, but also soldiers, chemists or railway officials, who later gave up all musical activity. Scriabin didn’t do anything other than music, his quest and his life will thus merge until the end.

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¹² Clément. *Alexandre Scriabine Ou Livrèsses Des sphères.* 35.
¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Clément. *Alexandre Scriabine.* 34.
Studies

In 1883, the first turning point in his musical education took place thanks to the teaching of the composer Georges Conus, descended from a family of French musicians, who studied at the Moscow Conservatory with professors Anton Arensky, Sergueï Taneïev and Tchaikovsky. Conus will leave a lasting imprint on Scriabin, in both organic and symmetrical aspect of its forms, and thanks to its metro-tectonic theory\(^\text{15}\), "a rational and revolutionary theory of musical architecture, postulating the rules of ‘good’ musical architectonics based on the law of the balance of temporal values."\(^\text{16}\)

Two other eminent teachers followed quickly, Sergueï Taneïev for the composition, then Nicolaï Zverev for the piano, who also trained Sergueï Rachmaninov, soon fellow student of Scriabin at the Conservatoire. Both were pensionnaires at Zverev’s mansion, who took care of them completely, guiding their readings (forcing them to read Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Stendhal, among others) and their cultural outings (even bringing them to the right restaurants and teaching them how to and what to order). Zverev was also a tyrant, sadistically punishing them and beating them regularly.\(^\text{17}\) Despite their differences and the way critics opposed them, the two pianists and composers will continue to respect each other throughout their lives; on Scriabin’s death, Rachmaninov gave a series of recitals entirely dedicated to his friend.

From 1883 to 1887, Scriabin never stopped to compose in all sorts of forms, rondo for orchestras, suites for strings, ballads, scherzo, fantasy-sonata and Hungarian rhapsody, so at the age of fifteen, his creative process was forming solidly.\(^\text{18}\)

In 1888, he enters the Moscow Conservatory in the piano class of Vassily Safonov, the rival of Zverev, who was in admiration for Scriabin’s ability to improvise. “I heard something not quite in C# minor and yet in was not in A major. He was improvising. This was one of the highest pleasures of my musical life.” According to Safanov, Scriabin already had attained the highest pianist’s aim which was “to make the piano not sound like a piano. He had his own rare and exceptional gifts — tonal variety, pedaling refinement… under his hands the instrument fair breathed”\(^\text{19}\)

Scriabin memorized the first 10 Sonatas of Beethoven by heart and studied him as a composer, looking for a system governing his compositions, before calling his work, “unbearably monotonous…the work of a muscleman with biceps.”\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 39.
\(^{17}\) Bowers. Scriabin: a Biography. 131.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 135-136.
\(^{19}\) Bowers. Scriabin: a Biography. 144.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 147-148.
At the end of his studies, in April 1892, he did not obtain the gold medal for composition due to a personal clash with his teacher Anton Arensky\footnote{Ibid., 152.}, who had Rachmaninov as his favorite\footnote{Ibid., 153.}. Scriabin also nearly failed to obtain the piano gold medal, due to a severe inflammation of the right wrist that started in 1891. It would have happened after having excessively practiced the *Reminiscences of Don Juan* by Franz Liszt. But even with an acute pain in his hand during the examination, he performed, as “*an angry gesture on the face of fate, the ‘Don Juan Fantasy.’ He played it Brilliantly.*”\footnote{Ballard, Bengston, Young. *The Alexander Scriabin Companion.* 20.}

A Providential Accident

Scriabin was nervous about his right hand for the rest of his life\footnote{Bowers. *Scriabin: a Biography.* 150.} and wrote in the notebooks of his first sonata, which he finished in 1893: “*The most serious event of my life: worries with my hand. What an obstacle for my supreme goal, glory, renown! Insurmountable! say the doctors. It’s the first real failure in my life. First serious thoughts, beginnings in self-analysis. I fear I will never be cured...*”\footnote{Clément. *Alexandre Scriabine.* 41.} As for Schumann, also a victim of a “provendential” accident of his hand, it is “*the turning point of his life, the one who will undoubtedly support his vocation as a composer instead of a performer.*”\footnote{Ibid., 42. ‘il s'agit bien là du tournant de sa vie, celui qui sans nul doute le confortera dans sa vocation de compositeur telle quelle s’affirme avec éclat dès ces années- là, à travers la Sonate n° 1 ».*}

He continued practicing with his left hand and developed a “*phenomenally independent and proficient left hand,*”\footnote{Bowers. *Scriabin: a Biography.* 150.} and wrote in 1894 two compositions for left hand alone, a Prelude and a Nocturne. Throughout those years and into 1900, Scriabin hovered on “*the brink of nervous breakdown*” and was almost drunk all the time\footnote{Ibid., 149.}.

2. **Music of Scriabin — Philosophy and Ideas**

Scriabin’s compositions are guided by an ideal, a life quest. For him, art is the door to the divine, and music takes him to a new world beyond the art any creator can call for. He was mystical from an early age, searching later in Indian philosophy, in esoterism, even in theosophy (occultist movement of Western esoterism), the elements likely to shed light on his questions\footnote{Clément. *Alexandre Scriabine.* 25.}. But in Scriabin (as in Liszt) the extra musical always follows the musical, and the program, when it exists, is only second. How could a theory put itself at the service of his music?
A new philosophy about to define Scriabin’s music

From the trauma of his injury came two direct consequences. Scriabin wrote his first piano sonata, complete with a Funeral March that recalls the Funeral March in Chopin’s Sonata No. 2 in Bb minor. The second was that Scriabin started questioning his devout Orthodox Christian faith, and “discovered within himself a creative potential that formed the basis of his new religion — the religion of art,” beginning a lifelong philosophical investigation. He wrote in his journal a text showing a clear dissociation from his Orthodox faith, but still addressing it to a divine figure:

_Whoever it was who mocked me, who cast me into a dark dungeon (...) I am still alive, I still love life, and I love humanity... I will go forth to announce to everyone my victory over you and over myself. I will go forth to warn them not to place their hopes in you, Life, Legacy, and Music not to expect anything from life, except what they can create for themselves._

From around 1903, Scriabin’s music became linked with his philosophical ideas in an inextricable way, discovering a new sense of purpose: “I cannot understand how to write just music now. How boring! Music, surely, takes on idea and significance when it is linked to a single plan within a whole view of the world... The purpose of music is revelation. What a powerful way of knowing it is!”

Scriabin’s mystical beliefs and his proximity with Theosophical beliefs—professing to achieve knowledge of God by spiritual ecstasy & direct intuition—are very well documented, in Faubion Bowers’ two-volume _Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer 1871–1915_ (1970) and _New Scriabin: Enigma and Answers_ (1973), as well as in _Scriabin: Artist and Mystic_ (1987), written by Scriabin’s friend and professor of philosophy Boris de Schloezer. These volumes include translations of many of Scriabin’s letters, philosophical notebooks and poetical works.

Scriabin’s thinking was very much a ‘product of his time and place’. His philosophical quest was fashionable at his time and shared by many of his contemporaries, especially the Russian Symbolist poets. They were fascinated by new theories about individuals and their roles in society, by what they called the _mysteries of the human mind and its untapped potential_.

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30 Ballard, Bengston, Young. _The Alexander Scriabin Companion_. 20.
31 Ibid., 20.
35 Ballard, Bengston, Young. _The Alexander Scriabin Companion_. 22.
36 Ibid., 22.
Scriabin’s close friendship with three symbolist poets, Jurgis Baltrusaitis (1873–1944), Constantine Balmont (1867–1942) and Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), as well as the influence of Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900) had a great impact on his music and creative ideology. The close friendship Scriabin had with Ivanov made him declare, “He’s so close to me and my thought-like no one else.” Solovyov and Ivanov’s theory was that art harnessed Divine Will, prophesying that Art must have a real force, enlightening and regenerating the entire human world.

For Scriabin, “music is only a particular vibration within the cosmos where all are called to vibrate together.” A theory which he will extend to a universal analogy — “Each grain of dust participates in the creative process,” he writes. “Our thoughts are outside us, they only seem to be ours, but in actual fact, after all, they are general.”

'Ecstasy' as the synthetic movement between progressive and conservative forces.

At the pick of his career, Scriabin wrote a poem that expresses all the contradictions of his music and of his times.

Like the word of Christ
As the deed of Prometheus
I closed Thee, O world of mine
With a single glance,
And by my one thought.

In that poem, Scriabin expresses well his state of mind of an artist torn between Greek polytheism and its naturalism (where Nature makes Humanity, as the Prometheus figure symbolizes), Christian monotheism (where God makes Humanity), and the synthesis, with the recent advent of modernity (where Humans make Humanity), putting humans and their newly discovered freedom at the center of their fate. The deep intellectual crisis raised from a new consciousness of death, first expressed by romanticism, was followed by a wave of conservatism in the second half of the 19th century, embodied by the novelty of National Schools created all over Europe. The music of Scriabin and his mystical approach can be seen

38 Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 175.
40 Ibid., 44.
41 Clément. Alexandre Scriabine. 20. ‘la musique n’est qu’une vibration particulière au sein du cosmos ou toutes sont appelées vibrer ensemble.’
42 Kelkel. Alexandre Scriabine: Sa Vie, l’ésotérisme Et Le Langage Musical Dans Son Oeuvre. 34.
as a product as well as a progressive reaction to this conservatism, a deep contradiction pushing him to explore new philosophical and musical grounds.\textsuperscript{44}

The concept of 'Ecstasy' that Scriabin developed in his music and writing seems to be the synthetic stage between the ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ forces at stake in his time, as shown in Scriabin’s drawing below, found in the Swiss Notebook of 1905, along with the \textit{Poem of Ecstasy}, that will be printed later as a heading for the ‘\textit{exuberant, beckoning Fifth Sonata}’\textsuperscript{45}:

\begin{center}
\textbf{Drawing 1 : Scheme of Evolution by Scriabin in 1905}\textsuperscript{46}
\end{center}

Scriabin describes in other texts these two opposite momenta, conservative forces and progressive forces, thesis and anti-thesis, which 'Ecstasy' manage to do the synthesis. The drawing shows on the left side a breakdown of these two opposite forces at stake (‘\textit{analysis}’) and on the right side the result of their combination (‘\textit{synthesis}’). The more the forces get closer (the more we go down toward 'Ecstasy'), the more the \textit{synthesis} seems to expend and vibrate, until we arrive to the ultimate junction, 'ECSTASY'.

\textsuperscript{44} Pagani, Domique. « \textit{La Musique de l'Histoire} », Youtube video, 120 min. 26 of February 2020. https://youtu.be/IfhWw5tbXNE
Conservative forces are to be linked to the Greek world, where Gods were multiples and among us, embodied in nature, but humans were part of one same substance, a homogeneous substantial community (‘from multiplicity to unity’), they were one substance at the center of the universe (‘centripetal’). Progressive forces are raising with Christianity and the Copernican revolution: humans are not anymore at the center of the world, but at the exact opposite, its periphery (‘centrifugal’), God is not anymore multiple and among us but unified and Beyond, unreachable. With the unity of God, humans are taking their multiplicity, the substantial community is dismantling, and individualities are raising (‘from unity to multiplicity’). Scriabin found himself caught in those opposite forces: “I myself am that which is opposite to me, because I am only that which I engender... The world is an impulse towards God. I am an impulse towards myself: I am the world, I am the search for God, because I am only that which I seek.”

For Scriabin, 'Ecstasy' is the unification of those opposite forces, “the highest synthesis (...) which in the final moment of being will include the universe within itself and will allow it to experience harmonious flourishing and thus will return it to a state of rest, to non-being.”

“The moment of ecstasy stops being a moment (of time). It engulfs all time.”

This conception of Ecstasy was probably inspired by Schelling’s Ekstasis as a gateway to the ‘absolute’: “at that moment we annihilate time and duration of time: we are no longer in time, but time, or rather eternity itself, is in us.” But it also reminds us of Hegel’s work, which defined the purpose of Philosophy as “restoring the feeling of essential being, providing edification rather than insight. The 'beautiful', the 'holy', the 'eternal', 'religion', and 'love' are the bait required to arouse the desire to bite; not the concept, but ecstasy, not the cold march of necessity in the thing itself, but the ferment of enthusiasm, these are supposed to be what sustains and continually extends the wealth of substance.”

Hegel also famously theorized the dialectical movement between opposite forces as constitutive of Philosophy as the science of History.

Mysticism and the concept of 'Ecstasy' seem to have been the personal way for Scriabin to cope with the ideological crisis of his time, that expressed itself not only in Scriabin’s music, but as we saw, in a wide range of poetical, religious and philosophical fields.

‘Ecstasy’ is taking its first musical forms in Scriabin’s work in The Poem of Ecstasy and the Fifth (Piano) Sonata (cf. p. 38 chapter 4. analysis, annotation in coda) and remains an essential element thereafter. It also calls to mind Solovyov’s statement: “For true creation it is essential that the artist should not remain with his clear and separate consciousness, but should emerge from it, in ecstatic inspiration.” ‘Ecstasy’ will find its iconic representation in Scriabin’s work with the ‘mystic chord’.

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50 Ibid.
'The mystic chord'

The mystical aspect of Scriabin’s music is widely represented by his signature sonority, called the 'mystic chord’,” that “one merely needs to play this unusual chord to conjure up Scriabin’s exotic sound world.”

The 'mystic chord' doesn’t register in the tonal system. It is built from six notes (C-F♯-B♭-E-A-D) stacked in intervals of fourths instead of thirds. Scriabin did not use himself the term 'mystic' to describe his famous sonority: it was invented by Arthur Eaglefield Hull (in a 1916 article in The Musical Times). At an early rehearsal of Prometheus, Rachmaninoff, stunned at the sound of the chord, asked Scriabin, 'What are you using here?' Scriabin answered, 'The chord of the pleroma'. Richard Taruskin, citing this anecdote, explains that 'pleroma, a Christian Gnostic term derived from the Greek for plentitude, was the all-encompassing hierarchy of the divine realm, located entirely outside the physical universe, at immeasurable distance from man's terrestrial abode, totally alien and essentially 'other' to the phenomenal world and whatever belongs to it. What we know as the mystic chord, then, was designed to afford instant apprehension of - that is, to reveal - what was in essence beyond the mind of man to conceptualize.”

Scriabin seems to have created the 'mystic chord' as a musical symbol, that we can bring together with the poetic symbol Ivanov describes in his 1910 essay The Behests of Symbolism (Zavety simvolizma). He defines a poetic symbol as providing artists with dual vision, showing them that "what is above is also below," the "Macrocosm and the Microcosm." It also "absorbs in its sound echoes of subterranean keys, which resound from unknown places," providing both "a boundary and an exit into a beyond," the "daytime world" of dazzling material displays, and the "nighttime world" that "frightens us and attracts us.”

Matthew Bengtson describes, in the Scriabin Companion, how Scriabin’s mystic chord is an enactment in musical terms of his philosophical ideals, in the language of tension and release, and a foundational element of his mature compositional style.

The first premise of the mystic chord appears in the fourth sonata in bar 18, but in a very incomplete manner, and appears for the first time very clearly in the fifth sonata (cf. p. 32 chapter 4. Analysis).

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53 Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 22.
56 Ibid.
58 Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 22.
His philosophy didn’t translate only into the harmonies but also into very original performance markings that punctuate all his oeuvre. Often in French, his performance markings became a signature or Scriabin philosophical imprint on his music: "avec une noble et joyeuse émotion" (with noble and joyful emotion), “avec enchantement” (with delight), “avec une céleste volupté” (with celestial pleasure), “dans un vertige” (with vertigo), “avec un effroi contenu” (with contained terror), “avec une joie exaltée” (with exalted joy), “comme des éclairs foudroyants” (like lightning flashes), “avec un intense désir” (with intense desire), “avec délice” (with delight), “étincelant” (sparkling).

From the fifth sonata, these performance markings start to freely mix with more traditional tempo and interpretive indications.60

These markings were closely linked to the philosophical readings of Scriabin at the time of writing. A marking in the Fifth Sonata at bars 289 and 401: “con una ebrezza fantastica” (“with fantastical intoxication”) is thought to come from his reading of Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy: “He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself.”61

3. The ten piano Sonatas

The resurgence of short forms

Scriabin was “obsessed with economy of means and maximal density in musical content”62 and will produce pieces no longer than 10 bars where melody and harmony exchange progressively their function and structure (poems op 59 and 53). Clément states that these very short musical forms are the “unfortunate reason why Scriabin did not get the same recognition”63 after his death as his fellow comrades, as more credit is generally given to long forms however artificial they may be.

Apart from his three symphonies, his two symphonic poems and his first and third sonata, none of his pieces reach more than 15 minutes. Even more, all of 200 pieces written exclusively for the piano don’t last more than a few minutes. This condensation of the form is appearing in reaction to the huge orchestral pieces produced over two centuries of musical domination by Italian and German composers. Scriabin is in that sense closer to the new impressionist French movement, where Fauré, Debussy or

60 Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 46.
61 Skrjabin, Nicholls, Pushkin, Ashkenazy. The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin. 186.
62 Clément Jean-Yves. Alexandre Scriabine
Ravel reinvent the short form at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. This movement not only happens in music but also in poetry, with the resurgence of the sonnet against longer forms (limited to 14 verses against long forms of thousands of verses).\footnote{Pagani, Domique. « La Musique de l'Histoire », Youtube video, 120 min. 26 of February 2020. \url{https://youtu.be/IfhWw5tbXNE}}

In this plethoric production of short forms by Scriabin, the ten Piano Sonatas are used as a solid basis to read his overall musical production, as the “concretization and the milestone that marks the way accomplished”\footnote{Clément. Alexandre Scriabine. 27.}.

**General evolution of the Sonatas**

Scriabin’s ten published sonatas for solo piano rank as “his most visionary artistic statements, and many of them remain integral works in the standard repertory”\footnote{Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 36.}. They are “a perfect witness to the rapid development of Scriabin, who signs with them each time the musical testament of the period that has just passed”.\footnote{Clément. Alexandre Scriabine. 28.}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ten Piano Sonatas</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Movement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. 1 Op. 6</td>
<td>1892</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 2 Op. 19 ‘Fantasy Sonata’</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 3 Op. 23</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. 4 Op. 30</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. 5 Op. 53</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 6 Op. 62</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 7 Op. 64 ‘White Mass’</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 8 Op. 66</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 9 Op. 68 ‘Black Mass’</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 10 Op. 70</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The most visible innovative aspect of Scriabin’s sonatas is the single movement design used in sonatas No. 5 to 10. Single-movement sonatas were unusual in Scriabin’s day, as the sonata form that was current was a three-part design. But it was not without precedent, as Scarlatti wrote over 500 single-movement sonatas for keyboards. In formal terms, Scarlatti’s pieces differ from Scriabin’s sonatas in their binary or two-part design, which was common for Baroque keyboard suites. In his sonatas Nos. 5 to 10, Scriabin compressed these three parts into one movement, yet he kept the basic formal outline of a traditional sonata form, with an exposition, development and re-exposition — as we will show later in our analysis.

In that regard, the Fifth Sonata was the first one to use the single movement design that will remain in all Scriabin’s piano work for the rest of his life.

The particular importance of the Fifth Sonata Op. 53

Since its premiere in Moscow by Mark Meichik on 1 December 1908, the Fifth Sonata has been “a favorite among concert pianists and audiences”. It is an ideal piece to introduce Scriabin to audiences because of its relative conciseness (a performance is around 10 to 12 minutes) and “its unbridled energy, which makes palpable the feverish inspiration from which it was produced. Its technical virtuosity is breathtaking”. Sviatoslav Richter described it as the most difficult piece in the solo piano repertory. Described by Scriabin as a “grand poem for piano”, most editions of the fifth sonata print the excerpt at the top of the first page, as a brief epigraph, which reads:

“I call you to life, oh mysterious forces!
Drowned in the obscure depths
Of the creative spirit, timid
Shadows of life, to you I bring audacity!”

It is an excerpt from a longer poem Scriabin wrote together with the music for the Poem of Ecstasy.

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68 Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 37.
69 Ibid., 44.
70 Ibid., 44.
74 Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 43.
“A companion piece to the Poem of Ecstasy”⁷⁵ - written at the same time and premiered together - the Fifth Sonata in F♯ major was written in the middle of Scriabin’s years of deep ideological revolution, testified by the Swiss notebook of 1905⁷⁶. As we saw earlier, he was then placing the concept of Ecstasy at the heart of his work for the first time. We can also notice that after the Fifth Sonata, all the 5 other sonatas will be written together in a very condense time frame and released between 1911 and 1913.

The Swiss notebook of 1905, written before the fifth Sonata is confirming the turning point in his oeuvre, as shown by Bowers in Scriabin, A biography. Bowers finds in this particular notebook the presence of texts that will be used inside the scores or closely linked to the genesis of the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Sonata, and even Prometheus and the Poem of Fire.⁷⁷ As we said, each of his sonatas thereafter would be cast in one movement. Legend has it that the Fifth Sonata was written in 6 days after a “flash of inspiration in late 1907.”⁷⁸ In reality, the initial sketches for its themes were inscribed in notebooks from 1905 to 1906, where we can find the theme of the “Presto con allegreza” (Bars 47–55)⁷⁹. In August 1906, Scriabin’s pupil Mariya S. Nemenova-Lunz wrote to her friend, the pianist Leonid N. Nikolaiev: “If you only knew what the 5th Sonata will be like [...]. Scriabin’s latest things are opening up a completely new creative phase. The harmonies are astounding, the forms original.”⁸⁰ But once “Scriabin realized the final form that the piece would take, however, the sonata came together quickly”⁸¹.

As Scriabin believed that the music existed outside the material world, he saw himself as “a translator who captured this divine vision into crude notated form”⁸². The actual writing down of the piece is said to have discouraged him, as “its rendering into notated form failed to capture the spiritual revelation”⁸³ that he experienced when he first envisioned it. Upon its completion, he wrote, “Today I have almost completed the 5th Sonata, a grand poem for piano, and I consider it the best of my piano works. I myself do not know what sort of miracle has come to pass there.”⁸⁴

In his book Alexandre Scriabine, Clément sees the Fifth Sonata as the “true pivotal work of Scriabin production, that is to say his life”⁸⁵.

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⁷⁵ Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 43.
⁷⁸ Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 43.
⁸⁰ Ibid.
⁸¹ Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 43.
⁸² Ibid., 43.
⁸³ Ibid., 43.
⁸⁵ Clément. Alexandre Scriabine. 18.
4. **Analysis of the Fifth Sonata**

The sonata form

Charles Rosen write in his book *Sonata forms* that a Sonata is “*not a definite form like a minuet, a da capo aria, or a French overture; it is, like the fugue, a way of writing, a feeling for proportion, direction, and texture rather than a pattern,*” showing the flexibility and the lively format Scriabin is using.

Rosen states that the sonata form was defined by theorists in the second quarter of the 19th century and became the most prestigious of musical forms. In its standard meaning, a sonata is a three-part form, where the second and third parts are closely linked so as to remains a two-part organization. The three parts are called exposition, development, and recapitulation. For Rosen, the Sonatas of Scriabin, with those of Reger, mark the moment in history when all sense of harmonic opposition completely disappears. Scriabin “*perfectly knew how to lay his vision in the necessity of the sonata form, reinventing it every time.*”

Scriabin’s approach

“I call you to life, oh mysterious forces!”

Scriabin’s written epigraph cited p. 14 begins the score: the outer “*mysterious forces*” are called into the inner “*creative spirit*”. The Fifth Sonata presents “*a model case study in which an ‘outer’ phrase (the epigraph) frames the ‘inner’ evolving subject of the work*”. This dialogue between inner and outer worlds, between the performer, its inspiration and the world around, is suggested before the pianist sets fingers on the keyboard.

The music begins to display characteristics unseen in his earlier works: “*it became more complex and obscure; melody and rhythm were often fragmented; harmonic thinking came to be ambiguous in terms of tonality and direction.*”

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87 Ibid., 1.
88 Ibid., 402.
The tonal status of the sonata is hard to grasp, although we can make out a fundamental line made of referential pitches which are sometimes center of tonal activity. “These bass pitches are emphasized via duration and dominant- or tritone- related harmonic preparation, with the tritone acting as a dominant substitute. Overall coherence comes from this linear bass narrative.”93 (See figure 1).

![Figure 1 - The structural bass line for Scriabin’s Fifth Piano Sonata.](image)

The sonata begins in a grand gesture covering the whole keyboard (‘Allegro impetuoso’, ‘con stravaganza’, with extravagance), “as if emerging from magma, a formidable eruption, a new gesture in piano literature (as Beethoven’s Appassionata was in its time)”94. This grand opening lasting a few second will also close the piece, closing the circular form Scriabin designed for its sonata, as shown in the drawing below, made by Jason Stell, using Scriabin's designations:

![Drawing 2 Circular depiction of Fifth Sonata by Jason Stell](image)

This circular depiction (see Drawing 2) of Scriabin’s fifth sonata shows the various themes, bass line steps and overall sonata form divisions. Poetic designations such as “Void, Dreams, Creative spirit etc.” are used to show the correlations between the musical themes and the metaphysical journey.

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94 Clément. Alexandre Scriabine. 18.
The epigraph (cited p.14) constitutes the conceptual core of the sonata. It can be also linked to a ‘cycle of evolution’ that Scriabin wrote in his 1905 notebook, that the Fifth sonata closely follows:

“0 — Nothingness, bliss.
1 — I wish. I rise out of Original Chaos, the Primordial Ooze.
2 — I differentiate the undifferentiable.
3 — I begin to define the elements of time and space, the future of the universe.
4 — I reach the summit, and from there recognize that all is one.
0 — Bliss, nothingness.”96

Structure of the Fifth Sonata

Here we present in a more classical way the structure of the sonata, to have a clearer view of the form used by Scriabin. We are only using the Jason Stell circular depiction to show the tonality evolution, but we are developing our own analysis.

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Introduction

Bars 1-12: Allegro Impetuoso, Con Stravaganza
(Allegro impetuous, with extravagance)

This agitated theme referred to as *void* by Jason Stell, starts from a loud sforzando in the lower register and consists of trills and glissandos in an ascending rush covering the whole keyboard followed by a pause. The notes belong to the diatonic scale, but it is hard to discern any tonality. However, the lower pitch d# is acting as a structural bass for this opening section and the tri tone tremolo implies the dominant seventh chord of E major. The upper part of the trill, F# establishes the minor third motive that will take form later in this sonata. (Relation between D# and F#). Then the following notes are accentuated: a, d#, e, g# in this agitated gesture with special emphasis on d# and g#.
Bars 13-46: Languido, Accarezzevole
(Languid, caressing)
The harmony plays around F# in this mysterious dreamlike phrase referred to as *Dreams*. This section reminds us of the introduction of the 4th sonata.97

The indication *Languido* can be translated as “weak” or “faint”, reminding us of the “of the creative spirit, timid” “shadow of life” that the composer wants to bring to life. The questioning, mysterious atmosphere is created by the rubato markings such as *pochissimo* (meaning a slight ritardando) or even *con voglia* (with desire) and also the instability of rhythmic signature, alternating from 5/8 to 4/8, 6/8 and 3/8. Here again rises the minor third motive D#-F# on the *Pochiss.* indications.

Then comes the *accarezzevole* section subtly transforming this first *languido* theme in the first theme that will follow. In the last bar we can hear the theme taking shape in different tonality as if unsure how or where to come to life until it finally finds its tonality followed by silence.

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Exposition

First theme

Bar 47-95: Presto Con Allegrezza (Presto With Cheerfulness)

The spirit of creativity. Here comes the faint obscure creative spirits to life, built on the rising minor third put forth in Void and Dreams in a furious and fantastic dance. The energetic quality derives the use of cross rhythms: the right hand is a 6/8 dancing melody reminding us of a ‘ravelian’ waltz opposing a binary left hand creating an even more rhythmical and dancing setting. This rhythmic metric destabilization of the first theme goes against sonata form conventions (See page 18).
This first theme is extremely technically demanding for pianists to play because of the leaping technique in the right hand. While it may sometimes be negotiated with both hands, in the example below it may only be done by the right hand while the left has its own leaps in the unforgiving Presto tempo. This passage must be attacked with cheeky confidence that call to mind Scriabin’s summons quoted at the opening of the piece: “to you I bring audacity!”
Transition

Bars 96-119: Imperioso, Soto voce misterioso affanato
(Imperious, in a quiet voice, mysterious breathless)

Following the first theme comes a contrasted transition which constitutes the most regular four bar grouping structure, alternating from a furious imperious theme of two bars to a sotto voce mysterious and anguished palpitation. This regularity is finally forming this fortissimo quasi trombe daring theme that will be very important to the piece as a whole.
Bars 114-119: Imperioso, Quasi trombe (Imperious, Almost horn)

Once formed, this powerful chord seems to be disintegrating over four bars into the next theme.

Second theme
Bars 120-139: Meno Vivo (Less Lively)

Evolution of spirit into passion. This second theme indicated to be played in an expressive and caressing manner (accarezzevole), reminds us of some parts of the first languido theme. It may be interpreted as the embodiment of the obscure shadows of life with its complex melody lines. The upper melody seems to be leading making out again an evolution of the minor third motive (d-f) while a dramatic descending chromatic line supports it in the medium register all over very surprising and mysterious harmony in the left hand often played in a descending arpeggio (quite unusual in piano repertoire), undercutting any sensation of tonal stability.
Codetta
Bars 140-156: Allegro fantastic

In-breathing. The second theme is interrupted by an allegro fantastico of two bars followed by a pause. The writing in the left hand is interesting and typical of Scriabin especially in his later works (see sonata 6 bars 9 to 13). It gives an impression of the theme walking onto itself, rushing toward something. Then comes the codetta mixing elements from the first theme as if searching for tonality and three fortissimo occurrences of the quasi trombe theme ending in a loud double sforzando that closes this first cycle and starts in the same gesture as the one that opened the piece. “An entire cycle has run its course and comes to an end (...) Scryabin echoes a philosophical concern for the cyclical rebirth of humanity.”

Development

Bars 157-184: Allegro impetuoso, Languido (Allegro impetuous, Languid)

Second Cycle.

Résurgence of the void, opening a new evolutionary cycle. Scriabin begins his exposition with the two elements of introduction (allegro impetuoso and languido theme) in a shortened manner, 8 bars instead of 11 for the allegro impetuoso and 19 instead of 33 for the languido theme. They are both in a different tonal colour than the introduction, transposed a whole tone up which is significant for the synesthetistic composer.
Here comes the first development part which consists of a synthesis of the first theme and its transition, the first theme being showed in yellow and the *imperioso* transition in red.

Bars 199-206: Bridge
That section presents a bridge containing both the second \textit{meno vivo} theme with the chromatic middle voice underlined in blue, and the \textit{con voglia} theme of the \textit{languido} introduction. Scriabin then proceeds in resuming a development synthesizing the first theme and its \textit{imperioso} transition from bars 207 to 226.

The above section presents material from the first theme (yellow) and the codetta (purple) during 20 bars driving us towards the \textit{leggierissimo volando}. There, the music seems to be evaporating, using elements of the first part of the introduction such as glissandos, forming a brief \textit{presto giocoso} \textit{development} of the \textit{languido} theme as seen below:
Bars 262-279: Meno vivo

We then arrive at a center point of the sonata as it features the 'mystic chord' discussed earlier, as shown in light blue, which is a six-note synthetic chord of superposed fourth intervals. The first two mentioned are complete occurrences of this chord while the two latter only seem to suggest it, as they are incomplete. In this further development we can clearly hear the meno vivo second theme with enriched bass and arpeggios covering the whole keyboard, but also a discreet but important element of the languido introduction as shown in green.
Then, as in the exposition, the composer abruptly interrupts the *meno vivo* with his stumbling *Allegro fantastico* for a few bars and goes back and forth between these two themes when finally developing for the first time this *Allegro fantastico* over 16 bars with, as he writes, a fantastic drunkenness (*con una ebbrezza fantastica*).

The stumbling effect created by his rhythmical left hand is here stressed by a number of rubato markings: 'ritard.', 'accel.', 'cresc.', 'ritard.' and 'accel.'
This fantastic theme finally lands on the climax of this complex and rich development putting forwards the *quasi trombe* theme (shown in red below) in a very romantic harmony and finally the *meno vivo* element (yellow) in a grand fortissimo dynamic with its descending chromatic line and end-of-phrase stubborn accentuated note.
Recapitulation

Bars 329-400

Cycle 3 recapitulation.

Scriabin then *re-exposes* note for note the first theme (this time *Prestissimo*), its *Imperioso* transition and the *second meno vivo* theme all transposed a fifth below:

![Sheet Music](image1)

etc.

![Sheet Music](image2)

etc.

![Sheet Music](image3)

etc.
Coda
Bars 401-477

As in the exposition, the *meno vivo* is interrupted by the *Allegro fantastico* this time developed over 16 bars quite like the development, this time *vertiginoso con furia*.

We then arrive to the grand final of the piece, *con luminosita / estatico*.

The composer here uses the *quasi trombe* theme in the left hand (red) and elements of *danse* present throughout the piece, a blend of *allegro fantastico* development and of the first theme (yellow) in a fortissimo dynamic and very large chords covering the whole keyboard. And finally, it is the *languido* theme (*estatico*) (shown in green) of the introduction that takes the main stage. The languid, timid, outlines of life are now fully formed and explode with audacity in this grandiose final. "The concluding section of the piece (mm. 401-456) draws together almost every motive of the sonata. It grows frenetically, climaxing with the apotheosis of (dream) material in an ecstatic explosion of light meant to shake the very firmament"  

The sonata ends in the Presto marking with a shortened version of the codetta including one occurrence of the Imperioso theme, and finally ends in a prestissimo accel glissando-like gesture the same way the piece starts:
Conclusion

Diving into the music of Scriabin is not only a musical but a philosophical journey, where one can only be inspired to look beyond its own discipline to master it even further. The pieces to follow the Fifth Sonata and his powerful philosophical detour, “will consume the form, the space, the harmony, the rhythm, the musical cosmos as a whole.”\(^{100}\) The journey through Scriabin’s life and ideas, the analysis of a pivotal composition of his, informed us about the importance of the knowledge of History, not only of music. It enables us to understand how ideologies were produced and how those ideologies could be embodied by a singular composer, to create the most distinctive music. It is a very fortunate insight to Scriabin’s music to have access to his notebooks and writing, as the composer seems to have encoded the ideologies of his time into his compositions.

For performers, it offers a corpus of literature to help trying to capture the excitement of Scriabin’s imaginative magic while remaining faithful to one’s craftsmanship. The repertoire of Scriabin is very challenging on every interpretative dimension. “The intellect and imagination are fully engaged, no two performances are alike, and very different approaches to the music are possible.”\(^{101}\) It is exciting to know that, in a time where the piano repertoire has been performed and recorded practically to exhaustion, “in Scriabin’s music, there is a great deal that remains to be said.”\(^{102}\)

\(^{100}\) Clément. Alexandre Scriabine. 16.
\(^{101}\) Ballard, Bengston, Young. The Alexander Scriabin Companion. 326.
\(^{102}\) Ibid.
Scriabin’s music and ideology through the analysis of the Fifth Sonata

**Bibliography**


