

RICE UNIVERSITY

*The evolution of musical language and sonata form in the piano sonatas of  
Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin*


by

**Filip Blachnio**

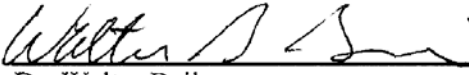
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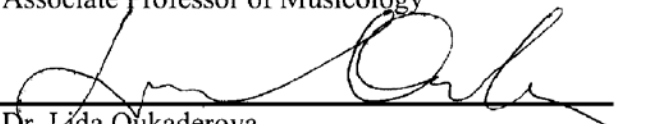
**Doctor of Musical Arts**

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# ABSTRACT

## *The evolution of musical language and sonata form in the piano sonatas of Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin*

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The evolution of Scriabin's musical style has been unmatched by any other composer and poses questions until this day. The collection of Scriabin's ten piano sonatas most aptly demonstrates Scriabin's long-term transformation. The composer's early and late sonatas are radically different on the surface but share similar underlying principles. The purpose of this dissertation is to show the profound lines of development between Scriabin's early and late styles and conceptions of sonata form.

The introductory chapter provides a background necessary for the study of change in Scriabin's approach to sonata form. The main body of my dissertation consists of three analytic chapters on Scriabin's third, fifth, and seventh sonatas - representative works of the composer's three creative periods. These analyses focus on three areas which are most indicative of Scriabin's musical development: harmony, form, and extramusical ideas. By comparing these indicative areas in Scriabin's early, middle, and late sonatas I gain a better understanding of his idiosyncratic musical language and sonata form. The concluding chapter releases my observations and places Scriabin's sonatas in a broader musical context.

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I would like to sincerely thank my dearest piano teacher, Dr. Robert Roux. He encouraged me to pursue the doctorate in the first place and has supervised my artistic, intellectual, and personal growth for the past ten years. His artistic legacy will shape my musical career long after I leave Rice. His mentorship and dedication will be a model for cultivating future professional and personal relationships.

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## PREFACE

My strong interest in the music of Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin (1872-1915) was conceived during my undergraduate years at the Eastman School of Music when I was a piano student of Professor Thomas Schumacher – a member of the Honorary Board of the Scriabin Society of America. It was at Eastman where I heard all of Scriabin's ten keyboard sonatas performed live and learned my first substantial piece of the Russian composer: *Vers la flamme* Op. 72 (1914). Through participation in class recitals and studio listening sessions devoted solely to Scriabin's music I also discovered that his music suited my personality and professional interests. I felt inspired to learn more about this controversial composer.

My understanding of Scriabin's individual style matured at Rice University when I was a graduate piano student of Dr. Robert Roux. It was at Rice where I performed Scriabin's three late sonatas: Sonata no. 6, Op. 62 (1911-1912), Sonata no. 9, Op. 68 *Black Mass* (1912-1913), and Sonata no. 10, Op. 70 (1912-1913). A significant component of my graduate studies at Rice was also devoted to the music of Fryderyk Chopin who was a key figure in Scriabin's compositional development and whose music allowed me to connect to Scriabin in a meaningful way. While at Rice, I also acquired a certain broadness of perspective by studying lives and works of Scriabin's contemporaries and other modernist composers.

After having studied the music from the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries and after having performed some of Scriabin's most sophisticated mature sonatas I developed an interest in his musical transformation. I came to a conclusion that one of the most effective ways of approaching this topic would be to study the sonatas I have not yet performed. The works studied in this project, the early third, middle fifth, and late seventh sonatas, are not only an excellent

source material for the discussion of Scriabin's development but also profoundly complement my personal experience with his music.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### *The Evolution of Musical Language and Sonata Form in the Piano Sonatas of Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin*

#### **Background**

Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin (1872-1915), an only child, was born in Moscow on Christmas day into a high-ranking military family. His mother, Lyubov Petrovna Stchetinina, was an accomplished pianist and student of the famous Theodore Leschetizsky at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. His father, Nikolai Alexandrovich Scriabin, left Moscow immediately after his wife's death in 1873 and pursued a military career in Turkey. He was unable to grasp the nuance of his son's artistic mind but he kept in touch with him sporadically. Nikolai's sister, Lyubov Alexandrovna, was largely responsible not only for Scriabin's female-dominated upbringing but also for nourishing his musical talent.<sup>1</sup>

Scriabin grew up to be a most extraordinary individual. This man of paradoxes had two radically different sides to his personality: He could behave in turn like a "delicate salon jeweler" or the "mystical antichrist."<sup>2</sup> This obsessive megalomaniac had an affinity for a luxurious lifestyle and led a life of self-adoration.<sup>3</sup> He performed exclusively his own compositions, wrote inflated poetry, and strongly believed in the divine meanings of his name and date of birth.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Swan, *Scriabin* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head LTD., 1923), 1-4.

<sup>2</sup> Lincoln Ballard, "Postcards from the Edge: Scriabin in Popular Trade," *Journal of the Scriabin Society of America* 14, no. 1 (2009-2010): 11.

<sup>3</sup> Leonid Sabaneyeff, *Modern Russian Composers* (Freeport: Books For Libraries Press, 1927), 40-41.

<sup>4</sup> "Scriabin" translates to "the exalted one."

Faubion Bowers, *Scriabin* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), 1:99.

Scriabin also had a rare gift of synesthesia,<sup>5</sup> which he used to create musical impressions of light, and was more generally interested in pan-sensory projects.

This proud Russian led a life of a cosmopolitan pianist-composer. His frequent travels and international concert tours exposed him to a huge variety of styles and influences. He was not a direct descendant of the Russian nationalist movement<sup>6</sup> in music, but was trained in the conservative tradition of the West established in Russia by Anton Rubinstein. Scriabin throughout his entire life wrote music that was cosmopolitan in influence but paradoxically never lost its distinctly Russian character.

Scriabin's music can be divided into three stylistic periods, differentiated mainly by changes in his harmonic style, which arose out of his desire to develop his own musical language. In the early period (1872-1900) Scriabin wrote compositions which frequently employed chromatic passages and prolonged unstable harmonies. However, these works were also fundamentally tonal and had strong harmonic root movement.<sup>7</sup> In the middle period (1900-1908) Scriabin

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Scriabin was born on Christmas Day and died on Easter. Some scholars suggest that he considered himself a *Messiah*.

Bowers, *Scriabin*, 1:76.

<sup>5</sup> Scriabin could relate notes and keys with colors. The term *synesthesia* applies to a condition, which "occurs when an individual who receives a stimulus in one sense modality simultaneously experiences a sensation in another." This rare condition fits into the broad artistic atmosphere of the first decade of the twentieth century as it results from "mysticism, decadence, and various philosophies ranging from Nietzsche's *Übermensch* to Helena Blavatsky's Theosophy."

Greta Berman, "Synesthesia and the Arts," *Leonardo* 32, no. 1 (1999): 15-16.

The effects of synesthesia are also to be noticed in poetic and visual works of the time and in the music of composers such as Claude Debussy and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

<sup>6</sup> The nationalist movement in Russia was started by a group of composers called the *Mighty Five*: César Cui (1835-1918), Mily Balakirev (1837-1910), Alexander Borodin (1833-1887), Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881), and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908). The main goal of the group was to create a musical style independent from the Western European tradition.

Donald Jay Grout. *A History of Western Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1960), 583-589.

<sup>7</sup> Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 55.



favored major keys<sup>8</sup> and built on the late-romantic harmonic tendencies that Yuri Kholopov labels functional inversion and neotonicity.<sup>9</sup> He also experimented with fourth-based and tritone-based harmonies. In the late period (1908-1915) Scriabin started treating dominant/major-minor-seventh sonorities as stable tonics and experimented with other harmonic idiosyncrasies such as his six-note *Prometheus Chord* (C-F#-Bb-E-A-D).<sup>10</sup> His late works also frequently employed advanced symmetrical scales and radiated a compelling relationship between harmony and melody.<sup>11</sup>

Simon Morrison has interpreted the evolution of Scriabin's harmonic system and musical style to be a dialectical process.<sup>12</sup> The early stage (Op. 1-29), the thesis, consisted mostly of conservative keyboard compositions rooted firmly in the realm of Romantic harmony. The middle stage (Op. 30-57), the antithesis, was a time of musical experimentation in many different directions and of joyous opposition to the achievements of the early stage. For example, after the turn of the twentieth century Scriabin stopped writing exclusively for the piano and turned his attention to monumental orchestral works. He also took decisive steps to find alternatives to

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<sup>8</sup> Scriabin favored major keys because of his preference for augmented chords and other harmonies with pronounced major thirds.

Hugh Macdonald, *Skryabin* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 34-35.

<sup>9</sup> Functional inversion is a phenomenon wherein the key's tonic still plays a formal role in the broad context but the focus is on other harmonies. Neotonicity is a phenomenon wherein the dominant (major-minor seventh sonority) loses its local function but still plays a traditional role in the broad context. Excellent examples of such compositions include Wagner's *Tristan* and Scriabin's Sonata no. 4, Op. 30.

Yuri Kholopov, "Scriabin and the Harmony of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," *Journal of the Scriabin Society of America* 11, no. 1 (2006-2007): 14-16.

<sup>10</sup> The terms *Prometheus Chord* or *Mystic Chord* do not come directly from Scriabin but from Leonid Sabaneyev and from Arthur Eaglefield Hull.

Simon Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51, no 2 (1998): 313.

<sup>11</sup> Scriabin used octatonic and whole tone scales in his mature works. He also unfolded chords into melodies or combined melodies into chords.

Peter Sabbagh, "The Development of Harmony in Scriabin's Works" (PhD diss, University of Hamburg, 2001), 46-48.

<sup>12</sup> Simon Morrison, "Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement," *Journal of the Scriabin Society of America* 14, no. 1 (2009-2010): 29-30.

Romantic tonality and began to experiment with innovative harmonic ideas such as tritone polarity. The late stage (Op. 58-74), the synthesis, was a time when Scriabin reassembled the musical achievements of the middle and early periods. He tightened the relationship between his mature keyboard and orchestral works which now had common extramusical goals.<sup>13</sup> Also, the *Mystic Chord* came to life not only as an interpretation of conventional dominant harmonies<sup>14</sup> but also as a process of harmonic synthesis.<sup>15</sup>

Scriabin's stylistic transformation was also fueled by his interest in philosophy. In his early period Scriabin became attracted to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). This late Romantic thought permeated Scriabin's personality and religious beliefs and remained a heavy influence until his death. For example, the Nietzschean ideas of the *Übermensch* and *Eternal Recurrence* fueled Scriabin's egocentricity, inflated poetry, beliefs about the messianic role of man, and the cyclical nature of his compositions. The obsessive interpretation of Nietzsche's views allowed the Russian composer to move beyond Romantic heroism, the vision of musician-artist, and the focus on national identity.<sup>16</sup> Scriabin, who once wrote "I am God,"<sup>17</sup> started to

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<sup>13</sup> Scriabin's early keyboard works were designed to please Romantic audiences and were appropriate for concert tours and recitals. His later piano works, like his orchestral projects, carried significant programmatic and philosophical undertones.

<sup>14</sup> The *Mystic Chord* can be described as a dominant thirteenth chord without a fifth, consisting of key note, third, seventh, ninth, altered eleventh, and nineteenth. This chord is also related to the *Chopin Chord* (dominant sixth) because both chords usually have the sixth in the top voice. Sabbagh, "The Development of Harmony in Scriabin's Works," 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> The *Mystic Chord* is built of all kinds of fourths: diminished, perfect, and augmented. This chord is also built of all kinds of triads: major, minor, diminished, and augmented. Swan, *Scriabin*, 100.

This chord also contains traces of octatonic and whole-tone scales and resembles the French sixth chord. Morrison, "Scriabin and the Impossible," 313.

<sup>16</sup> Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> In the first decade of the twentieth century Scriabin started writing inflated poetry which radiated his supernatural aspirations.

Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 9.

believe in his privileged role and in a supernatural world where he himself played the providential role of a high priest.

At the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries Scriabin was also inspired by the culture of the Russian Silver Age (1890-1915). This extremely creative and productive period in Russian art was similar to French *Fin de Siècle*. The main current of the Silver Age was Russian Symbolism<sup>18</sup> which had two movements: decadent and mystic. The decadents were concerned with the “musicality of poetry” and used symbols mainly to bring back forgotten experiences or to stimulate imagination.<sup>19</sup> Their works, influenced by French Symbolism and Impressionism, were not as progressive as the works of the mystics. The figurehead of the decadent movement, Valery Yakovlevich Bryusov, preferred to use symbols in technical and surface ways rather than to create radical effects. He believed that the primary goal of poetry was poetry itself and his works were “formalist in spirit.”<sup>20</sup> The more sophisticated mystic movement, inspired by German Idealist Philosophy, was not only dark and mysterious but also treated symbols as “narcotic” devices which had the power to transform reality.<sup>21</sup> The main figures of this movement included the symbolist philosopher Vladimir Solovyov<sup>22</sup> and the poet Vyacheslav

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<sup>18</sup> Russian Symbolism in poetry and in the visual arts was very similar to other symbolist movements in Europe at the time. The symbolists believed that the material world was an illusion under which there was a more true and ideal world. However, this hidden world could not be accessed through the use of human senses and reason. Only symbols could convey the atmosphere of that remote world. Symbolism was a movement in direction of idealism and strongly opposed realism and naturalism. Symbolist artists were interested in intuition, emotions, and the subconscious.

“Symbolism,” accessed April 20, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Symbolism-literary-and-artistic-movement>

<sup>19</sup> Simon Morrison, “Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement,” 20-22.

<sup>20</sup> Malcolm Brown, “Skriabin and Russian “Mystic” Symbolism,” *19<sup>th</sup> –Century Music* 3, no. 1 (1979): 46.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Morrison, “Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement,” 22.

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Solovyov compared reality to an advanced idea of “total-unity” which required a synthesis of religion, philosophy, and science.

Malcolm Brown, “Skriabin and Russian “Mystic” Symbolism,” 44.

Solovyov also created a futuristic vision of an artist whose supernatural forces would transform the world. Ibid., 48.

Ivanov.<sup>23</sup> This movement was most attractive to Scriabin because its main ideas resonated with his goal of achieving unity of arts in a grandiose artistic act.<sup>24</sup>

In the first decade of the twentieth century Scriabin became interested not only in mystic symbolism but also in theosophical mysticism. The most influential figure of theosophical mysticism was Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) who founded the Theosophical Society in 1875 and published her esoteric *Secret Doctrine* in 1888. Madame Blavatsky's theosophical group was a quasi-religious movement which combined science, religion, and philosophy. The main teaching of theosophy was the concept of *theurgy* or the act of divine creation. The theosophists believed in a cleansing power of destruction and suffering. They thought that a world catastrophe would precede a new superior culture.<sup>25</sup> The theosophists were also interested in the concept of "mystical dualism."<sup>26</sup> They believed that the magnetism between the opposite "celestial spheres"<sup>27</sup> or the tension between the masculine and feminine poles of the universe<sup>28</sup> could result in a life-giving catastrophe. The theosophical teachings on cosmic unity, dualism, extinction, and sexual union<sup>29</sup> were some of the most influential forces in Scriabin's final phase.

Scriabin's international focus also exposed him to a variety of musical inspirations. The most influential figure was undoubtedly Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849), whose music played a leading role in the formative stage of Scriabin's development. Scriabin, who wrote the most and the best

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<sup>23</sup> Vyacheslav Ivanov's interests in ancient rituals, support of mystical anarchism (opposition to decadent symbolism), appreciation of Nietzsche, and teachings on cosmic and erotic love were very attractive to Scriabin. Ralph E. Matlaw, "Scriabin and Russian Symbolism," *Comparative Literature* 31, no. 1 (1979): 5.

<sup>24</sup> Malcolm Brown, "Scriabin and Russian 'Mystic' Symbolism," 49.

<sup>25</sup> Maria Carlson, "Fashionable Occultism: The Theosophical World of Russian Composer Aleksander Scriabin," *Journal of the Scriabin Society of America* 12, no. 1 (2007-2008): 56-58.

<sup>26</sup> Susanna Garcia, "Scriabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype in the Late Piano Sonatas," *19<sup>th</sup> -Century Music* 23, no. 3 (2000): 289.

<sup>27</sup> Swan, *Scriabin*, 93.

<sup>28</sup> Vladimir Padwa, "Symbolism in Alexander Scriabin's Music," *Journal of the Scriabin Society of America* 14, no. 1 (2009-2010): 39.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth M. Smith, *Skryabin, Philosophy, and the Music of Desire* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 48.

of his compositions for the piano, treated the works of the Polish master as his bible.<sup>30</sup> In the beginning of his career Scriabin imitated Chopin's mazurkas, waltzes, impromptus, nocturnes, etudes, and preludes. These early compositions modeled Chopin's "strong right-hand melodies with chromatic accompaniment and occasional secondary voices in the same hand, the combinations of marked, slow bass lines and extended left-hand arpeggiation, and the mournful sadness and melancholy cry."<sup>31</sup> After the turn of the twentieth century Scriabin did not completely leave Chopin's style behind. Chopin's delicate, intimate, sensitive, and sensual musical language remained a strong influence in Scriabin's mature compositions. Scriabin was also influenced by Chopin's focus on harmonic development and preference for musical substance over mere flashy virtuosity.<sup>32</sup>

After 1900 Scriabin became inspired by the figures of Franz Liszt (1811-1886) and Richard Wagner (1813-1883). These late-Romantic composers were critical in Scriabin's development because they were strong proponents of program music and pushed the boundaries of traditional tonality in their late works.<sup>33</sup> Scriabin was attracted to Liszt's brilliant, colorful, and poetic keyboard writing. He was also in awe of Liszt's keyboard works such as the *Mephisto Waltz* which invoked the spirits of sorcery and black magic. The Russian composer also built on Liszt's experiments with one-movement sonata form, cyclicism, and thematic transformation. Scriabin often modeled Wagner's thick and orchestral style in his keyboard compositions and admired

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<sup>30</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> David Burge, *Twentieth-Century Piano Music* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 53.

<sup>32</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 13-14.

<sup>33</sup> The stress of expressing a program led not only to the erosion of conventional tonality but also to the appearance of special musical effects "dramatic, coloristic, or descriptive in nature." These effects were often unexplainable "in traditional theoretical or purely musical terms."

Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 5.

Wagner's intentionality in calling new forms of art to life.<sup>34</sup> The Russian composer was also extremely impressed with Wagner's ability to explore connections between philosophy and music. However, the most appealing attribute of Wagner's style for Scriabin was the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.<sup>35</sup>

Richard Wagner's music dramas, shaped by the ideals of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, prepared fertile ground for Scriabin's vision of an apocalyptic musical event he called the *Mysterium*. These music dramas were inspiring to Scriabin not only because they showed Wagner's desire to unite the arts but also because they attempted to strengthen the bonds between the listeners and performers. For example, Wagner, at Bayreuth, was able to shorten the distance between audience and singers by moving the orchestra out of sight.<sup>36</sup> The *Mysterium*, a monumental project "to be held for seven days and nights in India," was "conceived as the Wagnerian opera" in 1902 but took Wagner's achievements to extreme levels.<sup>37</sup> The *Mysterium* was to involve "not just sound but sight, smell, feel, dance, décor, orchestra, piano, singers, light, sculpture, and colours."<sup>38</sup> Another goal of this large work was "to remove the barrier separating audience and performers and to create conditions favorable for spiritual communion and all-unity."<sup>39</sup> The *Mysterium* became the ultimate goal of Scriabin's compositions written after 1903. These works,

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<sup>34</sup> Scriabin had less respect for intuitive artists and natural talents such as Haydn, Mozart, or the painter Raphael. Boris Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 101.

<sup>35</sup> *Gesamtkunstwerk* [Ger., total artwork] is "Richard Wagner's term for his mature operas, in which all the arts (including music, poetry, and visual spectacle) were to be perfectly fused."

Don Michael Randel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 350.

<sup>36</sup> Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 289.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>38</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 56.

<sup>39</sup> Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 284.

“études préliminaires”<sup>40</sup> for the *Mysterium*, not only carried compelling programmatic content but also contained a variety of extramusical effects.

The radical transformation of Scriabin's musical style is unmatched by any other composer. His mature works, which are very different on the surface from those of his formative years, rightfully raise many questions and present analytic challenges to his day. Yet all of Scriabin's music is still deeply rooted in the Romantic tradition of the nineteenth century: his late piano music, despite its revolutionary character, “remains totally pianistic and ecstatically romantic.”<sup>41</sup> This study will show, through the examination of piano sonatas from each of Scriabin's three stylistic periods, the profound lines of development between Scriabin's early and late styles.

I believe that the evolution of Scriabin's musical language can be understood using William Austin's definition of musical evolution. Austin compares musical evolution to “the evolution of a whole phylum, with its branches continually forking out.”<sup>42</sup> He argues that this process is slow and gradual, has no culmination, and also involves transformation of smaller elements. Austin says that a vast majority of composers do not actually reject tradition but refine and contribute to the existing models. However, he warns against a dangerous assumption that the new music is simply derived from the old. Austin says that the new music is not only a result of musical evolution but also a product of “special creation” and musical revolution.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the creation of new musical works often begins with a mixture of traditional and futuristic ideas. That is why the analysis of new music requires a consideration of traditional models and a close study of contemporary forces.

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<sup>40</sup> Louis W. Marvick, “Two Versions of the Symbolist Apocalypse: Mallarme's *Livre* and Scriabin's *Mysterium*,” *Criticism* 28, no. 3 (1986): 289.

<sup>41</sup> Burge, *Twentieth-Century Piano Music*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> William Austin, “The Idea of Evolution in the Music of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” *The Musical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1953): 26.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

Scriabin was not a rejector of the past but an interpreter. His early music showed signs of the later futuristic style but his mature music still contained elements from the earlier conservative style. Scriabin considered the traditional forms and techniques an appropriate home for his revolutionary ideas. He called himself “the translator”<sup>44</sup> and said “I write in strict style.”<sup>45</sup> However, Scriabin’s compositional creativity was not simply limited only to refreshing of the Romantic models. The Russian composer also took part in the explosive musical revolution of the first decade of the twentieth century. Scriabin’s appetite for novelty, cosmopolitan lifestyle, unique musical influences, extraordinary religious views, and unusual circles of society inspired him to explore some of the most radical musical ideas ever. These contemporary forces gave his mature musical language a special and unrepeatable character.

### **Scriabin and the Sonata**

The collection of Scriabin’s ten piano sonatas is appropriate source material for the more general study of Scriabin’s musical style and its long-term transformation because it offers a “near-inexhaustible source of analysis and approach.”<sup>46</sup> The sonatas span approximately his entire musical career (1892-1913) and each of his three creative periods. The sonatas of the early period comprise Op. 6 in F minor (1893), Op. 19 in G sharp minor (1892-1897), and Op. 23 in F sharp minor (1898). The middle sonatas are Op. 30 in F sharp major (1903) and Op. 53 in F sharp major (1907). The mature sonatas consist of Op. 62 (1911-1912), Op. 64 (1911-1912), Op. 66 (1912-1913), Op. 68 (1912-1913), and Op. 70 (1912-1913). These comprehensive works also illuminate the “continuity of change”<sup>47</sup> of distinct musical elements such as harmony, form,

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<sup>44</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 2:182.

<sup>45</sup> Faubion Bowers, *The New Scriabin: Enigma and Answers* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), 128.

<sup>46</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 172.

<sup>47</sup> Austin, “The Idea of Evolution in the Music of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” 26.



rhythm, and special effects. They also form a compelling cycle which not only brings to light fascinating relationships between individual works but also points of connection with other keyboard and orchestral works of the Russian composer.

The sonata was an extremely attractive medium for the cosmopolitan, ambitious, and self-centered Russian composer-pianist. This beautifully organized genre was highly respected in the West<sup>48</sup> and was considered by many “the vehicle of the sublime” or “pure music in its highest state.”<sup>49</sup> The sonata’s elevated status appealed to Scriabin because it provided an opportunity to prove the greatness of his genius. Scriabin also favored the fact that this genre was malleable and had revolutionary potential. The flexible design of the sonata could accommodate Scriabin’s futuristic musical and aesthetic goals. Scriabin, who inaugurated the sonata culture in Russia, used sonata form often not only in his keyboard sonatas but also in large orchestral compositions and other piano works such as the *Fantasia in B minor*, Op. 28.

Scriabin was specifically attracted to the traditional sonata form’s linear narrative which tells a story of conflict and reconciliation. The key concept in this sophisticated narrative is “the open modulatory plan of binary form, in which an initial modulation from the tonic to a new key is answered by a complementary modulation from the new key back to the tonic.”<sup>50</sup> This narrative is divided into three sections: exposition, development, and recapitulation. The purpose of the exposition is to introduce the contrasting themes and to create harmonic tension between them (the first theme is presented in the tonic and the second theme is presented in another key, usually in the dominant or relative major). The role of the development is to further escalate the harmonic conflict through various musical forces such as departure to distant key areas,

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<sup>48</sup> Randel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 797.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Rosen, *Sonata Forms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 366.

<sup>50</sup> Randel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 799.

sequences, or fragmentation. The recapitulation is a place where the musical material presented in the exposition in a key other than the tonic (i.e. the second theme) is brought back home. This balanced trajectory of basic sonata forms is sometimes altered by the presence of codas which “increase the sense of musical finality” and “delay or interrupt a final resolution, often with highly dramatic effect.”<sup>51</sup> Scriabin never abandoned the tripartite model of sonata form and continued to develop its ideas of tension and resolution until the end of his life.

Scriabin’s mature expositions, similarly to their traditional equivalents, play a referential role and set up a “harmonic” and “thematic-textural” canvas for the piece.<sup>52</sup> These expositions subscribe to the Romantic idea of thematic dualism but completely reinvent the musical relationships between the main themes. For example, Scriabin replaces traditional melodic contrasts and harmonic tension with extreme dynamic differences, radical changes of register, the use of special musical effects, different pitch collections, or with the ideas of tritone and rhythmic polarity. The composer also frequently derives new themes from the rhythmic and melodic cells of the main themes. The main theme areas of Scriabin’s mature expositions hint at the theosophical idea of mystical dualism and initiate a conversation between the mysterious and sensual worlds. The main purpose of these advanced expositions is to create desire for final unity between those opposite worlds. Some of Scriabin’s advanced expositions also begin with a mysterious introduction which resembles “the light from a distant star.”<sup>53</sup> This introduction is then restated at the beginning of the development and at the very end of the sonata.

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<sup>51</sup> Randel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 189.

<sup>52</sup> James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the late Eighteenth-Century-Sonata* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2006), 16.

<sup>53</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 175-177.

Scriabin's mature developments increase in anxiety and restlessness.<sup>54</sup> They employ conventional techniques such as harmonic sequences and fragmentation, and break down the musical material into smaller elements. These sections also frequently introduce new themes which are derived from the exposition's musical material. These new thematic ideas tighten the dialectic bond between the opposite worlds and increase the desire for final unity. Scriabin strengthens this desire with radical musical effects such as the *effondrement subit* (Fr., the sudden collapse). This special device, a signature element of the composer's late style, starts with a gradual creation of excitement through acceleration, increase of dynamics, rising gestures, or other musical means. The accumulation of energy is immediately followed by a deliberate, unexpected, and forceful cut of intensity. Scriabin's repeated use of these sudden collapses often leads to a forceful climax which replaces the standing-on-the-dominant at the end of traditional developments.

The appearance of the sudden collapse is a pivotal point in the overall trajectory of Scriabin's advanced sonata forms. The sudden collapse marks the beginning of "a strategic deployment of climactic points"<sup>55</sup> and "physical shocks of sound power."<sup>56</sup> These carefully planned eruptions of energy, accompanied by a powerful increase of intensity, represent Scriabin's unique musical interpretation of the theosophical "cycles" in the "cosmic process of the never-ending divine play."<sup>57</sup> The cycles of the sudden collapse, built of gradual accumulations of energy and forceful releases, resemble powerful waves of excitement toward the idea of final unity. These violent explosions initiated in the development not only illuminate a compelling relationship between

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<sup>54</sup> Hepokoski, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Smith, *Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire*, 67.

<sup>56</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 124.

<sup>57</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 122.

“extinction and sexual union”<sup>58</sup> but are also key elements in understanding of Scriabin’s advanced recapitulations and codas, since prepare the grandiose climax and delirious dance to come.

Scriabin’s advanced recapitulations reinterpret, rather than merely restate, the exposition’s musical material.<sup>59</sup> This technique is useful because it eliminates the feeling of low energy and darkness of Scriabin’s advanced expositions. The composer does not wish to extinguish the flame of desire between the two opposite theosophical worlds that has been heightened in the development. The main themes as they occur in the recap are often faster and appear surrounded by exciting musical activity which includes embellishments, motivic alterations, or busy accompaniment. Scriabin also takes further the Romantic preference of placing the climax at the end of the movement or at the end of the entire work<sup>60</sup> and continues the Romantic tendency to “deemphasize and shorten the recapitulation in various ways in favor of the coda.”<sup>61</sup> The advanced recapitulations are sometimes followed by secondary developments which take shape of a final attempt to accumulate energy before the sonata’s ecstatic climax. These secondary developments may include a few cycles of the *effondrement subit* which strengthen the last wave of excitement before the final resolution in the coda.

The “vertiginous”<sup>62</sup> codas are the most intense and tumultuous sections of Scriabin’s futuristic sonata forms. They bring back all previously introduced musical ideas for the purpose of their ultimate consummation and present them in a completely different context. These advanced codas are built of “an ecstatic climax and a cosmic dance of atoms, in which everything

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<sup>58</sup> Kenneth M. Smith, *Scriabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 48.

<sup>59</sup> Rosen, *Sonata Forms*, 284.

<sup>60</sup> Rosen, *Sonata Forms*, 393.

<sup>61</sup> Randel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 802.

<sup>62</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 178.

disintegrates and blows away like dust into outer space.”<sup>63</sup> In simple words they include an emphatic “the final effort”<sup>64</sup> followed by “the decomposition”<sup>65</sup> of the musical material. The explosive climax often takes shape of an apotheosis and the dance-like material focuses on the smallest motivic cells.

Scriabin’s late-period reworking of sonata style aims to incorporate an apotheosizing narrative into traditional sonata-form rhetoric. Scriabin redefines the relationship between the main themes and radicalizes the basic sonata’s developmental technique and “identifiable climaxes.”<sup>66</sup> The composer also replaces the traditional sonata’s “modular assembly”<sup>67</sup> and conventional dominant-tonic relationships with a more radical language of desire. Scriabin reinvents the structure of promise of traditional expositions, the rotational character of traditional developments, and the structure of accomplishment of traditional recapitulations.<sup>68</sup> As a result his futuristic sonata forms follow the scheme of ABC<sup>69</sup> rather than the traditional and balanced trajectory of ABA’ + coda. The scheme of ABC is an extreme version of the basic sonata’s tripartite model but still recalls previously introduced themes in the C section. It conveys the composer’s desire to press forward and to maintain the long-range build-up of energy. It also creates a movement “from the greatest delicacy (refinement) via active efficacy (flight) to the greatest grandiosity.”<sup>70</sup> This scheme is designed to produce the progression from melancholy to

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<sup>63</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 178.

<sup>64</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 97.

<sup>65</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 178.

<sup>66</sup> Rosen, *Sonata Forms*, 10.

<sup>67</sup> Hepokoski, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 15.

<sup>68</sup> Hepokoski, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 18-19.

<sup>69</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 177.

<sup>70</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 177.

ecstasy, from minor to major, from sadness to optimism, from darkness to brightness, and “from the general to the particular.”<sup>71</sup>

Scriabin’s most advanced sonata forms also contain compelling trajectories of emotional episodes. These episodes are a result of Scriabin’s recombination of the sonata’s main and secondary materials. They map on to traditional introductions, contrasting theme areas, transitions, closing sections, and codas. The episodes illuminate the processes of purification and spiritual transformation and tell a story of “languor, longing, impetuous striving, dance, ecstasy, and transfiguration.”<sup>72</sup> They also contain “characters” or little narrative side-plots which are associated with specific ideas or images and are similar to Wagner’s leitmotifs.<sup>73</sup> These side-plots often coincide with Scriabin’s advanced Italian or French vocabulary and bring to light the composer’s interest in the language of symbolism.

Scriabin’s piano sonatas undoubtedly illuminate the composer’s revolutionary spirit and a radical transformation of his musical language. However, the sonatas paradoxically belong to Scriabin’s most conservative creations. Scriabin reinterprets the sonata’s traditional tripartite model but never rejects it. The traditional sonata, arguably most experimental and malleable structure in tonal music, provides a suitable environment for the birth and growth of Scriabin’s mature vision of sonata form. I hope to show, through my comparative analysis of sonatas 3, 5, and 7, that there is a profound line of development between Scriabin’s early and late sonatas. Scriabin’s early sonatas not only continue to develop the achievements of his Western European predecessors but also contain seeds of his revolutionary ideas. The sublime late sonatas house the

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<sup>71</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 86.

<sup>72</sup> Boris de Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: CA, University of California Press, 1987), 97.

<sup>73</sup> Luigi Verdi, “Thematic Vocabulary in Scriabin’s Last Sonatas,” *Journal of the Scriabin Society of America* 15, no. 1 (2010-2011): 58-59.

conservative model within them and do not reject the traditional concepts of conflict and resolution.

### **Literature Review**

There is not a large body of scholarship on Scriabin, the set of his ten piano sonatas, or especially on the composer's futuristic conception of sonata form. There is consensus that the sonatas belong to the most substantial and representative works of the Russian composer. The earliest discussions of the sonatas appear in sources which focus on the general evolution of Scriabin's musical language and philosophical views rather than on those pieces' formal structure. For example, Arthur Eaglefield Hull's *A Great Russian Tone Poet, Scriabin* (1916), Alfred Swan's *Scriabin* (1923), and Boris Schloezer's *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* (1923) use the sonatas to highlight the major turning points in Scriabin's creative development. Hull compares Scriabin's life to the linear narrative of sonata form and argues that the Russian composer is influenced by the works of Bach, Beethoven, and Liszt.<sup>74</sup> He also notices that the thick texture of Scriabin's third sonata presages the multilayered constructions of the later sonatas.<sup>75</sup> Schloezer connects Scriabin's controversial religious views and projects such as the *Mysterium* with the philosophies and works of the nineteenth century. Hull's, Swan's, and Schloezer's discussions are still heavily influenced by the spirit of the nineteenth century.

In the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century the leading scholar is Faubion Bowers, whose perspective embraces Scriabin's entire life and all of his works. Bowers' *Scriabin: A Biography* (1969) is easily the most comprehensive study of the Russian composer and includes discussions of relevant historical information, program notes, and Scriabin's

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<sup>74</sup> Arthur Eaglefield Hull, *A Great Russian Tone-Poet, Scriabin*; (Miami: HardPress Publishing, 1916), 238.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

inflated poetry. Bowers' *The New Scriabin: Enigma and Answers* (1973), a valuable supplement to the larger biography, contains a concise summary of Scriabin's creative periods, influences, and controversial religious views. This book stresses the autobiographical character of Scriabin's sonatas and encourages thinking about them as a whole. Hugh Macdonald's compact book *Skryabin* (1978) emphasizes the later part of Scriabin's life and illuminates compelling relationships between the sonatas and other monumental works of the Russian composer. The author argues that Scriabin's sonatas have links with orchestral compositions such as the *Divine Poem*, *Poem of Ecstasy*, *Prometheus*, or the *Mysterium*. Macdonald argues that the sonatas are not isolated compositions but are by-products of Scriabin's broader development.

At the turn of the decade scholars begin to approach the subject of Scriabin's transformation in discussions devoted solely to the sonatas. These conversations include John Gorman's *An Analysis of Performance Problems in Selected Pianoforte Sonatas of Alexander Scriabin* (1979) and Gregory Strampe's *The Ten Piano Sonatas of Alexander Scriabin* (1981). The dissertation of Elizabeth Barany-Schlauch titled *Alexander Scriabin's Ten Piano Sonatas: Their Philosophical Meaning and its Musical Expression* (1985) narrates through every sonata and highlights Scriabin's three creative periods. Barany-Schlauch analyzes the programmatic content of each sonatas and focuses on the composer's philosophical and religious views. Her discussion involves some formal analysis of the sonatas but misses the broad lines of development.

In the 70's and 80's the scholars gradually move to more narrow and technical discussions of Scriabin's sonatas and Scriabin's musical language. They also show more interest in formal design, focus on Scriabin's middle and mature creative periods, and begin to notice compelling relationships between individual sonatas. For example, Timothy Dwight Woolsey's *Organizational Principles in Piano Sonatas of Alexander Scriabin* (1977) focuses on the Russian



composer's last five sonatas and highlights structural similarities between the sixth and seventh sonatas. James Baker's *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* (1986) emphasizes Scriabin's transition from tonality to atonality. Baker analyzes the relationship between Scriabin's fourth and fifth sonatas. He argues that the fifth sonata is not only a reworking of the fourth but also has a fundamentally tonal underlying structure. Herbert Harold Wise's *The Relationship of Pitch Sets to Formal Structure in the Last Six Piano Sonatas of Scriabin* (1987) also notices structural similarities between Scriabin's mature sonatas. These discussions of profound lines of development between Scriabin's individual sonatas can be used as a springboard to a broader analysis of these works.

The contemporary sources not only focus heavily on Scriabin's final phase but also use extremely technical language. Modern scholars frequently discuss formal organization but miss the broad connections between Scriabin's early and late sonatas. For example, Cheong Wai-Ling's articles titled *Orthography in Scriabin's Late Works* (1993), *Scriabin's Octatonic Sonata* (1996), and *Scriabin's 'White Mass': A Dialogue Between the 'Mystic' and the Octatonic* (2000) discuss notational consistency, octatonicism, and the *Mystic Chord* in Scriabin's late sonatas. These articles focus on the sixth and seventh sonatas and notice numerous similarities between these two works. Susanna Garcia *Scriabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype in the Late Piano Sonatas* (2000) and Luigi Verdi's *Thematic Vocabulary in Aleksandr Skrjabin's Last Sonatas* (2011) discuss the leading elements of Scriabin's futuristic sonata forms. Garcia analyzes Scriabin's advanced system of symbols. Verdi maps the futuristic thematic profiles of the last six sonatas on to the traditional canvas of sonata form.

Some other modern scholars who also involve the sonatas in their conversations have developed alternative ways of looking at Scriabin's harmonic development and theosophical

musical language. Peter Sabbagh's discussion in *The Development of Harmony in Scriabin's Works* (2001), divided into pre-Promethean and post-Promethean periods, treats the *Prometheus* and the *Mystic Chord* as pivotal achievements of the Russian composer. Sabbagh compares the *Mystic Chord* to the *Chopin Chord* and suggests that Scriabin never left tonality. Sabbagh's analysis of Scriabin's harmonic transformation emphasizes a vertical approach to harmony but Baker's discussion of Scriabin's transition from tonality to atonality contains numerous examples of linear analysis. Baker argues that many of Scriabin's pieces written after 1911, which are usually considered atonal, do not completely break ties with traditional tonality. Sabbagh, on the other hand, notices many forward harmonic tendencies in Scriabin's earlier works. Kenneth Smith's *Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire* (2013) builds on and expands Schloezer's argument on Scriabin's philosophical views. Smith goes beyond the *Mysterium* and discusses the theosophical ideas of gender polarity and erotic desire in a wide range of Scriabin's keyboard compositions. Smith's discussion not only explains the erotic tension in Scriabin's mature works but also points out the elements of desire in the early ones.

In summation, the oldest sources which talk about the sonatas focus on the broad transformation of Scriabin's musical language, but do not say enough about formal evolution. The more recent scholarship often discusses elements of formal organization but does not draw the connections between the early and late sonatas. The scholars have not stressed enough how the Romantic model of sonata form is an appropriate home for Scriabin's revolutionary ideas. The embryonic state of Scriabin's futuristic conception of sonata form in the early sonatas as well as the long-term evolution of Scriabin's interpretation of sonata form appear to be understudied. There is room for more work on the connections between the early and late sonatas that uses the technical analyses of modern-day scholarship.

## Methodology and Organization

The main goal of this study is to show profound lines of development between Scriabin's formative and mature conceptions of sonata form. This goal is inspired by Anna Akhmatova's beautiful comment about the Russian composer's music: "Just as the future ripens in the past, so does the past decay in the future."<sup>76</sup> As I hope to show, the Romantic sonata form is home to Scriabin's futuristic ideas and the underlying canvas of his late sonatas is paradoxically still conservative. This study demonstrates that Scriabin's mature sonata form is the composer's unique commentary on the traditional sonata form.

This document emphasizes the gradual character of musical evolution in Scriabin's sonatas and aims to fill the aforementioned critical gap through a detailed discussion of his remarkable sonatas: no. 3, no. 5, and no. 7. These sonatas are not only exemplary works of Scriabin's three creative periods but also most aptly demonstrate how the composer gradually reinterprets traditional models of harmony and form and slowly incorporates his extramusical ideas into sonata form. They represent turning points in Scriabin's harmonic development but are all conceived in F sharp. These sonatas also show that the sonata form is a flexible genre which can be interpreted in different ways.

The main methods of this study include technical and comparative analysis as well as application of secondary sources.<sup>77</sup> Technical analysis of each sonata allowed me to discover Scriabin's remarkable experiments in the areas of harmony (biggest indicator of Scriabin's transformation), form (key topic in a discussion about Scriabin's idiosyncratic sonata form), and

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<sup>76</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 175.

<sup>77</sup> My analyses of Scriabin's sonatas no. 3, no. 5, and no. 7 build on existing scholarly analyses of these particular sonatas and on analyses of his other works. They also build on more general scholarly conversations about Scriabin's musical style and extramusical ideas.

extramusical ideas (supplement of harmonic and formal analysis, enhancement of a conversation about Scriabin's evolution). Comparative analysis of chosen sonatas (no. 3/i - no. 3/iv, no. 3 - no. 5, no. 5 - no. 7, no. 3 - no. 7) allowed me to discover broader patterns in Scriabin's musical style and approach to sonata form. The application of secondary sources on Scriabin's harmony, sonata form, and extramusical ideas allowed me to place my analyses in a broader context of Scriabin's works. These three methods shed light on profound lines of development between Scriabin's sonatas no. 3, no. 5, and no. 7.

The main body of this study consists of three analytic chapters devoted to Scriabin's third, fifth, and seventh sonatas. All of these chapters contain discussions of essential topics such as Scriabin's harmonic language, formal design, and relationship to extramusical ideas. Each discussion contains a technical analysis of the musical material, compares the more conservative and more revolutionary musical models, and considers the influence of Scriabin's unique philosophical/religious views. The second chapter explains how the tension narrative of basic sonata form is an appropriate home for Scriabin's revolutionary ideas by comparing the Romantic third sonata's fourth movement to the first. The third chapter, which compares the fifth sonata to the third, shows how Scriabin breaks down and compresses the Romantic model of sonata form. The fourth chapter, which compares the seventh sonata to the fifth and third, explains how Scriabin reassembles the experiments conducted in the past and completely reinvents the sonata form's trajectory.

## CHAPTER II

### “Abyss of suffering, vortex of fury”: Scriabin’s Sonata No. 3, Op. 23

#### *Etats d’Ame*

The free, untamed Soul plunges passionately into an abyss of suffering and strife.

The Soul, weary of suffering, finds illusory and transient respite.

It forgets itself in song, in flowers.

But this vitiated and uneasy Soul invariably penetrates the false veil of fragrant harmonies and radiant rhythms.

The Soul floats on a tender and melancholy sea of feeling. Love, sorrow, secret desires, inexpressible thoughts are wraithlike charms.

The elements unleash themselves. The Soul struggles within their vortex of fury. Suddenly, the voice of the Man-God raises up from within the Soul’s depths.

The sound of victory resounds triumphantly.

But it is weak, still ...

When all is within its grasp, it sinks back, broken, falling into a new abyss of nothingness.

*Tatyana Schloezer*<sup>78</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The Sonata no. 3, Op. 23 (1898) is considered to be one of the most substantial keyboard compositions of Scriabin’s early creative period. This monumental piece brings to light a variety of interests and influences that penetrate Scriabin’s music at the turn of the twentieth century. For example, the third sonata is considered Scriabin’s last large keyboard work written under the influence of Fryderyk Chopin.<sup>79</sup> It also marks the beginning of Scriabin’s interests in mysticism and program music.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the sonata’s massive, symphonic texture hints at the composer’s increasing interests in orchestral music.

The poem *Etats d’Ame* (Soul States), written roughly eight years after Scriabin’s monumental third sonata and retroactively attached to it by the composer’s second wife Tatyana Schloezer, can significantly enhance the listening experience and understanding of this highly Romantic

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<sup>78</sup> Faubion Bowers, *Scriabin* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), 1:254-255.

<sup>79</sup> Swan, *Scriabin*, 75.

<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth A. Barany-Schlauch, “Alexander Scriabin’s Ten Piano Sonatas: their Philosophical Meaning and its Musial Expression,” (D.M.A. diss., Ohio State University, 1985), 67.

work.<sup>81</sup> *Etats d'Ame* not only mirrors the sonata's character and formal design but also brings to light some of Scriabin's advanced aesthetic goals. Scriabin's early period is not generally discussed in terms of his later theosophic/mystic views, but the fact that he approved the attachment of this poem to the third sonata suggests that those aesthetic ideas were indeed present. Scriabin's approval of this particular poem as appropriate program notes to the third sonata also shows links between his formative and mature styles.

*Etats d'Ame* and the third sonata both contrast the Romantic ideas of heroic suffering and sensuality. In the poem, this contrast is found in the comparison of the first and fourth stanzas, which describe the Soul immersed in a passionate struggle, with the second and third stanzas, which depict the Soul resting in a place where "fragrant harmonies" and "secret desires"<sup>82</sup> reign. The musical language and the key scheme of the third sonata mirror this organization of the poem. The piece's outer movements, in F sharp minor, radiate "mournful sadness and melancholy cry."<sup>83</sup> They use a language of extremes which includes extensive chromaticism, flagrant dissonances, excessive prolongations, and delayed resolutions.<sup>84</sup> The middle movements, in E flat major and B major, are considerably more optimistic and contain smoother musical material.

The contrast between the outer and inner stanzas of the poem also limns formal differences between the sonata's individual movements. The Soul's tragic-heroic efforts depicted in the first and fourth stanzas correspond to the formal strictness of the third sonata's outer movements. The first and fourth movements are in sonata form, which allows Scriabin to pursue his individual goals and to locate an individual style. The sensual atmosphere of the inner stanzas translates to a

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<sup>81</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 1:254.

<sup>82</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 1:254.

<sup>83</sup> Burge, *Twentieth-Century Piano Music*, 53.

<sup>84</sup> Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 55.

more relaxed and conservative musical environment in the middle movements. These movements are in gentle ternary form and closely resemble the style of Fryderyk Chopin.

Tatyana Schloezer's *Etats d'Ame* also contains some of the philosophical ideas that Scriabin uses to shape his mature sonata forms. For example, the stanzas depict a progression of shifting soul-states. The first stanza describes the Soul's bold move into action. The second depicts the Soul's temporary resting place and song with "radiant rhythms."<sup>85</sup> The erotic language of the third stanza conveys the Soul's experience of a sensual paradise. The unsettled fourth stanza describes the Soul's triumphant victory and brief state of ecstasy followed by a sudden and painful fall. The fact that the stanzas on suffering surround the radically different sensual stanzas also hints at the theosophical relationship between the outer and inner worlds.<sup>86</sup>

Furthermore, the trajectory of the poem outlines an intense and sophisticated accumulation of energy that is characteristic of Scriabin's mature sonata forms. *Etats d'Ame* begins with a straightforward one-line stanza. However, the elaborate fourth stanza is not only built of five lines but also contains an ecstatic climax followed by a sudden drop of intensity: "The sound of victory resounds triumphantly. But it is weak, still ... When all is within its grasp, it sinks back, broken, falling into a new abyss of nothingness."<sup>87</sup> The material between the outer stanzas includes creative waves of excitement which are also built of sudden changes of mood and forceful releases. The pensive third stanza contains only two lines and represents a drop of

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<sup>85</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 1:254.

<sup>86</sup> The theosophical outer and inner worlds can be taken to represent the conscious and unconscious states of human mind. Scriabin, influenced by the philosophy of panpsychism, believed that "cosmic history is the awakening of consciousness, its gradual illumination, its continuous evolution." Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 231.

Some of Scriabin's works follow this path, begin ambiguously, and progress to clearly defined musical ideas. An excellent example of such piece is the fifth sonata "in which an 'outer' phrase frames the 'inner' evolving subject of the work."

Smith, *Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire*, 77.

<sup>87</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 1:254.

intensity from the dance-like second stanza which has three lines. The third sonata mirrors the poem's build-up of intensity because it begins with a compact first movement and ends with a large and complicated Finale. The fourth movement also contains a radiant climax and an abrupt ending. The progression from the fast second movement to the slow third also mirrors the drop of energy from the second to the third stanzas of the poem.

This lack of balance between the third sonata's outer movements brings to light Scriabin's conscious effort to experiment with the boundaries of the Romantic style and shows his desire to reinvent traditional models of sonata form. The conflict between maintaining these models and revolutionarily re-working them is minimal in the fundamentally conservative first movement. However, the fourth movement, still built on the canvas of the Romantic sonata form, represents a waypoint on a journey from a conservative model to Scriabin's idiosyncratic mature conception of sonata form. The Finale is the place where the composer first begins to reshape the Romantic model of sonata form, and can be read as commentary on the conservative procedures of the sonata's first movement. Contrasting these outer movements will not only illuminate the forces that fuel Scriabin's early sonata forms but also uncover the most radical quality of Scriabin's third sonata - that this piece can be understood as a history of sonata form and the possibility of its reinvention.

The main goal of the chapter is to bring to light this microcosm of the progression of Scriabin's approach to sonata form. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the first movement which then serves as a point of reference in the analysis of the monumental Finale. The analysis of the fourth movement is the main body of this chapter and shows how the Romantic sonata form introduced in the compact first movement is an appropriate soil bed for the seeds of Scriabin's advanced aesthetic goals. The chapter's conclusion summarizes the



comparison of the third sonata's outer movements and sets the stage for the discussion of Scriabin's fifth sonata.

## **FIRST MOVEMENT**

### *Drammatico*

#### THE ROMANTIC BEGINNING

The “romantically thunderous” and “tragic-heroic”<sup>88</sup> first movement functions as a prelude within the context of Scriabin's third sonata as a whole. The dotted rhythms, which dominate the beginning and frequently appear in other parts of the movement, strongly resemble the processional style of a French Overture. The main goal of the first movement is to introduce motivic elements that show up in other movements and to establish a conservative model of sonata form that the Finale can then re-work. This compact and conservative movement clearly marks out the exposition in mm. 1-54, the development in mm. 55-94, and the recapitulation in mm. 95-144. The language of the nineteenth-century tonality and traditional treatment of themes are its primary means of organization.

The first movement's exposition accentuates the Romantic distinction between the first and second themes. The first theme, which inaugurates the movement in mm. 1-8, is serious and tightly organized. This theme, labeled *drammatico*, firmly establishes the mournful key of F sharp minor with the fundamental dominant-tonic relationship in the left-hand octaves. It is also marked by the avoidance of strong beats in the right hand, pronounced non-harmonic tones, and stretched chords. The first theme is built of two four-measure phrases. Scriabin creates anxiety in the first phrase by alternating ascending figures of strict dotted rhythms and smoother triplets in

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<sup>88</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 43.

the right hand. The composer relieves the intensity in the second phrase with descending musical gestures (Ex. 2.1).

Example 2.1 - THE FIRST MOVEMENT'S FIRST THEME

Op. 23 (1898)

*Drammatico*  $\text{♩} = 69$

*f*

○ - NON-HARMONIC TONES

*mp*

*una corda*

The loosely organized second theme, which begins with a pickup to m. 25, follows the Romantic convention of being lyrical and reconciliatory. This theme, marked *cantabile*, gracefully opposes the vertical character of the first. Scriabin assigns a slightly more moving metronome marking in m. 25 to underline the theme's gently flowing character. The key of A major is implied but not firmly established. The theme's smoothly descending gestures, long slurs, vague harmonic progressions, irregular phrase structure, and polyphonic dialogue between independent voices all convey the atmosphere of elusive sensuality (Ex. 2.2).

Example 2.2 - THE FIRST MOVEMENT'S SECOND THEME

Handwritten annotations on the score include:

- POLYPHONIC ENTRY** (in red) pointing to the treble clef entry in measure 24.
- POLYPHONIC ENTRY** (in red) pointing to the bass clef entry in measure 25.
- E DOMINANT CHORD IMPLIES A MAJOR** (in red) pointing to the chord in the bass clef of measure 25.
- ENTRIES** (in red) pointing to the treble clef entries in measures 29 and 30.

Although the themes do contrast in character, there are motivic connections between the two. The motivic material of the main themes is also used to generate to the rest of the movement. As an example of the first point, the contour of the first theme's descending motives in m. 12 and in m. 16 resembles the contour of the second theme's polyphonic entries in the alto in m. 24, in the bass in m. 25, in the tenor in m. 26, in the alto in mm. 27-28. As an example of the second point, the *poco scherzando* passages, which begin in m. 31, use the first theme's triplets and dotted rhythms. They also mirror the second theme's smooth endings of phrases and contain polyphonic dialogues. These light passages end in m. 42 with a PAC in A major. The musical material, which begins in m. 43, not only coincides with the return of the first theme in A major but also inaugurates the exposition's closing section. The material in mm. 47-50 continues the first theme in A major and contains the *espressivo* descent taken from the soprano line of the second theme in m. 25.

The first movement's conventional development is an appropriate home for Scriabin's more advanced ideas. The fact that this section does not begin with a statement of the first theme

makes the entire first movement not strictly rotational. The development's first phrase can be interpreted as a glimmer of unity between the opposite theosophical worlds because it brings together the motivic material from the exposition's main themes. For example, the phrase's head motive, in mm. 55-56, contains octaves in the left hand and triplets in the right hand which strongly resemble the *drammatico* theme. The tail motive, in mm. 57-58, contains flowing accompaniment in the left hand and gently descending eighths in the right hand which hint at the *cantabile* theme (Ex. 2.3).

EXAMPLE 2.3 - THE BEGINNING OF THE FIRST MOVEMENT'S DEVELOPMENT 55

The image shows a musical score for Example 2.3, titled "THE BEGINNING OF THE FIRST MOVEMENT'S DEVELOPMENT". The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It features a piano (mp) dynamic and a "dolciss." marking. The right hand contains a "HEAD MOTIVE" (mm. 55-56) with "TRIPLETS" and a "TAIL MOTIVE" (mm. 57-58) with a "GENTLE DESCENT". The left hand features "OCTAVES" (mm. 55-56) and "FLOWING ACCOMPANIMENT" (mm. 57-58). The score is annotated with red handwritten text and symbols.

The development makes use of sequences which create good conditions for Scriabin's advanced waves of excitement. These traditional techniques of fragmentation form logically organized patterns of various lengths which animate the musical environment and frequently include gradual increases of dynamics. For example, the initial phrase in mm. 55-58, which has a short internal circle of fifth sequence, is transposed up a whole step in mm. 59-62. The falling two-measure gestures in mm. 63-66, which contain the head motive of the initial four-measure phrase, are put through a descending thirds sequence. They begin on the notes of A flat and F in the soprano in m. 63 and in m. 65 respectively. The first notes in the right hand in every measure in mm. 67-70 also descend in thirds. Descending thirds patterns also appear in both hands in mm. 71-74 (Ex. 2.4). The material in mm. 75-78 is transposed down a whole step in mm. 79-82.

Example 2.4- SEQUENCES IN THE FIRST MOVEMENT'S DEVELOPMENT

55 *mp* *pp* *dolciss.* *p* *pp*

WHOLE STEP

59 *mf* *mp* *p* *cresc.*

THIS PHRASE IS TRANSPOSED UP A WHOLE STEP FROM MM. 55-58

64 *cresc.* *ff*

DOWN A THIRD FROM M. 63

D3

69 *dim.*

D3 → D3

74 *mp* *mp*

The development is tonally adventurous and showcases Scriabin's capacity for surprise. For example, the initial four-measure phrase in mm. 55-58 contains a falling-fifths progression which generates an expectation for E major. But Scriabin denies the arrival of E major in m. 59, changes the key signatures, and transposes the entire phrase up a step in mm. 59-62. The musical material in mm. 63-76 contains another example of Scriabin's ability to cause astonishment. The key signatures imply the key of B flat minor and the left-hand octaves on F generate the expectation for its dominant. The dominant appears in m. 70 and in mm. 75-76 but in both cases Scriabin denies the arrival of B flat minor. He reinterprets the F major chord at the end of m. 76 as the augmented sixth chord in m. 77 which then resolves to A6/4. The composer dazzles the listener with another change of key signatures in m. 79 and transposition of mm. 75-78 down a step in mm. 79-82. The development's retransition, in mm. 83-94, generates an intense expectation for the return of the first theme but contains an unusual drive to the recap. Its pedal is on V/V rather than on the dominant, which only appears in m. 94 (Ex. 2.5).

# Example 2.5 - THE FIRST MOVEMENT'S TONALLY ADVENTUROUS DEVELOPMENT

55 *mp* *pp dolciss.*

*C# MINOR*

\* \* \* \* \*

59 *mf* *mp* *cresc.* *f*

*Eb MINOR*

*f MINOR*

64 *cresc.* *ff*

*Db MAJOR*

*F*

HINT AT Bb MINOR

69 *dim.*

74 *mp* *mp*

In the first movement's development one sees the first glimmers of Scriabin's own idiosyncratic re-workings of sonata form. Scriabin shapes the development's sequences and adventurous tonal scheme into a dynamic wave of excitement. For example, the initial four-measure phrase, which gently inaugurates the development with a *mp* marking in m. 55, marks the beginning of the long-range wave of excitement. The transposed phrase, which begins in m. 59, displays a slightly higher level of tension because of the increase of dynamics to *mf*, higher register, and because of a more distant key area. The fragmentation in mm. 63-74 not only explores a variety of keys but also contains even more intense dynamic markings such as *f* in m. 63 and *ff* in m. 66. This long wave of excitement begins to dissipate in m. 72 until it reaches *mp* in m. 74. The previously discussed wave and the abrupt moves away from *sf* in m. 78 and in m. 82 foreshadow Scriabin's special effect of the *effondrement subit*.<sup>89</sup> The powerful climaxes at the end of m. 66 and at the end of m. 94, at *ff*, and the aggressive *sf* markings in mm. 78-91 foreshadow the violent musical shifts and strategic releases of energy which begin to reign in the fourth movement's development.

The first movement's recapitulation foreshadows Scriabin's strong desire to continue the development's build-up of intensity in the Finale. For example, this section begins in F sharp minor with a shortened first theme area in mm. 95-102. The musical material in mm. 101-102 is a transition compressed into the first theme which sets up the gently flowing second theme with a smooth descent in the right hand. The second theme area and the remainder of the movement in mm. 103-144 are in F sharp major. It is conventional for major-mode second themes to recapitulate in parallel major. Scriabin also follows general sonata form practices running back into the eighteenth century by delaying tonic confirmation and setting up the second theme's

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<sup>89</sup> The *effondrement subit* (the sudden collapse) is a gradual build-up of intensity and a violent release. This special device plays a major role in Scriabin's mature sonata forms because it often marks the structural climactic points.



cadence as a big deal in mm. 103-144. He begins to generate the expectation for cadential confirmation of F sharp major shortly after the statement of the second theme. He creates harmonic tension in m. 112 by alternating the global dominant and its leading tone in the bass. The alterations between C sharp and B sharp in the left hand continue until m. 132. Scriabin also fuels the desire for cadential confirmation with an exciting chromatic ascent which starts in m. 120 with the note of C sharp in the left hand. The powerful climax arrives at the end of m. 128 and the key of F sharp major is confirmed in m. 132.

The climax at the end of the third sonata's first movement represents a glimmer of seriously subversive use of tritone relationships and dissonance in the Finale (Ex. 2.6). The musical material in m. 128 is the only place in the movement where Scriabin uses the extreme sign of *fff*. This sign is placed next to a very dissonant chord on the first beat of m. 129. The note of B sharp in m. 128 in the left hand is special not only because it is a leading tone to C sharp (achieved in m. 129) but also because it is a tritone away from the global tonic of F sharp (also in m. 129). The emphasis of the tritone and dissonance in mm. 128-129 sticks out as an unusual place to mark the first use of *fff* but that is what makes the cadence in F sharp major in m. 132 much more satisfying.

Example 2.6 - THE FIRST MOVEMENT'S ECSTATIC CLIMAX

EXTREME DISSONANCE G# vs Gx

INTERNAL TRITONE

CADENCE IN F# MAJOR

TRITONE AWAY FROM THE GLOBAL TONIC

The Romantic first movement is fundamentally conservative and models the styles of Fryderyk Chopin and Robert Schumann. Scriabin follows the tripartite design of traditional sonata-allegro form in which the contrasting themes are introduced in the exposition, broken down and explored in the development, and brought back in the tonic in the recapitulation, and does not attempt to push the boundaries of traditional tonality. But although the outlines of the movement are conventional, that traditional set-up already starts to incorporate some of Scriabin's more advanced ideas. Scriabin brings out these ideas with more strength in the Finale where he reinterprets the tension-release relationship between the main themes, the unstoppable drive to the dominant at the end of the development, and the cadential confirmation of the tonic at the end of the movement.

## FOURTH MOVEMENT

*Presto con fuoco*

### INTO THE FUTURE

The Finale brings to light the savage side of Scriabin's personality and strongly opposes the aristocratic character of the conservative first movement. The Finale radiates Scriabin's obsession with chromaticism, extreme dynamics, flagrant dissonances, and violent musical shifts. The fourth movement includes three instances of *fff* and is the only movement of the sonata to use the marking *sff*. The Finale also radiates Scriabin's desire to accommodate more adventurous harmonic progressions and more radical interpretation of the sonata's tension narrative. Scriabin arduously pursues tendencies subtly introduced in the first movement such as the waves of excitement and *effondremets subits*. The third sonata's Finale also contains glimmers of Scriabin's futuristic ideas such as the theosophical dualism, ambiguous beginnings and inconclusive endings, and vertiginous dances.

The Finale duplicates the first movement's basic tripartite model of sonata form but also includes additional sections. It marks out the exposition in mm. 1-58, development in mm. 59-135, recapitulation in mm. 136-158, secondary development in mm. 159-201, and coda in mm. 202-235. The overall trajectory of this movement is a long-range accumulation of energy which ends with the explosive climax in the coda. This forward-driving gain of energy is very compelling because it alters the balanced shape of traditional sonata form.

The beginning of the third sonata's Finale (and the lead-up to it) is more sophisticated than the straightforward opening of the first movement. Scriabin sets up the fourth movement's first theme in F sharp minor at the end of the third movement in a short interlude in mm. 50-58. The first movement's first theme returns in mm. 50-54 but the musical material in mm. 55-58 is in V

of F sharp minor and foreshadows the Finale's material in mm. 5-8. The two outer movements are linked in this passage at the end of the third movement, which brings together some of their most important motivic elements.

The Finale's fiery first theme, in mm. 1-8, is significantly more nervous than the first theme of the first movement (Ex. 2.7). This anxiety results primarily from motivic repetition but is also fueled by the rumbling accompaniment in the left hand. This theme, in F sharp minor, contains two statements of the head motive and four gestures introduced at the end of the third movement. The head motive, which begins with an interval of the fourth and ends with a chromatically embellished descending tetrachord, is the crux of the Finale. The repetitions of this head motive, which resemble "wave-like rises and falls,"<sup>90</sup> are used obsessively in the first theme area and in other parts of the movement. For example, the first theme is repeated in varied form at m. 9 and again at m. 17; the transitional material in mm. 25-36 also contains three ascending transpositions of the head motive.

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<sup>90</sup> Smith, *Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire*, 19.

Example 2.7 - THE FINALE'S FIRST THEME

IV

Presto con fuoco  $\text{♩} = 58$

HEAD MOTIVE  
DESCENDING TETRACHORD

HEAD MOTIVE -

THIRD MOVEMENT  
V

legato

4 - DESCENDING TETRACHORD

ASCENDING GESTURES

cresc.

7

mf

dim.

2D STATEMENT OF THE 1ST THEME

*p*

Nervousness also penetrates the Finale's second theme (Ex. 2.8). Scriabin sets this theme up with the dominant chord of A major, chromatic ascent, and *dolce* and *rit.* markings in m. 36. The proper second theme, which begins in m. 37, is slower and relieves the breathless material of the first. This theme is also filled with graceful dotted rhythms which strengthen its sensual character. However, Scriabin makes this theme nervous by undercutting certain cadential arrival points: the left-hand accompaniment quickly moves away from I in mm. 39-40.

Example 2.8 - THE FINALE'S SECOND THEME

CHROMATIC ASCENT  
dolce rit.

pp

Meno mosso ♩ = 92

E DOMINANT CHORD IMPLIES A MAJOR

A MAJOR ARRIVES

cresc.

p.

The Finale's exposition can be read as a glimmer of the theosophical opposition of the outer and inner worlds. The Finale's anxious first and second themes, which subtly allude to the forces of "catastrophism"<sup>91</sup> and "eroticism,"<sup>92</sup> more strongly influence other parts of the exposition than did the Romantic themes of the first movement. For example, the transition and connecting passages in mm. 25-36 and in mm. 44-58 are extensions of these nervous main themes and focus solely on their motivic content. However, the equivalent passages in mm. 17-24 and in mm. 31-42 in the first movement's exposition are more flexible and not as heavily polarized.

The return of the Finale's first theme in mm. 59-70/iv carries different structural weight than the return of first movement's first theme in mm. 43-54/i. This return of the Finale's main theme

<sup>91</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 96.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

in F sharp minor suggests a Sonata-Rondo form (this appearance being the appearance, in a last movement, of the refrain in the tonic at the beginning of the development). This statement of the first theme also constitutes a radical change of mood from the preceding second theme area. In the first movement, however, the return of the first theme is in A major, still belongs to the exposition, and does not constitute a radical change of mood.

The large development of the Finale, in mm. 59-135, contains seven short-range waves of excitement and *effondremets subits* which are more extreme than in the first movement's development. The short-range waves gradually increase in length and in intensity and contain glimmers of Scriabin's advanced harmonic tendencies. They foreshadow the strategically important energetic releases in Scriabin's mature developments. This development also initiates a long-range build-up of intensity which culminates in the coda.

The musical material in mm. 71-90 is built of five four-measure phrases which each are also dynamic waves of excitement. For example, the first wave begins with a *mp* sign in m. 71 and ends with the sudden collapse marked *sf-p* in m. 75. This wave contains an internal descending thirds progression in the right hand in mm. 72-74 and ends with a minor-mode deceptive cadence in mm. 74-75 (D#7-E). The second and third waves, which occur in mm. 75-78 and in mm. 79-83 respectively, are considerably more violent. The second wave begins with a *p* sign in m. 75 but reaches *f* in m. 77. The third wave also begins with a *p* sign in m. 79 but reaches *sf* in m. 81 and ends with the sudden collapse marked *sff-p* in m. 83. This third wave also ends with a minor-mode deceptive cadence (A#7-B) but is followed with a more radical change of register. The fourth and fifth waves, in mm. 83-86 and in mm. 87-90, are transposed a perfect fifth up from the second and third waves. The fourth movement's passage in mm. 71-90 is a more extreme version

of the first movement's material in mm. 55-62; both involve crescendi and first-theme motives, but the Finale's passage features more waves, higher dynamics, and a clear sequence.

The musical material in mm. 91-102 houses a sixth wave of excitement which contains even more radical changes of register and dynamics. The accumulation of energy begins at *mp* in m. 91 and *cresc.* in m. 92. Scriabin abandons the rumbling accompaniment in m. 95 and begins to pursue smaller two-measure gestures. The increase of intensity continues with *f* in m. 95 and *cresc.* in m. 97 until the wave's climax at *ff* in m. 99. The right-hand and left-hand parts in m. 99 explore extreme registers of the piano and create the climax's expansive character. This wave begins to dissipate in m. 101 where Scriabin writes *dim.* The sixth wave of excitement can be read as a more extreme version of mm. 59-74 of the first movement because it contains the same change of key signatures, begins with a similar four-measure phrase, reaches *ff*, and gravitates towards B flat minor.

The most compelling aspect of the sixth wave of excitement is the fact that it uses unstable tritone relationships and mixed-mode deceptive cadences (Ex. 2.9). These adventurous passages set the stage for the radical ending of the Finale's development. For example, the root movement in mm. 91-94 displays the tritone relationship between the notes of G flat and C (Neapolitan-in-root-position to dominant). The C dominant ninth chord in m. 94 should resolve properly to F (the first note in m. 95 is actually F) but Scriabin quickly deceives the listener with the notes of D flat in the left hand and B flat in the right in m. 95. The endings of phrases in mm. 95-96 and in mm. 97-98 are also harmonically adventurous. The two-measure phrases in mm. 95-96 and in mm. 97-98 are not only a tritone apart but also contain compelling internal tritones. The musical material in mm. 95-98 contains tritone-based dominant-seventh-flat-five chords which appear on the third beat of m. 96 and m. 98 (F#-C and E-A#, C-Gb and Bb-E).



Example 2.9 - TRITONES AND DECEPTIVE PROGRESSIONS IN THE SIXTH WAVE OF EXCITEMENT

The image shows two systems of handwritten musical notation for piano. The first system, starting at measure 91, features a treble and bass staff with complex chromatic passages. It includes dynamic markings *mp* and *cresc.*. The second system, starting at measure 95, continues the chromatic exploration with similar markings. Red boxes highlight specific tritone and deceptive progression areas in both systems.

The large seventh wave of excitement, in mm. 103-125, is an extreme version of the first movement's materials in mm. 75-94. It contains cascades of the descending tetrachord which foreshadow the "series of upswings reaching higher and higher toward a final effort, liberation, and ecstasy"<sup>93</sup> of Scriabin's mature sonata forms. Multiple entries of the head motive form chromatic sequences which explore extreme registers of the keyboard. The first cycle begins in m. 103 on the note of F in a four-measure passage that precedes the change of key signatures in m. 107. Scriabin finishes each cascade with the extreme signs of *sff* or *ff*. These dynamic markings, followed by deliberate cuts of intensity, represent aggressive examples of the sudden collapse. The chain of cascades results in the violent climax in m. 119 and the first appearance of *fff* in the Finale. This climax, followed by the sudden drop of register and the markings of *mf*,

<sup>93</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 97.

*cresc.*, *sff*, *accel.*, and *sf* in mm. 121-125, represents the movement's most aggressive example of the *effondrement subit*.

The seventh wave's aggressive cascades also foreshadow a prominent role of the tritone in Scriabin's mature sonatas (Ex. 2.10). The cascades, which continue until m. 116, make use of local tritones which destabilize the musical environment. For example, the beginnings of the head motive in mm. 111-113 (C-F#-C) and in mm. 114-116 (Db-G-Db) display local tritone relationships. The traumatic passage in mm. 124-125 emphasizes the notes of C and B sharp in the left hand. These notes, which divide the movement into two approximate halves, can be interpreted as a dramatic pole against the global tonic. The seventh wave of excitement, which contains the change of key signatures to C major in m. 107 and ends in the key signature of F sharp major in m. 125, illuminates Scriabin's interest in the futuristic idea of tritone polarity.

# Example 2.10 - THE SEVENTH WAVE OF EXCITEMENT

72

104

Handwritten annotations: **IMPLICATION OF C**, **LEADING TONE OF C**, **C ESTABLISHED**, **TRITONE AWAY FROM IMPLIED TONIC**

Dynamic markings: *mp*, *sopra*, *sotto*, *ff*, *cresc.*, *mp*, *sotto*, *sopra*

Measure numbers: 104, 105, 106, 107, 108

109

Handwritten annotations: **TRITONE AWAY FROM IMPLIED TONIC**

Dynamic markings: *f*, *ff*, *cresc.*, *mp*

Measure numbers: 109, 110, 111, 112, 113

114

Handwritten annotations: **TRITONE AWAY FROM IMPLIED TONIC**

Dynamic markings: *cresc.*, *ff*, *sotto*, *sopra*

Measure numbers: 114, 115, 116, 117, 118

119

Dynamic markings: *fff*, *mf*, *cresc.*, *ff*, *sotto*

Measure numbers: 119, 120, 121, 122, 123

124

Handwritten annotations: **IMPLICATION OF F#**, **TRITONE AWAY FROM IMPLIED TONIC**

Dynamic markings: *accel.*, *poco rit.*, *p*, *ff*

Measure numbers: 124, 125, 126, 127, 128

The radical harmonic environment at the end of the Finale's development does not completely reject the drive to the dominant expected in conventional retransitions. Scriabin begins to generate the expectation for the global dominant at the end of the seventh wave by accenting harmonies which gravitate to C sharp. For example, he emphasizes the D major chord in m. 119 at *fff* and focuses on D major in mm. 121-124 in the right hand. The last notes in m. 124 in both hands also spell a D major chord. This D major chord together with the note of B sharp on the downbeat of m. 125 create an intense augmented sixth chord which desires to resolve to C sharp. The displaced entry of the first theme in mm. 125-135 brings back the key signatures of F sharp but resists the confirmation of the tonic. (This return of the first theme cannot be considered the refrain of a Sonata-Rondo form because it is not in the tonic.) The global dominant finally arrives in m. 136 and heralds the beginning of the recapitulation.

What is fascinating about the Finale's entire development is that it is heavily dominated by the materials associated with the first theme. For example, this section is embraced by the first theme's statements in mm. 59-70 and in mm. 125-135. The waves of excitement in mm. 71-90 are supported by the first theme's rumbling accompaniment and also contain chromatic descents in the right hand. The musical material in mm. 99-124 obsessively focuses on the first theme's head motive. This emphasis of the first theme's materials makes the arrival of the second theme in m. 136 much more satisfying.

The brief recapitulation, in mm. 136-158, is significantly shorter than the exposition and its compression goes further than in the first movement. The composer completely eliminates the elaborate first theme area and with that he begins to alter the traditional tripartite sonata form balance. This brief recapitulation is built solely of the second theme area, which can be read as an extremely satisfying return of the theosophical inner world. Scriabin closes the second theme

area with a weak V-I progression in mm. 150-151. He decides to delay the strong cadence in the tonic and to continue the development's build-up of energy until the ecstatic climax in the coda. The optimism of the major mode hints at the fact that this climax is now on the horizon.

Scriabin prepares the grandiose climax in the secondary development in mm. 159-201. The fact that, in the framework of traditional sonata form, the purpose of the secondary development "is to lower the harmonic tension without sacrificing interest"<sup>94</sup> before the coda creates suitable conditions for the eighth and ninth waves of excitement in mm. 171-182 and in mm. 183-201. The composer implies again the luminous key of C major a tritone pole away from the global tonic by canceling all sharps in m. 171 and by employing passages on V of C such as mm. 171-173. The eighth wave, frantic and unsettled, contains *effondremets subits* marked *f-pp* in mm. 174-175 and in mm. 180-181. The musical material stabilizes in the beginning of the ninth wave where Scriabin recalls the key signatures of F sharp major and establishes a pattern of octaves in the left hand. This bass pattern emphasizes the global dominant, generates the expectation for the global tonic, and supports the movement's most radical sweep from *pp* in m. 183 to *fff* in m. 202.

The Finale's ultimate climax, which coincides with the beginning of the coda in m. 202, is significantly more expansive than the ending of the first movement and throws the traditional sonata form completely off-balance. This climax, at *fff*, is Scriabin's extreme interpretation of the Romantic techniques of delaying satisfying tonic confirmation and making it a big event. This majestic theme, taken from the opening of the third movement, is built of thick chords, embraces the entire range of the keyboard, and requires exceptional strength on the part of the

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<sup>94</sup> Charles Rosen, *Sonata Forms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1988), 289.

performer. Its optimism resembles the victory of the “life-drive”<sup>95</sup> and resonates with the fourth stanza of Tatyana Schloezer’s *Etats d’Ame*: “The sound of victory resounds triumphantly.”<sup>96</sup>

The Finale’s secondary development and the coda form an integral unit which foreshadows some of Scriabin’s advanced ideas from the area of the “greatest grandiosity”<sup>97</sup> of his mature sonata forms. For example, the entries of the Finale’s head motive, which begin in m. 206 at *fff*, keep repeating in dance-like character until they dissipate in m. 230. This pattern foreshadows the “vertiginous codas”<sup>98</sup> and delirious dances characteristic of the composer’s late sonatas. Scriabin also foreshadows the futuristic concept of final unity by bringing together materials of themes from the opposite theosophical worlds. For instance, the theme in m. 202 and *sotto voce* ascending gestures in m. 225 are taken from the sensual third movement and belong to the theosophical inner world. However, these right-hand materials are supported by repetitions of the outer world’s descending tetrachord in the left hand. These repetitions ultimately lead into a mysterious plagal cadence in mm. 230-235. This cadence is built of ambiguous and obsessive gestures<sup>99</sup> which are marked *ff* and separated from each other by long one-measure rests. These gestures are extremely different from the radiant and satisfying dominant-tonic relationships from mm. 202-224, deliberately create confusion, and foreshadow the inconclusive endings of Scriabin’s mature sonatas.

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<sup>95</sup> Smith, *Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire*, 48.

<sup>96</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 1:254-255.

<sup>97</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 177.

<sup>98</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 175.

<sup>99</sup> These abrupt gestures are motivically related to the gestures from mm. 55-58 of the third movement. The main body of the Finale is embraced by similar figures that not only hint at Scriabin’s interests in symmetry but also foreshadow the bonds between the introductions and postludes of Scriabin’s mature sonata forms. Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 177.

## CONCLUSION

The comparison of the third sonata's outer movements shows that the Romantic sonata form is a natural vehicle for the expression of Scriabin's advanced ideas. The Finale is an adaptation of the first movement because its sections, key scheme, and main themes map on to the models introduced in the first movement. However, the Finale contains embryos of Scriabin's individual style and displays his desire to reinvent the Romantic models. Scriabin begins to express his own ideas by taking the basic sonata's tension narrative and conventions to extreme levels. For example, the Finale makes a step towards a deeper distinction between the main themes. This step shows Scriabin's desire to accommodate the idea of theosophical dualism. The composer alternates the materials of the outer and inner worlds throughout the movement but allows them to collide in the coda. The composer also throws the first movement's trajectory off-balance because he radicalizes its developmental technique and conventional climaxes. The Finale also shows that one of the main energies of Scriabin's individual style is compression. Finally, the fourth movement is still fundamentally tonal but it employs more unexpected progressions than the first and contains glimmers of advanced harmonic ideas such as tritone polarity. The comparison of the third sonata's outer movements shows that Scriabin's mature sonata form fuses "the collective spirit of ecstasy and orgiastic festival with the spirit of form, beauty, and control."<sup>100</sup>

The Finale of the third sonata plays an essential role in the large-scale structure of the third sonata because it embraces all previously introduced musical motives. For example, Scriabin hints at the first theme of the first movement in m. 170 and in m. 174 in the left hand. The motivic content of the second and third movements appears in m. 95 and in m. 202 respectively.

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<sup>100</sup> Smith, *Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire*, 49.

The presence of all motivic elements and the fact that this movement is the largest and most intense within the context of the entire sonata confirms the Finale's role as a conclusion to issues raised by all of the sonata's movements. The Finale corresponds to the section of the "greatest grandiosity"<sup>101</sup> in the context of Scriabin's "mega" mature sonata form.

Scriabin's monumental third sonata, the last one written in the nineteenth century, provides a meta-commentary on sonata forms. The piece brings together the Romantic influences of Fryderyk Chopin and Robert Schumann in the conservative first movement. Scriabin envisions the future, makes an effort to locate his own musical language, and comments on the traditional models in the Finale. The Finale and the entire large-scale four-movement design set the stage for Scriabin's sonata-form experiments in the first decade of the twentieth century. The third sonata's large-scale build-up of intensity, harmonic and motivic relationships between the individual movements, and the "logic of cyclic construction"<sup>102</sup> can be considered gentle impulses towards advanced one-movement sonata forms.

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<sup>101</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 177.

<sup>102</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 14.



### CHAPTER III

#### “To you I bring audacity”: Scriabin’s Sonata No. 5, Op. 53

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.

A. Scriabin, from *The Poem of Ecstasy*<sup>103</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

The first decade of the twentieth century was a time of profound changes in Scriabin’s artistic and personal life. The Russian composer engaged in numerous travels throughout Europe and to the United States, took Tatyana Schloezer as a new mistress, and pursued friendships with notable philosophers such as Prince Trubetskoy. He arduously studied the works of Russian symbolists and joined the theosophical group of Madame Blavatsky. It was also during that decade that Scriabin, inspired by Wagner’s idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, envisioned the *Mysterium*. This orgiastic multimedia art event, designed to alter existence and to be staged in India, became the ultimate goal of all of Scriabin’s music.

The Sonata no. 5, Op. 53 (1907), often placed among Scriabin’s finest works,<sup>104</sup> represents the culmination of Scriabin’s musical and philosophical development in this middle period. The piece, composed in only three days,<sup>105</sup> embraces the spirits of artistic freedom and musical discovery. Hugh Macdonald describes it as one of Scriabin’s “richest and least obsessive”<sup>106</sup> compositions. The fifth sonata is Scriabin’s pivotal work because it is his first one-movement sonata and contains a myriad of advanced musical devices that later would come to be associated

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<sup>103</sup> Scriabin, *Sonaten Nr. 1-5*, 93.

<sup>104</sup> Burge, *Twentieth-Century Piano Music*, 53.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>106</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 53.

with his individual style. However, the piece also offers a rear-mirror view of the Romantic tradition in that it is Scriabin's last large-scale tonal keyboard work.

The piece begins with a short stanza taken from Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy*, Op. 54 (1905-1907). This stanza not only captures the essence of the sonata's musical content but also illuminates some tendencies of Scriabin's style after 1900. For example, the excerpt's inflated language and radical mood shifts mirror the sonata's rapid shifts of character. Scriabin's text is also significantly shorter than Tatyana Schloezer's *Etats d'Ame* (the poem appended to the third sonata), and this difference mirrors how the fifth sonata compresses the model of the third sonata. This sonata's motto, which apotheosizes the joy of creation, can be considered a statement of theosophic thought because its contrasting lines resemble the opposite outer and inner worlds.<sup>107</sup>

This chapter builds on James Baker's observation that Scriabin prefers to test out advanced ideas in more conservative compositions before showing their full potential in later works.<sup>108</sup> The fifth sonata is generally discussed as a progressive piece which bridges Scriabin's middle and late styles but is rarely compared to Scriabin's pre-1900 works. The piece has been compared to the Sonata no. 4, Op. 30 (1903) which belongs to the same creative period, is in the same major key, is shaped by similar harmonic tendencies, and also challenges the Romantic four-movement sonata model.<sup>109</sup>

My analysis will have a larger temporal scope and will compare Scriabin's fifth sonata to the third. These sonatas belong to different creative periods, are inspired by different philosophical forces, and present different harmonic landscapes.

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<sup>107</sup> Smith, *Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire*, 77.

<sup>108</sup> James Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 201.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-202.

Yet there is still a profound link between Scriabin's middle-period fifth and early-period third sonatas. This chapter will show how the fifth sonata's harmonic and formal innovations are often extreme versions of subtle tendencies shown in the third sonata. Furthermore, this chapter will show how the most remarkable characteristics of the fifth sonata - which include the decisive move towards non-functional harmony, the use of one-movement design, and radical interpretations of the building-intensity and darkness-to-brightness narratives - are best viewed in relief through comparison with the third sonata.

The discussion of the fifth sonata's musical language and formal design is divided into three sections: harmonic devices, formal structure, and extramusical ideas. Each section focuses on Scriabin's futuristic tendencies but also discusses the fading influence of the Romantic tradition. The first section describes Scriabin's novel harmonic experiments but also shows how Op. 53 still uses some elements of conventional tonality. The second section shows that many formal innovations of Op. 53 have their origins in the primordial use of those techniques in Op. 23. The third section explains Scriabin's pianistic attempt to unite the arts and senses and brings to light the theosophic, poetic, and coloristic effects. The conclusion shows how Op. 53 sets the stage for the seventh sonata, a piece composed according to entirely new principles.

### **HARMONIC DEVICES**

The fifth sonata represents a critical stage in Scriabin's efforts to create a unique harmonic language. The piece still makes use of key signatures and has distinct key centers (Ex. 3.1). However, it not only lacks conventional modulations and cadences but is also marked by the overall weakness of the tonic. The broad key areas are implied but never firmly established. The primary catalyst of the piece's harmonic system is the tritone, which fuels novel harmonic ideas

such as ambiguous beginnings and endings, static/non-functional harmony, tritone polarity, and the *Prometheus Chord*. In this section I will show how the fifth sonata's harmonic trajectory challenges the harmonic narrative of basic sonata form and how it reflects Scriabin's desire to experiment in many different directions.

Ex. 3.1

## SONATA No. 5, Op. 53 (1907)

## FORMAL CHART

INTRODUCTION mm. 1-46		EXPOSITION mm. 47-156				DEVELOPMENT mm. 157-328			RECAPITULATION mm. 329-400			CODA mm. 401-456
IMPETUOUS PASSAGE mm. 1-12	LANGUID PASSAGE mm. 13-46	FIRST THEME AREA mm. 47-93	SECOND THEME AREA mm. 94-119	THIRD THEME AREA mm. 120-140	CLOSING SEC. mm. 140-156	FIRST PART mm. 157-262	SECOND PART mm. 263-280	THIRD PART mm. 281-328	I THEME mm. 329-354	II THEME mm. 355-380	III THEME mm. 381-400	
### ### ### m. 1			b $\flat$ m. 106			### ### m. 157		b $\flat$ b $\flat$ b $\flat$ m. 299 ### ### m. 325		b $\flat$ b $\flat$ m. 367		
		(F#)		(B $\flat$ )			Mystic Chords m. 264 m. 268	circle of fifths mm. 313-328	(B)		(E $\flat$ )	
	C $\sharp$ C $\sharp$ m. 92-93 mm. 44-45	V-I C $\sharp$ -F# m. 47 m. 88	C $\sharp$ F $\sharp$ m. 116 m. 120							F $\sharp$ m. 377		

The fifth sonata begins with a tonally ambiguous introduction split into two parts: an impetuous passage in mm. 1-12 and languid passage in mm. 13-46. The impetuous passage's key signature implies F sharp major but the musical material does not conform to that implication. James Baker calls the trilled note of E this section's pedal and notices that the E major scale is available from the general collection of pitches in mm. 1-12 (the notes of F# and G# appear only in mm. 7-11). He also suggests that the possible progressions in this adventurous

opening are V6/5-I in E major and [V6/5]-V-I in A major<sup>110</sup> (Ex. 3.2). However, the A major, E major, and B7 chords are not actually present in the music but only available in the general field of pitches. This material also stresses dissonant intervals such as D#-E in m. 1 and is accompanied by tritone figures in the left hand. Hugh Macdonald notices that the superimpositions of a tritone and a fifth in m. 3, in m. 5, and in mm. 7-11 foreshadow left-hand patterns in Scriabin's mature works.<sup>111</sup> Scriabin also enhances the effect of this tonally unstable material with trills, extreme dynamics, extreme registers, and with accelerating figures.

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<sup>110</sup> Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin*, 175.

<sup>111</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 53.



### Example 3.2 - THE INTRODUCTION'S IMPETUOUS PASSAGE

mm. 1-6 POSSIBLE CHORD

m. 7-11 POSSIBLE CHORDS

Scriabin maintains the atmosphere of tonal uncertainty in the introduction's languid passage (Ex. 3.3). James Baker considers the bass note of E in m. 13 a continuation of the impetuous passage's pedal on E, hears the note of A# in m. 13 as a resolution of As in mm. 1-12, and suggests that the music has some relation to F# major.<sup>112</sup> F# major triads are available from the collection of pitches in m. 19, in m. 23, in m. 28, in m. 34, and in m. 38 but the key of F# major is never established. The ambiguous chord in m. 13 can be heard as V7 of B but never resolves that way. The note of B appears in m. 18 in the soprano but not as a resolution of the left-hand

<sup>112</sup> Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin*, 175.

tritones but rather as the transposition of the right-hand's m3 motive in m. 14 and m. 16. The harmony in m. 13 is an example of Scriabin's treatment of dominant chords as stable non-functional sonorities. Hugh Macdonald has compared similar passages in Scriabin's literature to an "imaginary paradise of the senses beyond time."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 54.



Example 3.3 - THE INTRODUCTION'S LAUID PASSAGE

18 *Larguido* *pp dolciss.* *una corda* *< pochiss. >* *con voglia*

19 *poco cresc.* *dim.* *pp* *poco cresc.* *dim.*

25 *pp* *poco cresc.* *dim.* *pp molto languido*

31 *poco cresc.* *dim. smorz.* *p dolce* *Accarezzevole*

36 *accel.* *poco cresc.*

The fifth sonata's first theme area in the exposition, in mm. 47-93, is in F# major but that is not immediately apparent. The composer sets up this section with a C# dominant chord at the end of the introduction in mm. 44-45 but the tonic does not appear in m. 47. Scriabin prolongs the dominant harmony from m. 45 in mm. 47-52 and establishes a stable bass pattern with a pedal on C# (V of F#). Harmonic tension decreases in mm. 53-58 with the appearance of E natural which eliminates the possibility of a strong leading-tone resolution to the tonic. The musical material in mm. 59-67 interrupts the bass pattern in mm. 47-58 but ends with C# dominant chords and a leading tone in mm. 65-67. One can hear the pedal on F# in mm. 68-79 not only as an immediate resolution of mm. 65-67 but also as a continuation of the pedal on C# in mm. 47-58. This broad V-I progression in the beginning of the fifth sonata's exposition is significantly weaker than the straightforward dominant-tonic progressions which establish the key of F# in the beginning of the third sonata's outer movements.

Scriabin's harmonic experimentation moves in a completely opposite direction at the end of the fifth sonata's development, where the composer decisively breaks the sonata's pattern of harmonic ambiguity and escalates harmonic tension with extreme clarity (this section contains a harmonic progression which has a strong functional pull and creates a large-scale drive). After the change of key signatures in m. 299 the composer initiates a series of strong dominant seventh chords in m. 313, m. 317, m. 321, and in m. 325. Scriabin prolongs these dominants with chromatic descents and bold octaves in the left hand. These descents end with accented tritones in the bass in m. 315, m. 319, m. 323, and in m. 327. In the context of these dominant chords the tritones are flattened fifths of the same chord, now in second inversion. What is fascinating about these chords is that they form a compelling circle of fifths progression and create a desire for a climax and resolution at the formally significant juncture of the end of the development. The

explosive climax in mm. 325-328 coincides with another change of key signatures which sets up the recapitulation's first theme area in the key of B major.

This retransition section of the fifth sonata (mm. 299-328) is a more intense version of the retransition in the third sonata's Finale (mm. 91-135). These two excerpts begin with the same change of key signatures and have big build-ups to the global dominant. However, the Finale's development only delays the arrival of the global dominant until m. 136. The ending of the fifth sonata's development completely denies the dominant of F sharp major and sets up the recapitulation in an unconventional key of B major. This unusual ending illuminates Scriabin's openness to move away from the harmonic pillars of traditional sonata forms.

What is fascinating about the fifth sonata's recapitulation is that it showcases Scriabin's ability to conduct harmonic experiments without compromising the piece's large-scale organization. For example, the key of the exposition's first theme area (F# major) does not return in the recapitulation as expected in a conventional sonata form. But the recapitulation's tonal structure still models the one of the exposition. The recapitulation's first and third theme areas, presented in B major and in Eb major respectively, mirror the exposition's relative key relationship (F# major and Bb major). Furthermore, the recapitulation's second theme area contains a significant F7 chord in m. 377 which maps to a C7 chord in m. 116 in the exposition. Both chords mark the anticipatory end of a transition and resolve in the same way (C7-F7 in the exposition and F7-Bb7 in the recapitulation).

The fifth sonata's coda also demonstrates Scriabin's desire to create a coherent large-scale structure and to fuse energies of harmonic stability and ambiguity. The coda prolongs the recapitulation's tonal center with a stable pedal on Eb. This stable pedal supports and connects musical material discussed earlier as harmonically ambiguous. For example, it links the ecstatic

climax in mm. 433-440, which apotheosizes the languid passage's theme, with the impetuous passage in mm. 451-456. James Baker argues that the note of D sharp on the downbeat of m. 451 is an extension of the coda's E flat pedal and notices that the pitch collection in mm. 451-456 is similar to the material in m. 443 and to the left-hand chord in mm. 447-449 (Ex. 3.4).<sup>114</sup> The pedal on Eb works similarly to the pedal on E which links the impetuous and languid passages in the beginning of the sonata.<sup>115</sup> The coda's harmonic design is significant within the context of the fifth sonata as a whole because, despite different key signatures, it resembles the one of the introduction (both sections use pedal tones to connect harmonically ambiguous material).

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<sup>114</sup> Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin*, 188.

<sup>115</sup> Baker's analysis of the fifth sonata's introduction treats the impetuous passage's trilled E $\sharp$  as pedal tone which then continues in the bass of the languid passage. *Ibid.*, 175.

Presto

441

*mf* *cresc.* *imperioso*

EX. 3.4 - THE CODA'S ENDING

445

*f*

449

*f impetuoso* *cresc.* *accel.*

453

*prestissimo* *fff*

The fifth sonata's unusual harmonic scheme is a result of a strong conflict between conventional sonata form's balanced trajectory and Scriabin's desire to accommodate apotheosizing narratives. This conflict only subtly affects the harmonic outline of the third sonata's Finale. Scriabin opens this last movement with a strong V-I progression in F# minor, delays the dominant at the end of the development, presents the coda's ecstatic climax in F# major, but still closes the Finale in F# minor (the development's delay of the dominant and the coda's climax are strong examples of the composer's apotheosizing narrative but they do not throw conventional sonata form's harmonic design off balance: the key of F# major returns in

the recapitulation and the sonata ends in F# minor). However, in the fifth sonata we can see how Scriabin's apotheosizing narrative causes conventional sonata form's balanced harmonic trajectory to retrench itself: the tonally ambiguous introduction is followed by the exposition's weaker V-I opening progression in F# major, the denial of the global dominant at the end of the development results in the fact that the recapitulation does not bring back the tonic, and the coda's ecstatic climax in Eb major is too powerful to allow for a closing in F#. Scriabin attempts to balance the fifth sonata's unusual trajectory with harmonic relationships between the introduction and coda but the piece's overall harmonic scheme is much more extreme than the one of the third sonata's Finale.

The lack of tonal balance between the fifth sonata's beginning in F# and ending in Eb foreshadows Scriabin's advanced system of "Dual Modality."<sup>116</sup> This futuristic harmonic system, based on the opposition of two key centers related by a tritone, is a radical development from the harmonic plan of basic sonata forms which generally start and end in the same key and oppose keys related by fifth and third. The Eb major in the fifth sonata's coda can be considered a half-way meeting-point between F# and C. Scriabin produces this meeting-point by altering the piece's sonata-form machinery (exposition keys of F# and Bb, recapitulation keys of B and D#, both separated by enharmonic major thirds).

The fifth sonata's stand-alone introduction hints at the structural concept of tritone polarity. The entire section bears the key signatures of F# major and the languid passage contains some musical figures which subtly point at F#. However, in mm. 34-46 Scriabin gradually engages in the procedure of the "phasing-out of key signatures"<sup>117</sup> to prepare the opposite pole of C. The

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<sup>116</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 149.

<sup>117</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 45.

composer uses accidentals to cancel all key signatures of F sharp and uses G dominant seventh chords to imply the key of C in mm. 42-43. In mm. 44-45 Scriabin quickly returns to the realm of F sharp by using its dominant chord (Ex. 3.5). The introduction also contains musical materials which hint at the midpoint between F# and C. These materials include the impetuous passage's repeating lowest note of D# (this note can be linked to the lowest note of the coda's mm. 451-456) and the languid passage's notes of Eb in mm. 40-41 (in close proximity to the material in mm. 42-45 which highlights the tritone poles of C-F#).

Example 3.5 - THE INTRODUCTION'S ENDING

The image shows a musical score for Example 3.5, titled 'THE INTRODUCTION'S ENDING'. It covers measures 41 to 45. The score is written for piano in 6/8 time. Measure 41 starts with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. Measure 42 continues with *pp*. Measure 43 has a *poco cresc.* marking. Measure 44 returns to *pp*. Measure 45 ends with a final chord. Handwritten red annotations above the staff identify the dominant chords: 'V of C' (G7) over measures 42-43 and 'V of F#' (C7) over measures 44-45. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and fingering numbers (1, 2, 5, 1, 1).

The fifth sonata also contains other tritone-based experiments which foreshadow the harmonic language of Scriabin's post-Promethean sonatas. These experiments illuminate a fascinating paradox: the tritone, an interval filled with tension, is used as a foundation of a system "not dependent on the release of tension."<sup>118</sup> For example, the piece has a few *Mystic Chords*<sup>119</sup> which appear in root (unaltered) position in m. 264 and in m. 268. The fact that these magical chords share most pitches with the neighboring dominants (including the root) illuminates the evolutionary connections between these harmonies (Ex. 3.6). The sonata also

<sup>118</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 149.

<sup>119</sup> The equivalent terms *Prometheus Chord* or the *Mystic Chord* do not come directly from Scriabin but from Leonid Sabaneyev and from Arthur Eaglefield Hull. Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 313.

makes use of dominant-type chords which are separated by a tritone. Some examples of these tritone relationships appear in the introduction's languid passage (in mm. 13-16, or in mm. 25-28), in the exposition's second theme area (in mm. 96-99), and in the development (in mm. 191-198 and in mm. 211-218).

Example 3.6 - THE MYSTIC CHORD

103

### FORMAL STRUCTURE

The fifth sonata's formal design stretches the conception of sonata form in different directions. The piece has five distinct sections: introduction in mm. 1-46, exposition in mm. 47-156, development in mm. 157-328, recapitulation in mm. 329-400, and coda in mm. 401-456. This design houses the basic three-part model of sonata form (exposition-development-recapitulation), maintains the traditional distinction of contrasting themes (in the exposition and in the recapitulation), and employs some conventional developmental techniques such as sequences. However, the fifth sonata, with its substantial prologue, development, and epilogue, also emphasizes sections which have the fewest form-functional requirements. In this section I will show how some of the piece's novel organizational techniques can be interpreted as more



pronounced versions of the innovative tendencies subtly introduced in the third sonata. I will also discuss Scriabin's formal experiments which foreshadow the structure of his later sonatas.

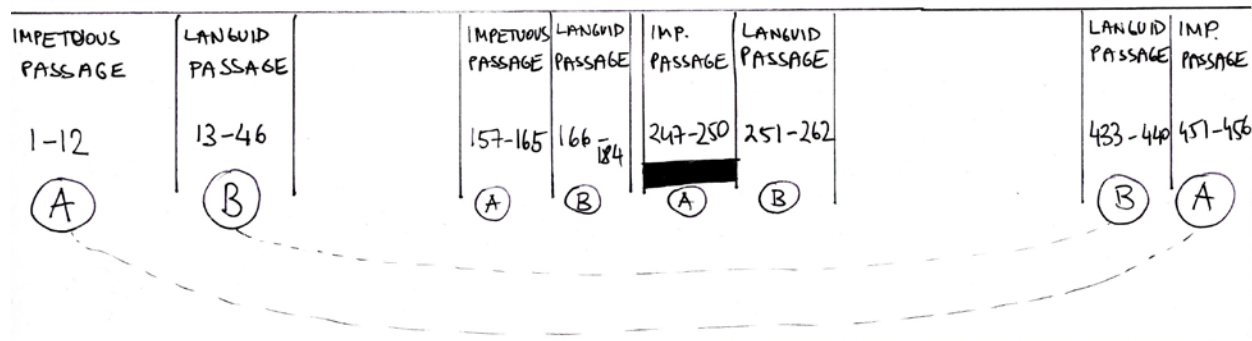
The key difference between the single-movement fifth sonata and the third sonata's movements in sonata form is the presence of a large stand-alone introduction. This futuristic section, built of contrasting impetuous and languid passages, contains violent shifts of dynamics and ambiguous tonal language. The introduction's materials illuminate an interesting paradox: they are used both to accentuate Scriabin's apotheosizing narrative and to preserve the arch tendencies already present in traditional sonata forms. Scriabin uses the introduction's materials to create powerful eruptions of energy in the beginning of the piece in mm. 1-46, in the beginning of the development in mm. 157-184, and in the coda.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, they shape the light flight-like passage in mm. 247-262 roughly in the middle of the sonata. The introduction's materials at the outskirts and in the center of the piece communicate Scriabin's desire to consider symmetry as one of the main techniques of large-scale organization (Ex. 3.7). A glimmer of this symmetrical approach can be found in the third sonata: the short interlude at the end of the third movement, in mm. 50-58, can be considered the Finale's introduction. This excerpt not only sets up the Finale's key center of F# minor with a strong dominant chord but is also motivically related to the Finale's main theme and to its abrupt ending.

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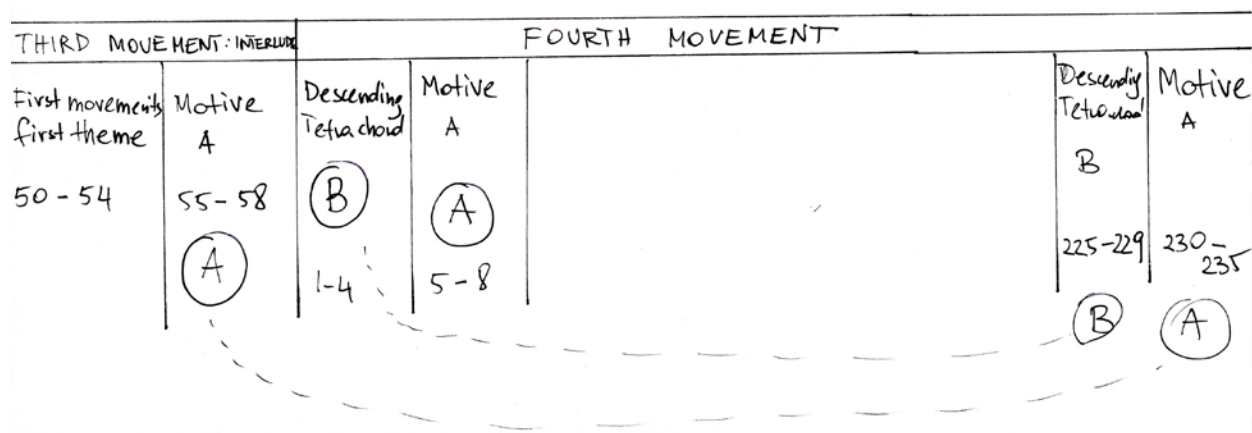
<sup>120</sup> The coda apotheosizes the introduction's *languido* theme in mm. 433-440 and recalls the impetuous passage in mm. 451-456.

## Ex. 3.7 - SYMMETRY

## SONATA No. 5, Op. 53



## SONATA No. 3, Op. 23: Finale



Another way in which this piece challenges the conventions of sonata form is by having three theme areas in the exposition (rather than first theme area, transition, and second theme area). The exposition's first and third theme areas, in mm. 47-93 and in mm. 120-139, mirror the Romantic conception of contrasting themes and are similar to the main themes of the third sonata's movements in sonata form. For example, the fifth sonata's first theme is not only built of predictable six-measure phrases and stable bass patterns but also contains a significant V-I relationship in F#. The fifth sonata's lyrical third theme contains polyphonic writing, creates smooth melodic lines with long slurs, and vaguely implies its tonal center. The second theme area, in mm. 94-119, resembles a traditional transition because it links two different key areas (F# and Bb) and contains a pivotal change of key signatures. It also contains passages that

smoothly connect the neighboring sections such as mm. 94-95 and mm. 116-119. However, Scriabin turns this section into thematic material in its own right: its main material in mm. 96-115 displays a high degree of independence because of the completely new *imperioso* and *misterioso affannato* motives. The composer also begins to reshape the closing material in mm. 140-155. This section is the fastest part of the exposition, introduces the new *fantastico* motive in mm. 140-141, and recalls the *imperioso* motives in m. 146, in mm. 151-152, and in mm. 155-156.

The fifth sonata's development is longer and more complicated than the developments of the third sonata's movements in sonata form. This large section is built of three smaller parts. The first part, in mm. 157-262, begins and ends with the impetuous and languid passages of the introduction and develops mainly the materials from the exposition's first and second theme areas. The second part, in mm. 263-280, explores the exposition's lyrical third theme area and contains the magical *Prometheus Chords* in m. 264 and in m. 268. What is fascinating about this part, which is slower than the rest of the development and appears roughly in the middle of the piece, is that, according to Alfred Swan, it can be taken to resemble a slow movement of a Romantic four-movement sonata.<sup>121</sup> The third part, in mm. 281-328, builds on the exposition's *fantastico* motive and also on the material from the third theme area. This section maps to the retransition passage in the development of the third sonata's Finale in mm. 91-135 because it contains the same change of key signatures and has a big build-up to the global dominant.

The fifth sonata's compact recapitulation showcases how Scriabin continues to reshape basic sonata form's trajectory. This section is shorter and faster than the piece's exposition. It

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<sup>121</sup> Alfred Swan has noted that Scriabin's single-movement fifth sonata can be taken to condense into one movement the elements of the Romantic four-movement structure. Swan, *Scriabin*, 92-93.

replicates the exposition's three thematic areas but does not contain the closing material. The first theme area in the recapitulation, in mm. 329-354, contains only one statement of the first theme and is marked *Prestissimo*. The beginning of the second theme area contains an additional *accelerando* marking in m. 355. This brief recapitulation, which demonstrates Scriabin's strong desire to press forward, is an extreme version of the Romantic tendency, discussed in the previous chapter, to shorten the recapitulation in favor of the coda. The recapitulations of the third sonata's outer movements do not contain any faster indications of tempo.

The fifth sonata's ecstatic coda, the ultimate goal of the piece, is an extreme version of the coda in the third sonata's Finale. This section is a more condensed summary of the sonata's musical ideas. For example, Scriabin expands the *fantastico* motive in the beginning of the coda. He recalls the *imperioso* motive in the left hand in m. 417 and in m. 425. The composer releases ecstatic energy in m. 433 when he apotheosizes the *languido* theme from the introduction. The composer explores the motives from the exposition's first theme area in mm. 441-450 and ends the coda with the introduction's impetuous passage in mm. 451-456. The fifth sonata's coda not only consummates all previously introduced motives in a radiant climax but also continues the increase of speed initiated in the recapitulation: *accelerando poco a poco* in mm. 403-404, *Presto* in m. 441, *accelerando* in m. 452, and *Prestissimo* in m. 454. The ending of the third sonata's Finale does not accelerate.

Scriabin intensifies the fifth sonata's trajectory not only with gradually faster tempos but also with more radical waves of excitement and *effondremets subits*. Scriabin employs gradual build-ups leading up to abrupt cuts of energy in mm. 185-198, in mm. 199-206, in mm. 207-227, in mm. 227-234, or mm. 235-246. The musical material in mm. 227 represents a flagrant example of the *effondrement subit* because of the extreme contrast of dynamics. The musical

material in mm. 263-280 interrupts the long-range increase of intensity for a moment but the waves of excitement resume in m. 281. The ending of the fifth sonata's development has four waves: two short ones in mm. 281-284 and in mm. 285-288, a longer one in mm. 289-298, and a big one in mm. 299-328. This last wave ends with the powerful climax in mm. 325-328 and the special effect of the sudden collapse marks the beginning of the recapitulation in m. 329. The start of the final wave of excitement coincides with the beginning of the coda in m. 401. This wave begins softly in the darker registers of the piano but gradually gains momentum, turns into a vertiginous dance, results in a forceful climax in m. 433, and ultimately dissipates into the highest registers of the keyboard.

In the fifth sonata we can see how Scriabin begins to shape sonata form's core and additional sections into three long-range build-ups of intensity which resemble the ABC design of Scriabin's mature sonata forms (Ex. 3.8).<sup>122</sup> These three broad surges explore essentially the same material and in similar order but with different levels of energy and focus. All of them accelerate at the end. The introduction and the exposition - comprise wave A - and set the stage for the entire piece. The development, labeled B, also begins with the material from the introduction and replicates the exposition's chain of events. The section C, which consists of the recapitulation and coda, no longer begins with the introduction but recalls the main theme areas of the exposition and follows the guidelines of sonata form. This section radically compresses the previously introduced ideas and is the fastest part of the piece.

The fifth sonata's trajectory can also be read in terms of small musical motives which are similar to Wagner's leitmotifs, are associated with specific ideas or images, and often coincide

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<sup>122</sup> Faubion Bowers has described this design as a movement from "the highest delicacy, via active efficacy, to the greatest grandiosity."  
Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 177.

with Scriabin's advanced Italian performance instructions. Luigi Verdi has described seven unique leitmotifs in the fifth sonata: darting in mm. 1-12, languid in mm. 13-20, affirmative in mm. 47-52, imperious in mm. 96-97, inciting in mm. 98-99, seductive in mm. 120-123, and galloping in mm. 289-294.<sup>123</sup> The affirmative and seductive leitmotifs belong to the first and third theme areas which correspond to the generic sonata-form contrasting themes. A repeating rotation of these leitmotifs cycles through several times within the piece (the A, B, C build-ups contain appearances of these leitmotifs) and hints at the concepts of spiritual transformation and dialectical construction characteristic of Scriabin's most advanced sonata forms.

Example 3.8 - THE FIFTH SONATA'S ABC SCHEME

WAVE A INTUITION	INTRODUCTION Darting Leitmotif 1-12 Languid Leitmotif 13-20	FIRST THEME AREA Affirmative Leitmotif 47-52	SECOND THEME AREA Imperious Leitmotif 96-97 Inciting Leitmotif 98-99	THIRD THEME AREA Seductive Leitmotif 120-123	CLOSING MATERIAL Hint of Galloping Leitmotif 140-41 Hints of Imperious Leitmotifs 145, 151-152, 155-156. <i>molto accel. Presto tumultuoso esult.</i>
WAVE B ANALYSIS	INTRODUCTION Darting Leitmotif 157-165 Languid Leitmotif 166-173	FIRST PART	FIRST PART I N T R O D U C T I O N	SECOND PART	THIRD PART Galloping Leitmotif 289-294
WAVE C RECONSTRUCTION + SYNTHESIS	X	FIRST THEME AREA shorter faster	SECOND THEME AREA	THIRD THEME AREA	CODA Radical Acceleration Galloping 401-408 Inciting 409-16 Imperious 417-20, 425-28, 444 Affirmative 417-20, 425-28, 441-450 Seductive 437-440 Languid 433-436 PARTING 451-456

### EXTRAMUSICAL IDEAS

The fifth sonata is a large experimental keyboard work which marks the beginning of Scriabin's more individualized style. This piece alone is a masterpiece of absolute music but,

<sup>123</sup> Verdi, "Thematic Vocabulary in Scriabin's Last Sonatas," 58-61.

because of Scriabin's endorsement of its accompanying poem, it can carry a compelling program. The poem describes "an impulse towards a difficult to attain goal"<sup>124</sup> and therefore calls to mind Scriabin's idea of the *Mysterium*. The piece resembles an "*etude préliminaire*"<sup>125</sup> for the *Mysterium*, not only because its trajectory moves from one harmonic plane to another but also because its special effects hint at Scriabin's attempt to unite the arts and senses in one grand spectacle. The analysis of these special devices, inspired by the knowledge of Scriabin's "denial of the separateness of different arts,"<sup>126</sup> can enhance our understanding of the energies which shape the fifth sonata's musical language and formal design. It can also lead to a conclusion that these theosophic, poetic, and coloristic devices are often stronger versions of such tendencies in the Romantic third sonata.

#### Theosophic Devices

The fifth sonata's musical presentation of theosophical dualism moves far beyond that latent in the third sonata's Romantic distinction between themes. Kenneth Smith argues that this piece and other later works of Scriabin illuminate "a traumatic split between two worlds."<sup>127</sup> He says that the conflict between the theosophical outer and inner worlds in the fifth sonata takes the shape of a broader "paternal/maternal" relationship and is different from a more erotic and stereotypical dialogue between the opposite sexes in earlier works.<sup>128</sup> Scriabin sets up this radical conflict in the introduction where the impetuous episode's turbulent material conveys the "tendency towards chaos and extinction" and the languid episode's sensual figures represent

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<sup>124</sup> Barany-Schlauch, "Alexander Scriabin's Ten Piano Sonatas," 93.

<sup>125</sup> Marvick, "Two Versions of the Symbolist Apocalypse," 289.

<sup>126</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 84.

<sup>127</sup> Smith, *Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire*, 93.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

“creativity and constant search for sexual union.”<sup>129</sup> He separates these contrasting musical images not only with a full-measure rest but also with extreme contrast of dynamics, register, and tempo.

Scriabin arduously pursues contrast in other parts of the sonata as well. In mm. 96-105 the composer alternates the two-measure luminous *imperioso* and evocative *misterioso* fragments marked *f* and *p* respectively. The composer also uses radical changes in tempo to show the contrast between the opposite theosophical worlds. For example, in mm. 139 and 140 the composer employs *motto rallentando* and *motto accelerando* markings. The musical passages in mm. 120-139, in mm. 263-298, and in mm. 381-400 also employ contrasting changes of tempo and bring to light the music’s hesitant character.

The concept of theosophical dualism also shapes Scriabin's use of time signatures. In this piece the meters of 2/4 and 6/8 can be taken to represent the theosophical outer and inner worlds respectively. The passages in 2/4 represent the strangest and most creative areas of the sonata. The passages in 6/8 are generally more sensual, promote natural flow of musical ideas, and embrace satisfying climaxes. The fifth sonata’s introduction contrasts the metric poles of 2/4 and 6/8: its impetuous passage is in 2/4 but its languid passage alternates between the meters of 5/8, 4/8, and 6/8. Metric uncertainty ends in m. 47 where Scriabin firmly establishes 6/8 as the main time signature of the exposition. Scriabin alternates passages in 2/4 with passages in 6/8 throughout the entire sonata. However, Hugh Macdonald argues that the composer feels most comfortable in 6/8 and reserves 2/4 only for the most extraordinary musical ideas.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Smith, *Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire*, 48.

<sup>130</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 18.



The most compelling example of theosophical dualism is to be found in the introduction which subtly hints at the harmonic planes of F# and C (in mm. 42-43). Hugh Macdonald argues that, as Scriabin gradually loses interest in the properties of Romantic harmony, the tritone poles of F sharp and C become “purely symbolic”<sup>131</sup> and resemble the opposite theosophical worlds. The composer uses the key of F sharp for “profound”<sup>132</sup> passages which symbolize “mysterious ecstasy and sensuousness.”<sup>133</sup> The key of C, “plain, straightforward, and honest,”<sup>134</sup> corresponds to the “triumph of light over darkness.”<sup>135</sup> Macdonald also considers the rare key of C Scriabin’s “favoured resting-place.”<sup>136</sup> Scriabin brings this interpretation of theosophical dualism to full potential in the seventh sonata which houses the large-scale harmonic planes of C and F#.

#### Poetic Devices

The fifth sonata is one of Scriabin’s most poetic compositions not only because it begins with a four-verse poem but also because it contains fascinating performance instructions. These creative terms convey the atmosphere of the piece and help to communicate the program outlined in the poem. These descriptive terms, which Hugh Macdonald calls “imaginative labels,”<sup>137</sup> often consist of deliberately misspelled Italian words and move far beyond the third sonata’s conventional performance instructions. The analysis of these “programmatic footnotes”<sup>138</sup> is important because it can enhance our understanding of the fifth sonata’s innovative design and its futuristic language of symbolism.

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<sup>131</sup> Hugh Macdonald, “[G-Flat Major Key Signature]” *19th-Century Music* 11, no. 3 (1988), 231.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>135</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 18.

<sup>136</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 45.

<sup>137</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 33-34.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

Scriabin uses this advanced vocabulary to emphasize the differences between the opposite theosophical worlds and to convey the piece's long-range build-up of intensity. For example, Scriabin uses the marking of *con stravaganza* (eccentric) to convey the sonata's striking beginning. In the introduction's languid passage, in m. 17, in m. 29, and in m. 34, Scriabin writes *con voglia* (voluptuously), *molto languido* (languidly), and *accarezzevole* (caressingly) to communicate the music's sensual and seductive character. In the exposition's second theme area, in mm. 96-99, the composer contrasts the terms of *imperioso* (imperiously) and *sotto voce misterioso affannato* (mysterious and sadly) and again hints at the previously discussed idea of theosophical dualism. In m. 114 Scriabin writes *quasi trombe* and *imperioso* to highlight the fanfare-like motive in the right-hand. The sonata's exposition ends with an intense combination of poetic devices such as *allegro fantastico* in m. 140, *presto tumultuoso esaltato* (fast, tumultuously, and with exaltation) in m. 143, and *imperioso* in m. 146.

The poetic terms evolve in later parts of the sonata, increasing in brightness and concentrating on the ecstatic ending. For example, the composer uses new labels in m. 247, m. 251, m. 263, and m. 289 of the fifth sonata's development. Scriabin employs respective terms of *leggierissimo volando* (lightly and flying), *presto giocoso* (fast and humorous), *con delizia* (with enjoyment), and *con una ebrezza fantastica* (in fantastic ecstasy). The coda begins with the previously introduced term of *con una ebrezza fantastica* but the composer employs *vertiginoso con furia* (dizzily and with fury) in m. 409, *con luminosita* (luminously) in m. 417, *estatico* (ecstatically) in m. 433, and *impetuoso* (impetuously) in m. 451.

These sophisticated poetic terms also often coincide with musical figures which Susanna Garcia has connected to Scriabin's unique language of symbolism. For example, the musical

passages marked *imperioso* or *quasi trombe* symbolize “divine summons” and fanfares.<sup>139</sup> The *languido* and *accarezzevole* markings symbolize “the Eternal Feminine” and illuminate “Scriabin’s representation of eroticism.”<sup>140</sup> The musical passages marked *fantastico* hint at Scriabin’s visions of flight.<sup>141</sup> The *con delizia* marking, which coincides with the appearance of the *Mystic Chord*, conveys the atmosphere of “mystical unity.”<sup>142</sup> The material which begins in m. 409, marked *vertiginoso con furia*, symbolizes the “vertiginous dances.”<sup>143</sup> The material which begins in m. 417, marked *con luminosita*, conveys the presence of unique symbols of light.<sup>144</sup> This advanced language of musical symbols reaches its full potential in the mature seventh sonata.

#### Coloristic Devices

The fifth sonata can be received as a preparatory exercise for Scriabin’s pan-sensory works such as the *Prometheus* or the *Mysterium*. The piece is informed by Scriabin’s general interest in light and therefore contains numerous coloristic devices. Faubion Bowers describes this sonata as Scriabin’s first and unquestionable success in light and ecstasy and says that this piece “shines with the high intensity of a vapor lamp.”<sup>145</sup> The performance of the fifth sonata does not require any actual light effects but Scriabin achieves effects of effulgence and luminosity by the use of the darkest and brightest registers of the piano, trills, pulsating chords, piercing single notes, and

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<sup>139</sup> Garcia, “Scriabin’s Symbolist Plot Archetype in the Late Piano Sonatas,” 278.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>145</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 2:181.

warm harmonies such as the *Prometheus Chord*. These sonic representations of light are not just one-time expressive gestures but shape the piece's musical language and formal design.

Scriabin's unique light effects enhance his apotheosizing narrative in the fifth sonata's formally significant introduction. The introduction's shocking impetuous passage, compared by Arthur Eaglefield Hull to a "curtain of gloom which enwraps the mystery,"<sup>146</sup> showcases a "bold alliance of light and sound."<sup>147</sup> This passage contains coloristic markings of *sotto voce*, *una corda*, and *tre corde*. It makes use of acciaccaturas which resemble sparks and ignite luminous build-ups of intensity. It is also built of trills in the right hand and tremolos in the left. Kenneth Smith argues that the trills not only "accompany drastic changes of style" but are also "expressly allied with luminosity."<sup>148</sup> Susanna Garcia suggests that trills "allude to light, and by extension, to divine illumination."<sup>149</sup> For example, the sonata begins with a trill on the note of E in the right hand. This trill is in the low register of the piano and is marked *sfp*. The abrupt *f* and *p* markings in m. 3 and m. 5 embrace other trills, sparks, and acciaccaturas. The violent eruption of energy in the high register in mm. 9-12, which ends with *ff*, resembles "flashes of light."<sup>150</sup>

The introduction's languid passage uses different light effects. It is built of smooth and tranquil gestures which reflect a variety of gentle shades and colors. This passage's opening figures in the higher register of the piano, which resemble delicate rays of bright light, slowly sink into the darker areas of the keyboard. Scriabin employs floating musical figures in the right hand in mm. 32-33 and mm. 36-37 which resemble flickering and dissipating light. The composer creates the effect of pulsation through the use of repeated chords, vanishing notes, ties,

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<sup>146</sup> Hull, *A Great Russian Tone-Poet Scriabin*, 138.

<sup>147</sup> Hugh Macdonald, "Lighting the Fire: Skryabin and Colour," *The Musical Times* 124, no. 1688 (1983): 600.

<sup>148</sup> Smith, *Skryabin, Philosophy and the Music of Desire*, 94.

<sup>149</sup> Garcia, "Scriabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype in the Late Piano Sonatas," 283.

<sup>150</sup> Verdi, "Thematic Vocabulary in Skryabin's Last Sonatas," 59.

and off-beats. This part of the introduction also employs coloristic performance instructions such as *una corda* and *pp*. The use of specific terms shows Scriabin's desire to create a wide variety of musical shades and colors.

Scriabin also uses musical impressions of light to reshape other sections of the fifth sonata. For example, he contrasts the illusions of bright and dark lights in mm. 96-99 in the exposition's transitional second theme area. This passage begins with piercing and accented eighth notes and ends with repeated chords in the lower register. The presence of accented single notes, octaves, and pulsating chords intensifies throughout the sonata but the most luminous effects occur in the coda. The fifth sonata's coda, which belongs to the most expansive passages in piano literature, is described by Faubion Bowers as a place where the "radiance bursts from the piano"<sup>151</sup> and where Scriabin attempts to "capture pure light in sound."<sup>152</sup>

The coda, the fifth sonata's most significant section from the viewpoint of Scriabin's apotheosizing narrative, contains a whirl of luminous effects. For example, the right-hand *staccato* triplets, which begin in m. 409, resemble groups of sparks. Scriabin starts to insert rests in m. 417 and gradually allows the sparks to dissipate. He also begins to employ accented and longer chords in the left hand in m. 417 marked *con luminosita*. These chords resemble focused rays of light and oppose the scattered sparks in the higher register. The grace notes of E flat in the lowest register in m. 417, m. 425, and m. 429 foreshadow the three staves in m. 433. Scriabin's use of three staves shows that the fifth sonata's coda contains a multidimensional spectrum of light.

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<sup>151</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 2:181.

<sup>152</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 127.

The coda's radiant climax on three staves in mm. 433-440 embraces all previously introduced luminous effects. The composer prepares this ecstatic passage with a change of time signatures from 6/8 to 3/4 in m. 432. He also initiates chordal vibrations in the same measure in the left hand. The chordal vibrations in the middle register consist of repeated chords in triplets in mm. 432-436. However, the intensity of pulsation increases in mm. 437-439 where the chords are repeated in groups of sixteenths. The *estatico* theme, which begins in m. 433 in the right hand, consist of single notes in the high register which resemble clear and piercing light. These piercing notes, marked *fff*, penetrate the chordal vibrations in the middle register, and are supported by the lowest notes in the bass. Alfred Eaglefield Hull interpreted this theme as a "glorious vision of Light and Life."<sup>153</sup> This vision dissipates in mm. 441-456.

In summation, the fifth sonata and its coloristic effects reinvent the progression from darkness to brightness from the outer movements of the Romantic third sonata. The composer no longer relies on the movement from minor to major but develops a light-oriented path: "The music gradually acquires more and more life, light, and rhythm until the chief subject is clearly defined; this grows more and more luminous and brilliant, finally ending in climax of blazing radiance which requires three staves for its full display."<sup>154</sup> This path, subtly introduced in the third sonata's Finale, is assembled in the fifth sonata and brought to full potential in Scriabin's late compositions such as *Vers la Flamme*, Op. 72.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>153</sup> Hull, *A Great Russian Tone-Poet Scriabin*, 141.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

Scriabin's fifth sonata is significantly more progressive both in terms of energy/tempo and in terms of compositional innovation than the Romantic third sonata. The composer decisively moves away from the "forward flow associated with functional, tonal harmony of the classical heritage"<sup>155</sup> and radically strengthens the piece's long-range build-up of intensity. The piece's trajectory challenges the harmonic scheme of traditional sonata form, contains glimmers of the *Mystic Chord*, and foreshadows the advanced concept of Dual Modality. This trajectory, when compared with that of the third sonata, also contains more radical waves of excitement, accelerating passages, glimmers of advanced emotional episodes, and sets the stage for the overwhelming sweeps and dialectical constructions of Scriabin's most advanced sonatas. This futuristic interpretation does not completely contradict the closed trajectory of classical sonata forms because the piece still begins and ends with the same material. The fifth sonata is also filled with futuristic special effects which can be taken as more radical interpretations of theosophical dualism, have been discussed as illuminations of Scriabin's advanced system of symbols, and show the composer's desire to create musical images of light.<sup>156</sup>

The fifth sonata can be also seen as a preparatory exercise for the *Mysterium*. The piece represents a step to achieving the goal of "intimate intermingling of all artistic disciplines."<sup>157</sup> Scriabin's arduous pursuit of this goal results in the significant role of theosophic, poetic, and coloristic effects in the fifth sonata's musical language and formal design. The striking beginning and ending passages of the piece expand the Romantic tendency to "open up the sonata"<sup>158</sup> and

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<sup>155</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 54.

<sup>156</sup> Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin*, 169.

<sup>157</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 84.

<sup>158</sup> Rosen, *Sonata Forms*, 393.

place the fifth sonata's trajectory in the context of the "never-ending divine play."<sup>159</sup> These abrupt passages embrace the main body of the piece which can be taken to be in a "state of flux" and a "link of a chain."<sup>160</sup> They also strengthen the impact of the sonata's powerful long-range build-up of intensity.

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<sup>159</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 122.

<sup>160</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 95.



## CHAPTER IV

**“I will conquer you by loving you”: Scriabin’s Sonata no. 7, Op. 64  
“Messe Blanche” and the celestial vision of sonata form**

Peoples! Blossom forth, create, negate me and rise up against me. I resurrect all you terrors of the past, all monsters and all frightful, horrible visions. I give you full flower. Try swallowing me up! Lay open the dragons’ pasture. Serpents! Twine around me, strangle me, and bite. Everyone and everything seeks my destruction and when all fall upon me, that is when I begin my play. I will conquer you by loving you. I will surrender and seduce you. But I will never be conquered, since I will never conquer myself.

*Ecstasy*<sup>161</sup>

A. Scriabin, from *The Poem of*

## INTRODUCTION

The excerpt from the *Poem of Ecstasy* captures the main energies of Scriabin’s late period and will serve as our springboard to the discussion of his favorite Sonata no. 7, Op. 64 (1911-1912). This short passage alludes the opposite theosophical energies of “catastrophism”<sup>162</sup> and “eroticism.”<sup>163</sup> For example, its violent beginning invokes horrific spirits, calls upon evil creatures, and uses exclamation marks. Its gentler ending, which mentions love, surrender, and seduction, is filled with sensual imagery. Furthermore, Scriabin entwines the excerpt’s catastrophic and erotic energies in the following sentence: “I will conquer you by loving you.”<sup>164</sup> This melting of opposite ideas shapes the vast majority of Scriabin’s mature works and can help us understand his futuristic theme of spiritual transformation.

The seventh sonata is both a highly programmatic piece and a tightly constructed work of absolute music. This sonata, like Scriabin’s large-scale multimedia works such as the *Mysterium* and *Prometheus*, can be interpreted as a religious ritual; the piece was marked *Prophétique* in the original manuscript and was titled *White Mass* by Scriabin himself. The piece’s narrative of

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<sup>161</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 2:60.

<sup>162</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 96.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>164</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 2:60.

spiritual transformation is also reflected in its musical trajectory. For example, the sonata progresses from one harmonic plane to another and gradually fuses the opposite energies and musical materials of its main theme areas.

The seventh sonata's narrative of spiritual transformation can also shed light on the special effect in Scriabin's music which results from infusing Romantic models of harmony and form with ideas far from traditional realities. This chapter's main purpose is to explain how this effect, which I will be terming *musical dematerialization*, works in the seventh sonata. This discussion, which is my last step in the broad analysis of Scriabin's musical development, depicts *musical dematerialization* as a long-term process and shows that there are in fact deep connections between the composer's conservative and revolutionary styles. Specifically, this study demonstrates that the *White Mass* sonata continues the evolution of the middle fifth and early third sonatas.

The chapter is divided into three distinct sections which discuss dematerialization of the seventh sonata's harmony and sonata form and explain its extramusical ideas. These sections show how some of the piece's musical achievements are extreme versions of tendencies discussed in earlier chapters and how some areas of the seventh sonata still map on to the areas of the fifth and third sonatas. The section on harmony explains how Scriabin replaces traditional sonata's tonal narrative with novel harmonic relationships. The section on form explains how Scriabin reassembles the formal experiments conducted in the past and creates his futuristic vision of sonata form. The section on extramusical ideas sheds light on the seventh sonata's supernatural atmosphere.

## **DEMATERIALIZATION OF HARMONY**

The *White Mass* sonata's harmonic scheme represents Scriabin's ultimate achievement in the art of fusing traditional and futuristic harmonic ideas (Ex. 4.1). Scriabin replaces conventional key signatures, dominant-tonic relationships, and key areas with different arrangements of the *Mystic Chord* and with different octatonic collections. Sonorities which resemble major-minor seventh harmonies are completely freed from their need to resolve as dominant-seventh chords and are instead treated as stable. The seventh sonata's harmonic trajectory also showcases a mature version of Scriabin's advanced idea of tritone polarity.

THE WHITE MASS SONATA  
FORMAL SCHEME

Ex. 4.1

EXPOSITION			DEVELOPMENT			RECAPITULATION			SECONDARY DEVELOPMENT		CODA												
FIRST THEME AREA	TRANS. CL. MAT.	SECOND THEME AREA	77-80	81-88	89-92	93-118	119-126	127-168	FIRST THEME AREA	TRANS. CL. MAT.	SECOND THEME AREA	CL. MAT.	FIRST PART	SECOND PART									
1-16	47-59	29-46	77-80 imperious, sound whirl	81-88 seductive	89-92 imperious, sound whirl	93-118 interrogative seductive darting	119-126 inuiting, galloping	127-168 interrogative seductive darting imperious sound whirl	169-182	183-196	197-227	228-236	237-252	253-272	273-288	289-308	309-332	331-343	344-358	359-374	375-390		
$\Pi^0$ Mystic Chord		$\Pi^8$ Mystic Chord							$\Pi^6$ Mystic Chord				imperious sound whirl	seductive darting	sound whirl, seductive, darting	inuiting, galloping	galloping, sound whirl				trills	$\Pi^{\#}$ C	
$\text{CIII}-\text{CI}-\text{CI}$ $-\text{CII}$		$\text{CII}$ $-\text{CI}$							$\text{CI}-\text{CII}-\text{CI}$ $-\text{CI}-\text{CI}$				C	$\text{C}\#$				$\text{F}\#-\text{C}$				$\text{F}\#-\text{C}$	$\text{F}\#$

TRANS. - TRANSITION

CL. MAT. - CLOSING MATERIAL

- $\text{C}, \text{G}\#, \text{F}\#$  - roots which control broader sections
- $\text{CI} - \text{C}\#, \text{D}, \text{E}, \text{F}, \text{G}, \text{G}\#, \text{A}\#, \text{Bb}$  octatonic collection
- $\text{CII} - \text{C}, \text{D}, \text{E}, \text{F}, \text{F}\#, \text{G}\#, \text{Bbb}, \text{B}$  octatonic collection
- $\text{CIII} - \text{C}, \text{Db}, \text{Eb}, \text{E}, \text{F}\#, \text{G}, \text{A}, \text{Bb}$  octatonic collection

THE EXPOSITION'S LEITMOTIFS:

- (Verdi)
- imperious <sup>mm</sup> 1-9
- sound whirl 10-16
- darting 17-20
- seductive 29-35
- interrogative 39-42
- inuiting 73-74
- galloping 75-76

The main building block of the seventh sonata is Scriabin's famous *Mystic Chord* (Ex. 4.2). There is consensus that the *Mystic Chord* is the product of Scriabin's unique reinterpretation of traditional harmony. Alfred Swan has described the *Mystic Chord* as a *synthetic chord*<sup>165</sup> built of all kinds of fourths and triads.<sup>166</sup> Simon Morrison argues that the chord contains traces of octatonic and whole-tone scales and also resembles the French sixth chord.<sup>167</sup> Peter Sabbagh thinks that the *Mystic Chord* is similar to the *Chopin Chord* (dominant sixth) because both chords usually appear with the sixth on the top.<sup>168</sup> Robert Morgan, who gives four most common manifestations (chordal and scalar) of the *Mystic Chord* in Scriabin's oeuvre, not only suggests that it is "an extension of the dominant-type constructions" (dominant thirteenth chord with a raised eleventh) but also calls it "a sort of tonic itself."<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> A *synthetic chord* is a chord which does not appear in a diatonic scale.

<sup>166</sup> Swan, *Scriabin*, 100.

<sup>167</sup> Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 313.

<sup>168</sup> Sabbagh, "The Development of Harmony in Scriabin's Works," 12-13.

<sup>169</sup> Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 57.

### EXAMPLE 4.2 - THE MYSTIC CHORD

unaltered Mystic Chord	All Kinds of fourths	All Kinds of triads	
	 P4, P4, Aug4, Dim4, Aug4	Major	Diminished
		Minor	Augmented

### OCTATONIC SCALE

### FRENCH SIXTH

### WHOLE-TONE SCALE

### MORGAN'S FOUR FORMS OF THE MYSTIC CHORD

9th altered

### CHOPIN CHORD D6

Scriabin uses the *Mystic Chord* to generate the seventh sonata's musical material as well as to accentuate the piece's important structural arrivals. Cheong Wai-Ling argues that the *Mystic*

*Chord* is the seventh sonata's "ultimate harmonic goal."<sup>170</sup> For example, Scriabin unfolds the sonata's basic *Mystic Chord* (C-F#-Bb-Db-E-A) in mm. 1-2.<sup>171</sup> He also uses this chord (infused with additional notes of G and D#) to generate the material in mm. 10-16. Scriabin employs a transposed version of the sonata's basic chord (G#-Cx-F#-A-B#-E#) in mm. 29-32 and in mm. 39-42.<sup>172</sup> A passage which builds on the untransposed and unaltered version of the *Mystic Chord* (C-F#-Bb-E-A-D) appears in mm. 135-136. Finally, Scriabin uses the sonata's basic *Mystic Chord* in vertical form to support the coda's ecstatic climax (on the second beat of m. 314 in bottom register).

Varvara Dernova's analysis of the seventh sonata's basic *Mystic Chord* (unfolded in mm. 1-2) can further enhance our understanding of this magical sonority and of the piece's entire harmonic system (Ex. 4.3). Dernova considers this passage to be a progression of two dominant-type harmonies separated by a tritone rather than an unfolding of Scriabin's single reinvented tonic chord.<sup>173</sup> She also hears these chords as dominants implying imagined tonics and argues that "the non-resolution of the dominant and all its enharmonic transformations is understood to be at the basis of Scriabin's dual-polarity."<sup>174</sup> Dernova labels these dominant-sounding sonorities as the Initial Dominant (DA) and Derived Dominant (DB).<sup>175</sup> This progression, called by Dernova the *tritone link*,<sup>176</sup> is Scriabin's unique replacement of traditional dominant-tonic relationships.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Cheong Wai-Ling, "Orthography in Scriabin's Late Works," *Music Analysis* 12, no. 1 (1993): 59.

<sup>171</sup> The seventh sonata's basic chord is a *Mystic Chord* in root position and with lowered ninth T0 = (C, F#, Bb, Db, E, A).

<sup>172</sup> The material in mm. 29-32 and in mm. 39-42 builds on the T8 = (G#, Cx, F#, A, B#, E#) version of the sonata's basic chord.

<sup>173</sup> Philip Ewell, "Scriabin's Seventh Piano Sonata: Three Analytical Approaches," *Indiana Theory Review* 23 (2002): 50.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

While I consider Dernova's idea of the *tritone link* very compelling (I aim to show that the basic chord's root poles of C and F# are reflected in the seventh sonata's broad harmonic trajectory) I find her idea of imagined tonics speculative (if she is imagining absent tonics, then her tritone poles are B and F). I, along with scholars such as Robert Morgan and Yuri Kholopov,<sup>178</sup> prefer to consider the *Mystic Chord* and its two dominant-type harmonies as artificial tonics. With this realistic approach I will show how Scriabin's use of the *Mystic Chord* in the seventh sonata creates traditional key centers/theme areas and futuristic large-scale tritone planes.

The image shows a musical score for the first two measures of Scriabin's Seventh Piano Sonata. The tempo is marked 'Allegro' and the time signature is 4/8. The score features a complex harmonic structure with many triplets and a crescendo. A large circle is drawn around the first two measures, highlighting a tritone link between two chords. The first chord is a triad with notes C, E, and G (labeled with a circled '3'), and the second chord is a triad with notes F#, A, and C (labeled with a circled '3'). The tritone link is indicated by a line connecting the C of the first chord to the F# of the second chord.

Example 4.3 - DERNOVA'S REDUCTION OF mm. 1-2

The image shows a handwritten reduction of the first two measures of Scriabin's Seventh Piano Sonata. The reduction is written on a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The first measure contains a triad with notes C, E, and G, labeled 'DA' in red. The second measure contains a triad with notes F#, A, and C, labeled 'DB' in red. A line connects the C of the first chord to the F# of the second chord, with the label 'tritone link' written below it. The notes C and F# are circled in red, and the notes E and A are also circled in red.

<sup>178</sup> Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 57.  
Ewell, "Scriabin's Seventh Piano Sonata," 53.



The *White Mass* sonata begins with the establishment of two contrasting harmonic environments which map on to the key centers/theme areas in the exposition of a traditional sonata. The first of these two environments (seventh sonata's first theme area), built of abrupt and mysterious material, is based on the T0 (C, F#, Bb, Db, E, A) version of the *Mystic Chord*, heard in mm. 1-2 and then reestablished in mm. 10-16; the stability of the latter passages reinforces the role of C as the local tonic/root. The stability of mm. 10-16 resolves the tension created in mm. 5-6 and m. 8, which transpose the initial version of the *Mystic Chord* up by two half-steps and then a further two in m. 8 (Ex. 4.4). The material in mm. 3-4 is also a transposition of the T0 version of the *Mystic Chord* down a major third.<sup>179</sup> The entire passage in mm. 1-9 can be taken to resemble the nervousness and motivic repetition in the first theme area of the third sonata's Finale.

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<sup>179</sup> Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Piano Music*, 59-60.

Ex. 4.4.  
THE FIRST THEME  
AREA

# SONATE NR. 7

Erschienen 1913

Opus 64

**Allegro**

*mp* *cresc.* *f*

*m.g.* *mystérieusement sonore\**

*mp* *f*

*m.g.* *mystérieusement sonore\**

*mf*

The musical score consists of three systems of piano music. The first system (measures 9-11) is marked *mystérieusement sonore* and features a complex texture with triplets and sixteenth notes. The second system (measures 12-15) includes dynamic markings *f*, *p*, and *pp*, with some notes marked *m.* and *d.*. The third system (measures 16-23) is marked *avec une sombre majesté* and features a *f* dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, sixteenth notes, and dynamic markings.

The second environment (the seventh sonata's second theme area) is more stable and conservative-sounding than the first (Ex. 4.5). This section, based on the T8 (G#, Cx, F#, A, B#, E#) arrangement of the *Mystic Chord*,<sup>180</sup> begins with a vertical chord (G#-Cx-B#-F#) on the downbeat of m. 29. This vertical chord is different from the sonata's opening because it immediately introduces the static root of G# and rejects the opening's atmosphere of ambiguity and instability (the first theme area's root is delayed to the downbeat of m. 2). This chord also

<sup>180</sup> Robert Morgan notices that the seventh sonata's second theme area opens with the unaltered *Mystic Chord* because the note A in m. 29 resolves to A# in m. 30. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Piano Music*, 60.

contains two superimposed tritones (G#-Cx, B#-F#) and the major-minor seventh sonority (G#-B#-F#) which produce a contrasting warm and sensual atmosphere. This major-minor seventh sonority resembles dominant-type harmonies which open the languid passage of the fifth sonata's introduction rather than the dominants from the fifth sonata's third theme area: it does not imply any conventional tonal area and is completely freed from the need to resolve similarly to the dominant-type harmonies in the languid passage of the fifth sonata's introduction (the dominants in the fifth sonata's third theme areas do imply specific keys).

EX. 4.5 - THE SECOND THEME AREA

29 *avec une céleste volupté*

32 *très pur, avec une profonde douceur*

35 *mystérieusement sonore*

*impérieux*

*f*

*pp*

*m.d.*

*p*

*pp* (\*)

*m.d.*

Our understanding of the contrasting harmonic environments (key centers/theme areas) in the exposition of Scriabin's seventh sonata can be enhanced by Philip Ewell's octatonic analysis.<sup>181</sup> The first theme area employs all three octatonic scales. The initial statement of the *Mystic Chord* in mm. 1-2 and the material in mm. 9-16 are built of the CIII collection (C, Db, Eb, E, F#, G, A, Bb). The CII (C, D, Eb, F, F#, G#, Bbb, B) and CI (C#, D, E, F, G, G#, A#, Cb) collections appear in mm. 3-6 and in mm. 7-8 respectively. The material in mm. 17-28, which maps to a traditional transition, moves from the CIII to CII octatonic collection. The pivotal point is in mm. 22-23 where Scriabin abandons the notes of E and G in favor of Eb and G#. The second theme area is firmly based on the CII (B#, Cx, D#, E#, F#, G#, A, B) collection.

Thinking about octatonic areas as tonics also gives us a conservative view of the piece's sonata form.<sup>182</sup> Philip Ewell argues that the main octatonic collection of the seventh sonata is CIII which can be taken to be the piece's artificial tonic.<sup>183</sup> He notices that the sonata's broad harmonic trajectory begins and ends with the same octatonic collection: it moves away from CIII to CII in the exposition but then returns to CIII in the recapitulation. Furthermore, the recapitulation's second theme area is presented in CIII. In this octatonic reading, the tonal trajectory of the *White Mass* sonata is quite conservative because it mirrors the balanced tonal narrative of basic sonata forms.

The broad harmonic trajectory of the mature seventh sonata also represents the final stage of Scriabin's futuristic concept of Dual Modality (tritone polarity). Faubion Bowers has noted that the piece contains large-scale tritonal harmonic planes of C and F# and can be taken to begin in

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<sup>181</sup> Philip Ewell argues that in Scriabin's seventh sonata the three octatonic collections can be interpreted as "systems of traditional tonal harmony" and can "prolong structures in a quite traditional fashion." Ewell, "Scriabin's Seventh Piano Sonata," 32-36.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 32.

C (Dernova's Departure Dominant) and to end in F sharp (Derived Dominant).<sup>184</sup> Bowers has also noticed that the seventh sonata's original set of program notes suggests the key of F sharp.<sup>185</sup> Scriabin firmly establishes the root of C in the exposition's first theme area. The bass note C appears for the first time in m. 2 and is reinforced in mm. 8-16 (this note is a root of the T0 arrangement of the *Mystic Chord* which controls the first theme area). The note of F# is a root of the T6 (F#, B#, E, G, A#, D#) arrangement of the *Mystic Chord* which controls the recapitulation's second theme area and is also an important referential sonority in the secondary development and in the coda. Strong arrivals on F#, which support radiant dominant-type harmonies, appear in mm. 197-203, in mm. 207-214, in mm. 229-236, in mm. 253-261, in m. 280, in mm. 289-296, and in mm. 309-316. The F# root of the piece's last dominant-type chord in m. 335 represents the opposite pole of the initial root of C in m. 2.

Bowers analysis of the *White Mass* sonata's harmonic trajectory can be taken to follow a theosophic path. The exposition's first theme area, rooted in C, and the recapitulation's second theme area, rooted in F#, resemble respectively the mysterious outer and sensual inner worlds. Scriabin attempts to fuse these opposite worlds in the final parts of the piece. The C and F# harmonic planes begin to touch in the two-part secondary development: the first part firmly establishes the root of C in mm. 243-252, the second part favors the root of F# in mm. 253-261 but then gradually moves back to C in mm. 262-272. The alternation of the C (B#) and F# poles accelerates in the beginning of the coda in mm. 277-280 and in mm. 285-288.<sup>186</sup> Scriabin alternates these poles forcefully in mm. 309-316 and unites them in a climax which contains the

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<sup>184</sup> The seventh sonata's large-scale harmonic planes reverse the order of F#-C in Dernova's analysis of the seventh sonata's material in mm. 1-2.

Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 180-182.

<sup>185</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 2:230.

<sup>186</sup> What is fascinating about mm. 277-280 and mm. 285-288 is that these passages also contain strong arrivals on D# in m. 279 and in m. 287 which represent a midpoint between the harmonic poles of C and F#.

only instance of *fff* in the entire sonata. After this grandiose climax, the opposite harmonic planes begin to separate. The material in mm. 317-334 accentuates the note of C (mainly in the right hand) and the material in mm. 335-343 flows out of the F# dominant-type chord in m. 335. The sonata's concluding trills draw attention to the note D# which is a midpoint between the poles of C and F#.

The *White Mass* sonata's overall harmonic system can be considered an extreme version of the fifth sonata's experiments with dominant-type harmonies<sup>187</sup> and with Dual Modality (tritone polarity). The dominants in the fifth sonata's exposition and recapitulation still imply specific keys. But in the formally less rigorous introduction and development some of these harmonies are treated as stable sonorities. It is also in these sections where Scriabin begins to separate the dominant-type chords by a tritone (i.e. in mm. 13-16 of the introduction and in mm. 191-201 of the development). The fifth sonata's experiments with dominant-type harmonies also include a few unaltered *Mystic Chords* in the development. The fifth sonata's harmonic trajectory also sets the stage for the seventh's large-scale opposition of C and F#. The fifth sonata not only begins in F# and ends in Eb (midpoint between F# and C) but also contains the F#-C poles in its introduction.

In summation, the most compelling aspect of Scriabin's advanced harmonic language in the seventh sonata is the fact that it creates the special effect of *musical dematerialization*: it expresses both conservative and futuristic energies. The piece's broad octatonic patterns pay homage to tonal tradition because they model conventional sonata's balanced harmonic scheme. The seventh sonata's mystic relationships not only do the work of a traditional sonata's tonal

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<sup>187</sup> Philip Ewell argues that is at the end of Scriabin's middle period when most of "the non-tonic emphasis is placed specifically on the dominant."

Ewell, "Scriabin's Seventh Piano Sonata," 55.

relationships but also accommodate Scriabin's apotheosizing narrative: they are used to create conventional key centers/theme areas as well as futuristic large-scale tritonal harmonic planes both of which can be interpreted in theosophic terms.

### **DEMATERIALIZATION OF SONATA FORM**

The formal design of the *White Mass* sonata embraces both conservative and futuristic tendencies which shaped Scriabin's mature sonata forms in the last few years of his life. The seventh sonata strictly models the formal scheme of the third sonata's Romantic Finale: exposition in mm. 1-76, development in mm. 77-168, recapitulation in mm. 169-236, two-part secondary development in mm. 237-272, and coda in mm. 273-343. The piece also models the Romantic sonata's basic chain of events: it begins with the presentation of contrasting theme areas in the exposition, engages in developmental technique in the development, and restates the main theme areas in the recapitulation.

What is fascinating about the seventh sonata's conservative design is that it accommodates a long-range accumulation of energy which is more powerful and smoother than the build-ups discussed in earlier chapters. We will study this large-scale sweep by looking at how Scriabin reworks and reassembles the formal experiments conducted in the third and fifth sonatas. After we do this, we will briefly look at the dialectical and theosophic interpretations of the seventh sonata's trajectory.

The seventh sonata is exceptionally smooth because it is a result of a process that Timothy Woolsey calls "continuous development."<sup>188</sup> This process, which involves variation technique and is based on constant derivation of new material from the old, shapes all sections of the piece.

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<sup>188</sup> T.D. Woolsey, "Organizational Principles in Piano Sonatas of Aleksander Skrjabin," (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1977): 87.



For example, the exposition's transitional material in mm. 47-59 is derived from the second theme area's material in mm. 39-46. Scriabin uses the descending quintuplet motive from m. 39 to create contrapuntal entries in mm. 47-59. Another example includes the development's material in mm. 127-168. This material is an extreme version of mm. 93-118 because it explores more radical registers, uses thicker texture (three staves in mm. 145-150), and employs smaller note values and faster indications of tempo. Finally, the recapitulation's first and second theme areas are thicker and more intense variations of the exposition's equivalent parts. The violent return of the first theme area in m. 169 is shaped by massive chords in the higher register and by roaring arpeggiation in the bass. The recapitulation's second theme area is embellished with a parallel line: the melody is now in dyads.

What also makes the seventh sonata's trajectory more gradual is the fact that it refines the narrative of tension (waves of excitement, sudden collapses, and climactic points) composed in the third sonata's Finale and used again in the fifth sonata. The *White Mass* sonata's development makes extensive use of *effondremets subits* which end local waves of excitement in m. 109, in m. 113, in m. 119, in m. 141, in m. 145, in m. 156, in m. 161, and in m. 166. These waves and sudden collapses prepare the thunderous climax in m. 169 which coincides with the beginning of the recapitulation. This beginning, marked *ff*, is different from the *pp* openings of recapitulations in the third sonata's Finale and in the fifth sonata because it continues the development's dynamic build-up of energy.<sup>189</sup>

Scriabin ends the seventh sonata's single gradual increase of intensity with additional sections that carry significantly more musical weight than their counterparts in the fifth and third sonatas.

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<sup>189</sup> This deployment of a single dynamic build-up of energy reflects Scriabin's belief that "development of a theme must lead forward - to a higher power - not backward - to a tame and wearisome repetition." Hull, *A Great Russian Tone-Poet Scriabin*, 236-237.

The *White Mass* sonata's two-part secondary development and coda more strongly alter conventional sonata form's balanced narrative not only because of their size but also because of their volume. The coda's ecstatic climax in m. 313 is the only place in the entire piece which is marked *fff*. In contrast, the third sonata's Finale and the fifth sonata contain *fff* markings in the coda and in the development. The seventh sonata's coda is much thicker than the codas of the sonatas discussed in previous chapters. It is saturated with multilayered constructions in mm. 297-305 (four layers) and in mm. 313-316 (three layers). This coda also contains an unusual five-layer cluster in m. 331 which is the thickest and most dramatic chord in the entire piece.

What also sets the seventh sonata's coda apart from the codas discussed in the fifth and third sonatas is that, together with the secondary development, it can be taken to form an integral unit which represents a new miniature vision of the entire seventh sonata (this miniature vision also progresses from C to F#). The secondary development is built of two parts which resemble the exposition's contrasting theme areas: these two parts oppose similar motivic materials and harmonic environments (in this case C and F#). The coda's material in mm. 273-288 is an extreme version of the development's opening in mm. 77-92 because it more tightly embraces the passage in 6/8. The coda's joyous climaxes in mm. 309-331, a miniature recapitulation, reverse the order of the secondary development's harmonic planes of C and F# (the material in mm. 309-316 is supported by strong F# roots on the downbeats, the material in mm. 317-331 contains a prominent arrival on C in m. 327 in the right hand). The section in mm. 332-343, a miniature coda, contains a final arrival on F# in m. 335 and is built of long trills in the high register.

The seventh sonata's main theme areas also combine the energies of the fifth sonata's two-part introduction and the fifth sonata's first and third theme areas. The fifth sonata's materials

mentioned above instantiate the idea of dualism with different strength. In the fifth sonata's introduction one can see a radical separation of the impetuous and languid passages (whole-measure rest, extreme activity vs extreme stasis, 2/4 vs 6/8, tonal ambiguity) which can be interpreted as the opposition of the theosophical spheres. The relationship of the fifth sonata's first and third theme areas is gentler and can be seen as more Romantic (these themes carry the same time signatures and accentuate the traditional opposition of keys). The main theme areas of the *White Mass* sonata both convey Scriabin's theosophic views and accentuate Romantic opposition of themes (i.e. they are in 4/8 and 6/8 and create different harmonic environments).

Scriabin uses the fusion of the above theosophic and Romantic energies to launch, to tighten, and to escalate the long-range ABC waves that had previously been noted in the fifth sonata (these waves now form a single long-range build-up of energy). The seventh sonata's wave A (exposition) combines the narratives of the fifth sonata's introduction and exposition. The seventh sonata's wave B (development) incorporates the narrative of the fifth sonata's introduction.<sup>190</sup> The seventh sonata's wave C (recapitulation, secondary development, and coda) is an extreme version of the fifth sonata's recapitulation and coda: this wave escalates the fusion of the theosophic and Romantic energies in the recapitulation's main theme areas and reinforces it in the two-part secondary development.

The seventh sonata's ABC waves showcase how dialectical processes can work within the framework of sonata form.<sup>191</sup> The wave A contains a compelling outline of leitmotifs<sup>192</sup> which

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<sup>190</sup> Scriabin alternates the materials of the first and second theme areas in the beginning of the seventh sonata's development in mm. 77-92. The excerpt in mm. 77-88 resembles the introduction's return in the beginning of the fifth sonata's development.

<sup>191</sup> Basic sonata forms create harmonic tension in the exposition by presenting two contrasting themes in different key areas and resolve this tension in the recapitulation by presenting the second theme in the home key. Dialectical sonata forms are different because they use the conflict of two opposing musical environments (contrasting theme areas) as a springboard to create a new musical environment (i.e. fuse the opposing environments) This process,

can be read in terms of Hegel's dialectic (Ex. 4.6).<sup>193</sup> The first theme area, in 4/8, contains the imperious (mm. 1-9) and sound whirl (mm. 10-16) leitmotifs which emphasize verticality and rhythmic activity. The first transition, in mm. 17-28, foreshadows the second theme area's time signature of 6/8 and contains the darting (mm. 17-20) leitmotif built of ascending triplets and a radiant trill. The contrasting second theme area, in 6/8, contains the seductive (mm. 29-35) and interrogative (mm. 39-42) leitmotifs which create calm horizontal melodies in the right hand. The closing material, in 2/4, contains the inciting (mm. 73-74) and galloping (mm. 75-76) leitmotifs which are both vertical and horizontal, create excitement through movement, and can be taken to convey Scriabin's interests in the idea of light and flight. The waves B and C also begin with presentations of conflicting musical environments and contain similar rotations of leitmotifs and time signatures (4/8, 6/8, 2/4).

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initiated in the exposition, can repeat a few times in the piece (restatement of the opposing environments in the recapitulation makes a dialectic sonata form a sonata form). The dialectical approach to sonata form was extremely attractive to Scriabin because it resonated with his advanced narratives of purification and spiritual transformation and could accommodate his radical build-ups of energy and ecstatic climaxes.

<sup>192</sup> Luigi Verdi has described seven distinct leitmotifs in the seventh sonata's exposition: imperious, sound whirl, darting, seductive, interrogative, inciting, and galloping.

Verdi, "Thematic Vocabulary in Skryabin's Last Sonatas," 64-65.

<sup>193</sup> Boris Schloezer has noted that Scriabin's late sonatas follow a dialectical path: in these sonatas "contrasting elements are constantly in collision."

Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 331-332.

Ex. 4.6  
DIALECTICAL PROCESSES IN THE WAVE 'A'  
(EXPOSITION)

THESIS		ANTITHESIS		SYNTHESIS	
FIRST THEME AREA	TRANSITION	SECOND THEME AREA	TRANSITION	CLOSING MATERIAL	
4 8  imperious leitmotif sound whirl leitmotif	6 8  darting leitmotif	6 8 4 6 8 8  seductive leitmotif interrogative leitmotif  mm. 36-38 hint at imperious, sound whirl leitmotifs	6 8  variation on interrogative and seductive leitmotifs  but some LH figures resemble the imperious leitmotif	2 4  60-72 - variation on interrogative, seductive, darting leitmotifs  73-76: inciting galloping leitmotifs	

The seventh sonata's dialectical processes emphasize the erotic element of Scriabin's theosophic views. Boris Schloezer has noted that the "erotic aspect of cosmic evolution dominated Scriabin in his last years of life."<sup>194</sup> Most of Scriabin's philosophies at that time were based on the fact that "the primary polarity of spirit and matter is the polarity of the masculine, impregnating principle and the feminine, receiving principle."<sup>195</sup> The seventh sonata's first and second theme areas can be taken to resemble not only the opposite theosophic worlds but also the masculine and feminine poles of the universe. The first theme area's material promotes musical activity because it contains energetic accents, strict rhythms, and arpeggiated chords. The second theme area is filled with calmer and more passive material.

The seventh sonata's dialectical narrative can be taken to tell a story of the masculine outer world impregnating the feminine inner world.<sup>196</sup> This story culminates with an ecstatic union at the end of the sonata. Scriabin instills the elements of the masculine outer world in the feminine inner world for the first time in the exposition's three-measure passage in mm. 36-38. This short passage contains the energetic and vertical elements of the outer world which contrast with the inner world's smooth linear figures. The materials of the outer world also embrace the inner world in the beginning of the development in mm. 77-92. The union of the masculine and feminine poles begins to take shape in the recapitulation's second theme area in mm. 197-227: the melody in dyads fuses the vertical and linear types of writing. The coda's material in mm. 273-288 is an extreme version of mm. 77-92 because it contains a tighter embrace of the inner world in 6/8 by the outer world in 2/4. The ecstatic climaxes in mm. 309-331 can be taken to

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<sup>194</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 212.

<sup>195</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 211-212.

<sup>196</sup> It was customary to label musical passages as masculine and feminine during Scriabin's time. This terminology, now out of date, can help us understand Scriabin's erotic interpretation of sonata form.

represent a full union of the theosophic masculine and feminine poles which results in the appearance of new life in mm. 332-343.

Scriabin's technique of continuous development, heavy emphasis of the ending, refinement of formal experiments conducted in the fifth and third sonatas, and advanced dialectical and theosophic narratives all allow us to consider the seventh sonata a single long-range wave of excitement. This wave gradually picks up speed, increases in dynamics and volume, and can be said to smoothly move "from the highest delicacy via active efficacy to the greatest grandiosity."<sup>197</sup> It also showcases how Scriabin achieves the effect of *musical dematerialization* by infusing the sonata form's traditional canvas with futuristic narrative.

### EXTRAMUSICAL IDEAS

The celestial musical language of the *White Mass* sonata allows the listener to focus on spiritual contemplation and to achieve a higher state of mind. Alfred Swan has noted how the piece contains musical images of "trumpet calls and pealing, lightnings, cataracts, and icebergs."<sup>198</sup> Faubion Bowers has called the seventh sonata "pure inspirational music"<sup>199</sup> and compared it to "purest mysticism ... total absence of human feeling ... complete lack of emotional lyricism."<sup>200</sup> He has also noticed that some of its sound effects can be taken to resemble "chords of perfume, mystic bells of sanctification, fountains of spraying fires, vortexes of wind, a final dance of ecstasy."<sup>201</sup> In the *White Mass* sonata Scriabin completely reinvents the

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<sup>197</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 177.

<sup>198</sup> Swan, *Scriabin*, 105.

<sup>199</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 180.

<sup>200</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 2:231.

<sup>201</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 180.

rules of Romantic narration and creates a supernatural musical atmosphere by using the language of symbolism, idiosyncratic performance instructions given in French, and coloristic gestures.

### French Terms

The seventh sonata's narrative is filled with evocative performance instructions in French. These creative "programmatic footnotes"<sup>202</sup> can enhance our understanding of the piece's supernatural atmosphere, language of symbolism, and processes of purification and spiritual transformation. They evolve over the course of the sonata, strengthening the overall build-up of energy and increasing in brightness, and concentrate around the coda's ecstatic climaxes. These French terms also represent a departure from the fifth sonata's advanced Italian vocabulary. This move can be interpreted as Scriabin's desire to move to a higher plane of thought; in the seventh sonata Scriabin still uses some Italian terms for relatively basic instructions (e.g. the piece begins with a conservative term *Allegro*), but puts the more profound ones in French.

The French terms in the *White Mass* sonata's exposition convey this section's stable character. The markings of *mystérieusement sonore* (mysteriously sonorous) and *avec une sombre majesté* (with sombre majesty) are used by Scriabin in the first theme area and in the transition. By way of contrast, the second theme area contains sensual descriptions such as *avec une céleste volupté* (with heavenly blissfulness), *très pur, avec une profonde douceur* (very pure, with profound gentleness), and *la mélodie bien marquée* (clearly emphasize the melody). Scriabin briefly recalls the *mystérieusement sonore* marking in m. 36 above the *impérieux* (imperious) marking which highlights the entrance of the imperious leitmotif. Scriabin communicates the light atmosphere of the closing material section with elusive terms such as

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<sup>202</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 33-34.



*animé, ailé* (animated, winged), *très animé, ailé* (very animated, winged), and *étincelant* (sparkling).

The composer uses stranger and more sophisticated French terms in the development. For example, the composer uses creative words such as *onduleux, insinuant* (rippling, ingratiating), *menaçant* (menacing), *avec trouble* (turbulently), *de plus en plus sonore et animé* (increasingly resonant and animated), and *comme des éclairs* (like lightning). These descriptive terms gradually become more forceful and convey the music's build-up of intensity and increasingly complicated character.

In the recapitulation and secondary development, the French terms continue to increase in intensity. For example, the composer labels the beginning of the recapitulation with the term *foudroyant* (crashing, thundering). He also uses terms such as *orageux* (tumultuous) and *ondoyant* (undulating) in other parts of the recapitulation. Scriabin's French vocabulary in the secondary development clearly signals upcoming climaxes and ecstatic eruptions of energy in the coda. The composer labels the two separate parts of the secondary development *avec éclat* (brilliantly) and *avec une volupté radieuse, extatique* (with radiant pleasure, ecstatic) respectively.

The most extreme terms occur in the coda, to convey the section's joyous atmosphere, ecstatic climaxes, and dance-like passages. The coda begins with the term *en un vertige* (in dizzy intoxication). Scriabin writes *fulgurant* (flashing) in m. 289. The passages in m. 313 and in mm. 327-331 are supported by terms such as *avec une joie débordante* (with overflowing joy) and *en délire* (in a delirium) respectively.

#### Coloristic Devices

The seventh sonata contains a myriad of light effects which are similar to the luminous experiments discussed in the fifth sonata. For example, the piece makes extensive use of pulsating chords and accented single notes. These types of coloristic devices appear immediately in the seventh sonata's opening measures but show their full potential in passages such as the thunderous beginning of the recapitulation in mm. 169-182 or the brilliant first part of the secondary development in mm. 237-252.

Although the seventh sonata's coloristic language builds on the models discussed in the fifth sonata, there are compelling differences. For example, in the seventh sonata Scriabin decisively moves beyond the fifth in the use of trills.<sup>203</sup> The only sections that use trills in the fifth sonata are the introduction's impetuous passages before the exposition and development. Furthermore, the fifth sonata's trill figures appear only in low register. The seventh sonata's trill figures, used "incessantly for luminosity,"<sup>204</sup> are radiant and appear in high register. They are first introduced in mm. 19-20 and in m. 72 of the exposition but play a much more significant role later in the piece. They begin to appear more frequently in the development and dominate the second part of the secondary development in mm. 253-272. Scriabin also uses ascending trill figures as the piece's concluding gestures in mm. 332-343. Another example includes the fact that the main building block of the seventh sonata is the *Mystic Chord* described by Garcia as a symbol of mystical unity<sup>205</sup> and by Schloezer as a "sound-color."<sup>206</sup> The fifth sonata contains only two instances of the *Mystic Chord* in the middle of the development.

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<sup>203</sup> Susanna Garcia has described trills as symbols of light and has associated them with the sensual theosophic inner world.

Garcia, "Scriabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype in the Late Piano Sonatas," 277-285.

<sup>204</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 180.

<sup>205</sup> Garcia, "Scriabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype in the Late Piano Sonatas," 277.

<sup>206</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 85.

The *White Mass* sonata also showcases Scriabin's desire to create effects of "phosphorescence" and "incandescence"<sup>207</sup> rather than of direct and forceful impressions of light. Elizabeth Barany-Schlauch argues that in the seventh sonata "passages referring to light are also changed from radiant, blinding, burning light to the sparkling or scintillating, unfocused lights of the cosmos."<sup>208</sup> For example, Faubion Bowers has read the material marked *étincelant* (sparkling) in mm. 73-74 as "shimmers of unfocused light" and as "sparks from the fountain of fire."<sup>209</sup>

In the seventh sonata Scriabin also arduously pursues his interest in creating multilayered musical constructions which can be taken to imitate advanced spectrums of light. For example, the piece's opening material in mm. 1-2 is built of three layers which resemble different kinds of light: focused on top, pulsating in the middle, and darker in the bottom. A similar set-up of coloristic layers is flagrantly intensified in the beginning of the recapitulation in m. 169. The seventh sonata also contains musical passages written on three or four staves and a chord built of five layers (in m. 331).

Some of these multilayered constructions can be taken to be inspired by Scriabin's multimedia works such as the *Prometheus*.<sup>210</sup> For example, the bottom part of the coda's quadruple staff in mm. 297-305, which contains long single notes, can be taken to resemble the slowly moving note-colors of the *Tastiéra per luce*. This bottom part seems to be detached from the piece. The upper staves contain motivic material and harmonic progressions developed in

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<sup>207</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 62.

<sup>208</sup> Barany-Schlauch, "Alexander Scriabin's Ten Piano Sonatas," 126.

<sup>209</sup> Bowers, *Scriabin*, 2:230.

<sup>210</sup> Scriabin designed a simple light-keyboard for the performance of the *Prometheus* to highlight its harmonic canvas. His performance instructions for the *Tastiéra per luce* are written on only one staff and consist of two parts. The first part is built of slowly changing note-colors (changes occur approximately every two minutes) and the second, consisting of constantly changing tonic-colors, visualizes the piece's actual quick harmonic progressions. Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 56-57.

many other parts of the piece. The material in the upper staves can be taken to resemble brighter rays of light because it explores higher registers of the keyboard. It is also built of faster, more flowing figures.

## CONCLUSION

The mystical *White Mass* sonata showcases Scriabin's full potential as a composer. The piece contains a variety of features characteristic of his mature style: harmonic devices such as the *Mystic Chord*, octatonic collections, and tritone polarity, and formal devices such as the continuous development, the long-range accumulation of energy, and dialectical narrative. These features can also form a compelling spiritual program of significant theosophic energy. The seventh sonata, unlike the fifth and third sonatas, also ends with completely new material. Its final trills resemble a higher level of consciousness and resonate with the goals of the *Mysterium*.

The seventh sonata's large-scale trajectory is a result of a long-term process. The piece's mature conception of tritone polarity and strong upward trajectory are extreme versions of such tendencies discussed in the fifth and third sonatas. However, the seventh sonata's musical material, despite its futuristic character on the surface, remains fundamentally conservative on the deepest level. The piece's formal scheme adheres to the canvas of conventional sonata form: the seventh sonata's different arrangements of the *Mystic Chord* do the work of contrasting key areas, and, its use of octatonic collections mirrors the traditional sonata's large-scale harmonic narrative.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion

My doctoral document, titled *The Evolution of Musical Language and Sonata Form in the Piano Sonatas of Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin*, has focused on the development of Scriabin's mature style and sonata form. In this concluding chapter I will briefly summarize my analyses of Scriabin's remarkable sonatas no. 3, no. 5, and no. 7. I will also briefly mention the composer's last two sonatas as a suggestion for further study. After I do this, I will show how the collection of Scriabin's ten keyboard sonatas continues the musical tradition of the past and influences the works of future composers. Finally, I will explain how these sonatas can enhance our understanding of musical evolution and modernism.

The main goal of my project is to prove that Scriabin is not a rejector of the past but an interpreter. I have achieved this goal by showing how tension between traditional and futuristic models of harmony and form shapes Scriabin's early, middle, and late sonatas. This project has demonstrated how Scriabin both maintains and reinvents the basic sonata form's key areas and broad harmonic narrative. It has also shown how he manages to create increasingly more powerful build-ups of energy on the basic sonata form's balanced canvas. Furthermore, my study has revealed how Scriabin gradually places more emphasis on the extramusical interpretation of the conventional sonata form's trajectory.

My study of sonatas no. 3, no. 5, and no. 7 builds on Boris Schloezer's description of Scriabin's evolution: "From Scriabin's point of view, the process of evolution is the history of the impregnation of matter with spirit, which is also the immersion of spirit in matter, leading to constantly increasing interpenetration."<sup>211</sup> In Schloezer's description, the musical tradition of the

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<sup>211</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 210.

nineteenth century can be taken to resemble matter and Scriabin's futuristic musical ideas can be taken to resemble spirit. In my discussion of Scriabin's unique sonata form and individual style the first movement of the early third sonata represents matter. Scriabin begins to infuse matter with spirit in the third sonata's Finale. The tension between matter and spirit escalates in the middle fifth sonata. In the seventh sonata the composer creates the "most intimate fusion"<sup>212</sup> of matter and spirit and by doing that achieves the effect of *musical dematerialization*. The fusion of traditional and futuristic musical elements, which defines *musical dematerialization*, represents Scriabin's highest achievement in the interpretation of Romantic musical language, harmony, and sonata form.

The traditional elements of harmony and form are the strongest in the Romantic third sonata. The harmonic trajectories of the piece's outer movements (in sonata form) present the main themes in contrasting keys in the exposition (F# minor and A major), explore remote key areas in the development, and return to the second theme to tonic (in fact the parallel major) in the recapitulation. However, the Finale is an extreme version of the more conservative first movement: the first movement's basic canvas is transformed into an appropriate home for the Finale's apotheosizing narrative. In the Finale Scriabin increases tension between the main theme areas in the exposition, accentuates waves of excitement and *effondrements subits* in the development, intensifies the expectation for the dominant in the retransition, and radically expands the cadential confirmation of F# major in the coda. The attached poem also betrays Scriabin's early interests in program music, mysticism, and theosophy.

The conflict between the traditional and futuristic elements of harmony and form escalates in the fifth sonata. One of the main propellers of this conflict is the force of compression: this piece

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<sup>212</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, 211.

condenses the Romantic keyboard sonata's four-movement model into a single-movement sonata form. As a result of this compression all of the fifth sonata's core sections (exposition-development-recapitulation) accelerate. These accelerating core sections foreshadow the ABC waves characteristic of Scriabin's mature sonata forms. This sonata contains a two-part introduction (at the outskirts and in the middle of the piece) which not only accentuates the beginnings of the AB waves and the ending of the C wave but also paradoxically betrays Scriabin's interest in symmetry. The piece's elevated conflict between the upward and balanced trajectories also affects its harmonic structure: the main theme areas, presented in F# major and in Bb major in the exposition and in B major and in Eb major in the recapitulation, follow the mechanics of sonata form to some degree (the recapitulation mirrors the exposition's relative key relationship) but the home key of F# major does not return in the recapitulation. The fifth sonata's large-scale harmonic planes of F#-Eb represent an intermediary step to Scriabin's futuristic concept of tritone polarity. The fifth sonata has significantly weaker traditional tonal progressions (dominant-tonic relationships) than the third but contains glimmers of the futuristic *Mystic Chords* and *tritone links*. It also uses more creative Italian performance directions, foreshadows Scriabin's mature language of symbolism, and can be taken to incorporate stronger theosophic and coloristic devices.

The seventh sonata fuses the musical experiments conducted in the fifth and third sonatas and represents a mature example of Scriabin's idiosyncratic sonata form, harmonic system, and musical language. The piece houses a single powerful long-range build-up of energy which tightens the fifth sonata's ABC waves and most aptly demonstrates the smooth movement "from

the highest delicacy via active efficacy to the greatest grandiosity”<sup>213</sup> characteristic of Scriabin’s most advanced sonatas. This smooth accumulation of energy results from the technique of “continuous development,”<sup>214</sup> heavy emphasis of the ending, and refinement of past experiments. This overwhelming sweep also most strongly affects the sonata’s overall harmonic trajectory: the piece’s root movement illuminates a large-scale progression from C to F# which is a mature example of tritone polarity. Even though the futuristic elements of harmony and form dominate the piece’s trajectory its deep underlying structure is still conservative. The seventh sonata’s unique harmonic devices such as the *Mystic Chord* and octatonic collections are used to create traditional sonata’s contrasting key centers-theme areas and a broad trajectory of tonal resolution. The seventh sonata’s musical language is saturated with extramusical ideas: it contains a profound French vocabulary, uses a sophisticated system of symbols, carries significant theosophic undertones, and creates the effects of light with music. The *White Mass* sonata’s spiritual program can be taken to closely resemble the aesthetic goals of Scriabin’s quasi-religious projects such as the *Mysterium* and the *Prometheus*.

I believe that the study of tension between the traditional and futuristic models of harmony and form could benefit from the analysis of Scriabin’s final sonatas no. 9, Op. 68 (1912-1913) *Black Mass*<sup>215</sup> and no. 10, Op. 70 (1912-1913). These sonatas incorporate some formal experiments discussed in previous chapters. For example, they contain formally significant introductions which not only precede their expositions and developments but also close their codas. However, these sonatas, described by Hugh Macdonald as Scriabin’s “most concentrated”

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<sup>213</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 177.

<sup>214</sup> Woolsey, “Organizational Principles in Piano Sonatas of Aleksander Skrjabin,” 87.

<sup>215</sup> The *Black Mass* sonata (no. 9), unlike the *White Mass* (no. 7), was not titled by Scriabin but by his friend Alexei Podgaetsky.



and “most ethereal”<sup>216</sup> respectively, also include some compelling new developments. The compact ninth sonata houses arguably the most powerful long-range build-up of energy in Scriabin’s output and compresses the canvas of sonata form to extreme levels. As a result, the piece’s recapitulation is significantly faster and shorter than its exposition. Furthermore, the *Black Mass* sonata recapitulates the materials of the first theme area but the second theme is displaced to and apotheosized in the coda. By way of contrast, in the tenth sonata Scriabin focuses on formal balance rather than on expression of power.<sup>217</sup> Hugh Macdonald has noted that this piece’s recapitulation “reverses the sequence of the opening.”<sup>218</sup> The tenth sonata’s large-scale build-up of energy is also a masterpiece in terms of trills and other luminous sound effects.<sup>219</sup>

The set of Scriabin’s keyboard sonatas not only logically outlines the development of an individual composer but also can be used in a discussion about how the musical world is extremely connected. These sonatas are influenced by the musical works and styles reaching back to the Baroque era, play a pivotal role on the Russian musical scene, and impact the works of future composers.

Scriabin’s sonatas continue the tradition of the past. Alfred Eaglefield Hull has noted that the codas of Scriabin’s sonatas frequently mirror the impetuous endings of certain monumental works of composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and Liszt.<sup>220</sup> Faubion Bowers has also compared Scriabin's sonatas to the sonatas of Beethoven.<sup>221</sup> Scriabin’s sonatas, similarly to the

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<sup>216</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 62.

<sup>217</sup> Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 64.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>219</sup> The tenth sonata is sometimes called a sonata of insects. Faubion Bowers considers this particular sonata a nature piece and argues that it focuses specifically on creating the effects of light with music.

Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 179-180.

<sup>220</sup> Hull, *A Great Russian Tone-Poet Scriabin*, 238.

<sup>221</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 173.

ones of Beethoven, can be divided into three distinct creative periods, showcase the composer's experimentation with the number of movements, display the composer's tendency to stress the ending, and explore similar special effects.<sup>222</sup> Scriabin's sonatas also mirror Chopin's intimate style and build on Liszt's cyclic use of themes and single-movement sonata form.

Scriabin is considered the father of the Russian keyboard sonata<sup>223</sup> and has had notable followers<sup>224</sup> such as Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953), and Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975). Rachmaninoff, often mistaken for Scriabin's rival, was a traditionalist who had no desire to participate in the modernist movement.<sup>225</sup> His two large multi movement keyboard sonatas (No. 1 in D minor, Op. 28, 1908 and No. 2 in B flat major, Op. 36, 1913), similarly to Scriabin's early sonatas, are Romantic works deeply influenced by the music of Fryderyk Chopin. The key difference between the sonatas of these two composers is that Scriabin imitated Chopin but Rachmaninoff translated Chopin's style into "an essentially Russian idiom" and "brought Chopin's work to a logical conclusion."<sup>226</sup> Stravinsky, an innovator, was familiar with the music and piano sonatas of Scriabin. His early Sonata in F sharp minor (1903), called by David Burge "youthful and uncharacteristic,"<sup>227</sup> can be taken to be similar to Scriabin's third sonata also in F sharp minor. However, Stravinsky's *Piano Sonata* from 1924 is an elegant, three-movement work and a powerful statement of the composer's neoclassical ideas. Prokofiev was a complete antithesis of Scriabin: his musical style was mostly linear and polyphonic and Scriabin's was vertical and

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<sup>222</sup> Scriabin's and Beethoven's last sonatas are trill sonatas. Macdonald, *Skryabin*, 64.

<sup>223</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 173.

<sup>224</sup> In this context "followers" means Russian composers who knew Scriabin's sonatas and were inspired to write their own.

<sup>225</sup> Burge, *Twentieth-Century Piano Music*, 57-58.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

harmonic.<sup>228</sup> What is striking about his nine keyboard sonatas (he did not finish the tenth) is that they showcase how he, unlike Scriabin, started out as an innovator and ended as a traditionalist.<sup>229</sup> Only Prokofiev's early sonatas no. 1, Op. 1 (1907-1909) and no. 3, Op. 28 (1907-17) explore the single-movement sonata form. Shostakovich's only two piano sonatas (No. 1, Op. 12 1926 and No. 2 in B minor, Op. 61 1943) can be taken to follow a similar path to the sonatas of Prokofiev: the youthful first is atonal and in single-movement form, the three-movement second betrays a strong influence of classical forms.

Scriabin's late piano sonatas are not detached from the works of Western European modernists. Their harmonic development resonates with the movement in the direction of atonality of composers such as Alban Berg (1885-1935) and Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951). For example, Berg's single-movement Sonata in B minor, Op. 1 (1910), similarly to Scriabin's late sonatas written around the same time, is filled with heavy chromaticism, contains numerous unresolved dominant-type harmonies, and explores advanced symmetrical scales. This particular sonata is also influenced by Schoenberg's idea of *developing variation*<sup>230</sup> which resonates with the concept of *continuous development* discussed in Scriabin's seventh sonata. Schoenberg, similarly to Scriabin, wrote tonal music before approaching the issue of atonality.

My study of Scriabin's piano sonatas can be used as a springboard to a broader conversation about musical evolution and modernism. The project has shown that Scriabin's sonatas are appropriate material for the study of key indicators of musical evolution described by William

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<sup>228</sup> Peter Doane Roberts, *Modernism in Russian Piano Music* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 1993), 27.

<sup>229</sup> Burge, *Twentieth-Century Piano Music*, 104.

<sup>230</sup> Schoenberg's technique of *developing variation*, different from traditional theme and variations, is a "more flexible compositional procedure whereby the different elements of a basic idea or shape - what he called *Grundgestalt* - are successively modified."

Walter Frisch, "Brahms, Developing Variation, and the Schoenberg Critical Tradition," *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 5, no. 3 (1982): 216.

Austin as “the *continuity* of change in ideas and techniques from one piece of music to another and one composer to another; and the great *diversity* of ideas and techniques in musical compositions and styles.”<sup>231</sup> All of Scriabin’s sonatas build on traditional models (they adhere to the principles of sonata form)<sup>232</sup> but are also products “special creation” and “revolution.”<sup>233</sup> This project has shown that Scriabin is a modernist: he is a creator of a harmonic system unlike any other composer and is an individual who believes in a tight relationship between his most extraordinary philosophical views and music. However, he does not create something new out of nothing and his modernism does not equal to complete rejection of the past. He does not metaphorically lose his mind in his final years; his transformation is not as radical as it appears on the surface. I believe that Scriabin’s creative energy focuses not on rejecting or breaking down of old forms but on making them new: the composer proposes new ways of looking at the sonata form and its harmonic trajectory. I also believe that Scriabin, in his sonatas, is searching for answers to questions such as “What is beauty?” and “What does music mean?”<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Austin, “The Idea of Evolution in the Music of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” 26.

<sup>232</sup> Bowers, *The New Scriabin*, 175.

<sup>233</sup> Austin, “The Idea of Evolution in the Music of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” 26.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

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