Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

“Poem of Ecstasy,” Opus 54

Even today, Alexander Scriabin remains a somewhat mysterious and isolated figure in the history of Russian music. Highly impressionable and egomaniacal, he was drawn to Satanism and altered states of consciousness, and even likened himself to the sun. For Scriabin, composing music was a means to transform his audience, to transport them to realms far beyond the concert hall. His work exhibits none of the Russian nationalism or ethnographic color characteristic of many of his contemporaries. Trained as a pianist at the Moscow Conservatory, he initially composed exclusively for the piano and made his reputation performing his own works on tour in Europe and America.

In the late 1890s, after writing his Piano Concerto, Scriabin was increasingly drawn to various mystical schemes and utopian visions that he attempted to incorporate into his music. Correspondingly, the forms and genres in which he was composing tended to become less and less conventional. His first two symphonies are called simply “symphonies,” without programmatic subtitles. This changed with the Symphony No. 3 (1902-04), given the ambitious title The Divine Poem. The Third was also the first of Scriabin’s symphonies to follow a spiritual-poetic (one might even call it New Age) text.

Though much shorter than The Divine Poem, Poem of Ecstasy (sometimes called the Fourth Symphony) is similarly saturated with literary-musical connections and elaborate symbolism. When he began working on Poem of Ecstasy—which he began in 1905 and completed in late 1907—Scriabin was initially thinking about writing (in the words of biographer Faubion Bowers) “an orgiastic or orgasmic poem in which Man-God arrives at release through love and sex, creation and procreation.” Originally he was planning to entitle it “Poème orgiaque.”

As a philosophical foundation for the work, Scriabin wrote a 369-line poem elaborating the ideas he wished to express. Scriabin provided these instructions: “Conductors who perform the work may always be told that explanatory comment is to be found there, but in general they should start by approaching it as pure music.” The text is written in dense, hyperbolic verse. It treats the spirit’s search for ecstasy, through a pursuit of pain, death, and sexual desire that culminates in orgasmic release.

Poem of Ecstasy was first performed on December 10, 1908, in New York, by the Russian Symphony Society conducted by Modest Altschuler, Scriabin’s friend from his days as a student at the Moscow Conservatory. The first performance in Russia took place on February 1, 1909, in St. Petersburg, conducted by Hugo Wahrlich. Scriabin uses an enormous Wagnerian orchestra with an expanded brass section, extra percussion, and organ. He and others have referred to Poem of Ecstasy as a symphony, composed in free sonata form in one movement. There are three themes: the “longing” theme (a drooping figure played by the flute at the outset); the “dream” theme (introduced by the clarinet at the beginning of the exposition), and the rising “victory” theme (announced by the trumpet at the marking “avec une noble et douce majesté”). After a short introduction, Scriabin develops the themes at length, then proceeds to the recapitulation and an ecstatic concluding coda in triumphant C major, anchored by the organ. The harmonic language is adventurous, with frequent use of the dissonant tritone interval, but remains firmly grounded in tonality. At times, the lush orchestration recalls the tone poems of Richard Strauss and Debussy.
That the All-Union Soviet Radio chose Poem of Ecstasy to accompany the first manned spaceflight by Yuri Gagarin in 1961 is testament to the otherworldly atmosphere of Scriabin’s late symphonic music.Reportedly, the work was simultaneously transmitted to Gagarin in the spacecraft and to dazed earthlings by their radios below. Poem of Ecstasy was also played at a massive celebration on Red Square, on April 15, 1961, when Gagarin was honored after his safe return home.

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