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A Side Entrance to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Music

The Unexploited Potential of Scriabin's Middle-period Piano Works in Teaching and  
Perception of Modern Music

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Abstract

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## **I. Background and aims**

Early romantic works of Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) dating from the 1880's and his highly abstract late masterpieces composed during the years before his premature death in 1915 are connected by a single uninterrupted arch of stylistic metamorphosis. The present dissertation aims to unfold the notion that Scriabin's middle period offers an unparalleled insight into a journey from 'broadly accessible' music to something what, borrowing the terminology of Carl *Dahlhaus* who defined mainstream Western music written after 1910 as 'new', is certainly a kind of 'new' music. The transfiguration is vividly palpable in Scriabin's middle period works where rules of the 'old' system are still operational while novel forces are already put at work.

What makes Scriabin particularly attractive as a didactic path to 20<sup>th</sup> century music is the fact that, with very few exceptions, he composed his entire oeuvre for the piano. Since in his output we find numerous small pieces which, while artistically by no means inferior to his grand compositions, are technically less demanding, even younger pianists or players of other instruments with reasonable skill at the piano can follow the remarkable stylistic progress he made through his short lifetime.

In my thesis I argue that the process of living through this change may bring new music within reach for many who currently find it unintelligible and inaccessible, and the experience gained may translate into a better understanding of other modern and contemporary composers as well. Thus, my choice of topic was not only directed by my personal appeal to Scriabin as a practicing performer, but also by a pedagogic incentive.

## II. Sources

The opinions of various authors, each applying his own analytical method to Scriabin's idiosyncratic tonal language, are divided even in the principal aspect whether the master's late works are to be regarded as tonal or atonal. This uncertainty may partly arise from the ill-defined concept of tonality: is it determined by a single central tone, or may it be founded on a central chord?

Peter *Sabbagh* argues that even Scriabin's last pieces can be interpreted within the context of tonality, whereas George *Perle* approaches them using his methodology especially developed for the analysis of atonal music. Varvara *Dernova*, while exploring its tonal roots, also sheds light on the atonal potential of Scriabin's central harmony, and demonstrates how Scriabin exploited this potential as he departed from tonal composition. James *Baker* deploys the powers of Schenkerian analysis to reveal a deep-level tonal framework in Scriabin's mature works where organizing control over the work is apparently handed over from classical functions of traditional harmony to transpositions of a central chord.

### III. Methods

In Scriabin's oeuvre, traditional tonality as a frame of reference is gradually replaced by a central chord as the basis for both harmonic and melodic progression. This chord provides global cohesion beyond the point where the last remnants of Schenkerian *Ursatz*, the deep tonal framework, vanish.

In Chapter II of my thesis I set out to examine several components of Scriabin's musical fingerprint, starting with his central harmony I chose to call the 'kaleidoscope chord'. I give an overview of its historical forerunners, its particularities arising from its tritonic structure, and explore some of its implications on melody and form. Further, I make observations on Scriabin's play with time, and propose a practical classification of his recurring musical characters.

Chapter III is dedicated to the analysis of three short but emblematic compositions. *Feuillet d'album*, Op.45, No.1, was written in 1904, on the eve of Scriabin's stylistic change. *Poème*, Op. 52, No.1 (1907), is a contemporary of the 5<sup>th</sup> Sonata, the chef d'oeuvre of the period. Finally, *Feuillet d'album*, Op.58, from 1910 is a witness of Scriabin's transition to his 'new' music. For the study of all three compositions I employ traditional tools of tonal analysis; however, subtleties of style and ambiguities related to its transformation necessitate the use of subjective terms and descriptions that stem from my personal experience as a performer.

#### IV. Results

The three selected pieces represent characteristic milestones of Scriabin's stylistic evolution. In the analyses I have outlined the progress of the central 'kaleidoscope' chord from its establishment within the boundaries of tonality to its conquest over traditional tonal structure and emergence as a novel binding force. The all-permeating tritone-based musical thinking marks Scriabin's departure from the norm of commonly accessible functional-tonal music: it creates novel links between melody and harmony, generates unprecedented temporal courses of musical action, and calls innovative forms to life. In my theses I have encouraged performers to follow through this change for a comprehending and creative interpretation of Scriabin's piano works, and pointed out the pedagogic potential awaiting discovery that lies in the master's numerous brilliant miniatures.

Through the study of Scriabin's play with rhythm, and his peculiar notation thereof, I concluded that his experiments with influencing temporal flow may represent attempts to break the regular, metronome-like ticking of time, and often endow his music with a *rubato* character and the air of improvisation.

Scriabin used his harmonic, melodic and formal progressions derived from the kaleidoscope chord to build musical 'edifices' of various types. In the present thesis I have proposed a possible classification of Scriabin's piano works based on recurring archetypes of mood and character. I have argued that such a classification facilitates recognition of shared versus unique properties of works subjected to comparison.

Study into Scriabin's middle period led me to the presumption that his extra-musical beliefs and philosophic views also manifest through his tritone-centered musical logic. The tritone as a single interval serves as foundation for vertical and horizontal progression as well as for formal architecture; it is, similar to a kaleidoscope image, variable yet invariant, and condenses all possible correlations. Thus, the kaleidoscope chord is a faithful musical reflection of Scriabin's messianic self-image and his web-like view of the universe.

Documents and analyses relating to Scriabin's late works, just like the pieces themselves, raise the notion that the ever-increasing dominance of the tritone-based system over the master's entire musical idiom might mirror complexities of his personality. His

contemporaries described him as a person of weak physique, unsteady nerves, and fragile health. For his eruptive mind to break through the barriers of a vulnerable body, he had to invest his music with supernatural powers and endow himself with the energy that sprang from it.

## **V. Activities related to the topic of the thesis**

The programme of my diploma concert held on 15 May 2004 featured Scriabin's Fifth sonata.

In my diploma work completed in 2004 I subjected Scriabin's Fourth and Fifth sonatas, as well as Etudes Op.8 No.5, Op.42 No.8, and Op.65 No.2 to comparative analysis.

My doctoral exam held in 2011 was focused on the comparison of Scriabin's Préludes Op.11 with Chopin's Préludes Op.28.

My repertoire includes the following compositions by Scriabin:

Préludes Op. 67, Op.74 No.3

Etudes Op.8 No.5, Op.42 No. 3, 4, 5, 8, Op.65 No. 2, 3

Poèmes Op.52 No.1, Op.71 No. 2

Feuillets d'album Op.45 No.1, Op.58

Fragilité, Op.51 No.1

Fifth sonata, Op. 53

In my educational practice I have taught the following pieces by Scriabin:

Préludes Op. 11 No.1, 4, Op. 27 No.2, Op.39 No.3