



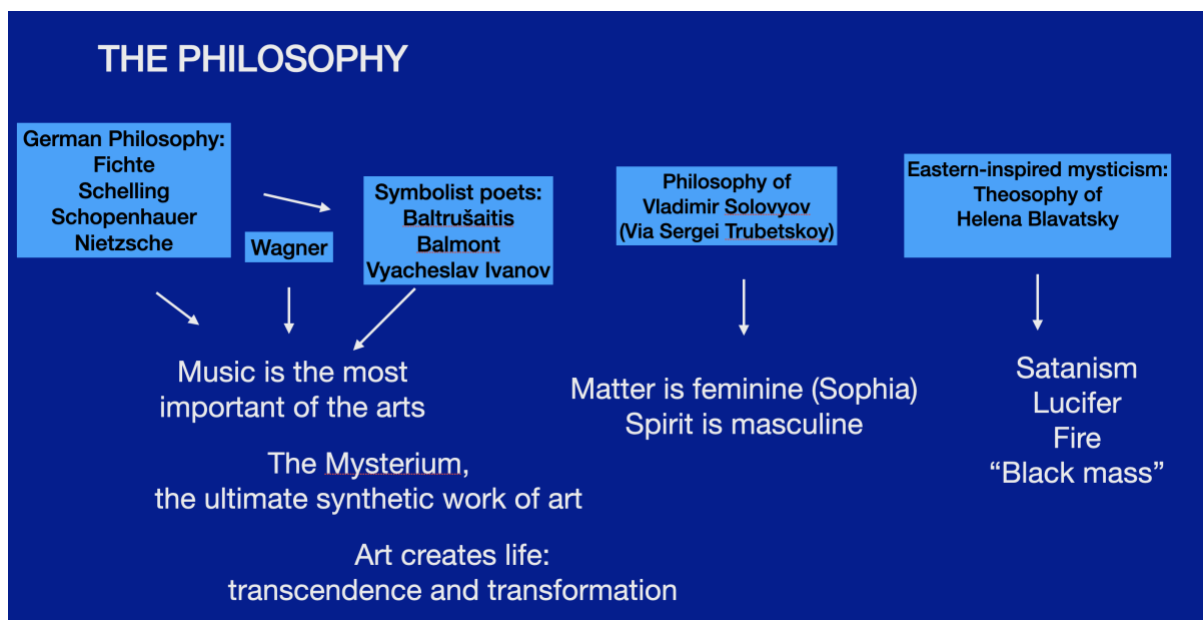
**Scriabin: Towards the Flame**  
**Professor Marina Frolova-Walker**

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The Philosophy

Those who know Scriabin’s music well puzzle over his lack of wider recognition, especially in the West. One of the obstacles is to be found in Scriabin’s mystical thinking, which seems impenetrable, irrational, or even repugnant, and yet Scriabin insisted that his music was simply the artistic expression of this mysticism and the two could not be separated. Let us confront this obstacle first.

Scriabin was not a scholar. His library was small, and he was easily influenced by acquaintances who would pull him in different directions, towards Theosophy, Hinduism, yoga or various other systems of thought that the composer found attractively exotic. This strange brew of ideas never coalesced into anything that could be called a philosophical system, and he merely drew on ideas that were popular in artistic circles at the time without trying to reconcile them. This was a period in Russia when revolutionary ideas were mixed with apocalyptic presentiments, and when a crisis of institutionalised religion led to the mushrooming of mysticism, and explorations of Buddhism and Hinduism fuelled the search for a universal religion. One strain was even called “God–building”. The Symbolist movement that encompassed all the arts drew from the notion that the visible, material world contains only the symbols of a more real world beyond.



The chart shows the main sources of Scriabin’s mystical ideas and their disparate nature.

The Piano Sonatas

Scriabin’s ten piano sonatas span his entire artistic career, although the last five are clustered towards the end, in the period from 1911 to 1913. *Vers la flamme* (Towards the Flame), originally planned as the next sonata, occupied him during 1914, but was never fully fleshed out.

Scriabin's piano style was based on Chopin above all, although it was a highly imaginative extension of that composer's ideas. Scriabin gradually develops some highly characteristic features of his own:

- extravagant tempo and expression directions, first in Italian, but changing to French for the last five
- extravagant key signatures in the first half of his career, including his favourite, F# major (which he associated with a purplish-blue colour); but starting from the Sixth, there are no longer any key signatures
- polyrhythms, i.e. more than one subdivision of the beat occurring simultaneously (not just 3 against 2, but various permutations of these numbers into 5, 7 and 9)
- highly chromatic harmony, which in the later sonatas is non-tonal and based on Scriabin's own principles and intuitions
- multi-layered textures, sometimes requiring three staves, when several themes or motifs are superimposed

Scriabin's three trademark types of expression, which had crystallised by the Fourth Sonata, are

- WILL: wilful, "masculine" melodies, often with fanfare elements
- EROS: languid, "feminine" themes, which seem to stop time
- FLIGHT or DIVINE PLAY: more rhythmic, dance-like passages with leaps and trills

### **SONATA No. 1 (1892) (four movements)**

The First Sonata was written after Scriabin had injured his hand through overpractice, forcing him to abandon his goal of becoming a concert pianist. He later spoke of himself as a "disabled" pianist, and the weakness of his right hand affected his piano writing, which features very busy left-hand activity to compensate for the sparser or simpler right-hand (he gave performances of his own works).

*"At the age of 20: an infirmity of the hand... Fate throws an obstacle on the path to a goal greatly desired: of glamour and fame... Life's first serious misfortune. The first serious ruminations, the beginning of analysis. Doubts that good health could ever return, and the darkest of moods. The first serious contemplation of the value of life, of religion, of God. A strong belief in Him lingers on... Ardent prayer and attending church... Reproaching both Fate and God. The composition of the First Sonata, with a funeral march..."*

– from Scriabin's notebooks

Scriabin preferred not to remind himself of this demoralising time, which meant that he did not programme this sonata in his concerts, although for a time, he still played the funeral-march movement alone.

### **SONATA-FANTASIA No. 2 (1897) (two movements)**

*"Scriabin himself said that it was all created from his impressions of the sea. The first movement is a quiet southern night on the seashore. In the development – the dark and stormy high seas. The E-major section – the caressing light of the moon after the darkness. Second movement (Presto) – a broad stormy expanse of sea."*

– Yuli Engel's memoir

The "fantasia" element in the title points to the unusual structure: there are only two movements, and the first movement does not end in the main key. This is possibly the closest that Scriabin's comes

to the style of Rachmaninoff, his classmate at the Moscow Conservatoire. Rachmaninoff chose this sonata in the first memorial concert after Scriabin's death.

### **SONATA No. 3 (1898) (four movements)**

This is a highly Romantic work, even melodramatic at times, and the technical demands must have seemed excessive to Scriabin himself, since he eventually simplified the left-hand figurations in the finale. He commented on one occasion that this was a sonata that was not suited to female pianists (although it is worth noting here that female pianists, including Vera Isakovich, his first wife, and also several of his students, played a major role in the dissemination of his music).

*“In my Third Sonata, at the beginning: can this be played with two hands?” And he played the Sonata's first notes, that fourth C#-F#, with both hands. “It's terrible, scandalous! It sounds so calm and cosy, but it has to be like a flash of lightning! The mood of the performer depends on what he is playing and how the notes are distributed between the hands. This is why it is absolutely not the same when it is played with the left hand or with the right, with both hands with just one – all of this creates or changes the mood and the articulation”.*

– Scriabin, as recalled in Leonid Sabaneev's memoir

By this stage, the critics began to think of Scriabin's piano music as something singularly ambitious:

*“The Sonata... will be inaccessible to many pianists, because it presents extraordinary technical difficulties at every step which are sometimes inconsistent with the spirit of the instrument and thus disproportionate for the effect they produce. Additionally, the **sickly** dramatics, the lyrical refinement and the overall sophistication of the music demand a performer of similar artistic disposition.”*

– *Russkie vedomosti* newspaper, 1900

It was this piece, apparently, that won him the lifelong dedication of Tatyana Schloezer, his muse, who became his second wife.

Critics also began to associate Scriabin's music with the “decadence” of the times:

*“Scriabin's music is a product of modern times, where we are anxious and nervous, living lives of heightened intensity. This is an art that has cut itself off from the simple and healthy moods of the masses, from the broad, fragrant expanses of the fields, meadows and forests. The city, the four walls, refined and complicated dispositions of “the top ten thousand” – this is the sphere to which such art belongs.”*

– Engel in the *Russian Review*, 1902

### **SONATA No. 4 (1903) (two movements)**

In this sonata, Scriabin's style becomes unmistakably his own, with a bold contrast between the languorous, ultra-refined first movement and images of wilful flight in the finale (*Prestissimo volando*). Sabaneyev tells us that Scriabin's desired tempo for the finale of the Fourth Sonata bordered on the impossible. At the right tempo, the movement would suggest, in Scriabin's words, “flight at the speed of light, straight towards the sun - into the sun!”.

It was highly regarded by listeners of diverging aesthetic outlooks, and even the leading conservative composer, Alexander Glazunov, praised it as “original, full of intoxicating beauty; its ideas are expressed with great clarity and concision”. This the most frequently performed and recorded of the ten sonatas.

In the three years between the Fourth and Fifth Sonatas, Scriabin first began to entertain the idea that he had a messianic calling. In his private notes from 1904, we find fevered passages like this:

*“I am, and there is nothing outside me. Nothing beyond my consciousness does or can exist. I am god. I am nothing, I am play, I am freedom, I am life, I am the frontiers, I am the summit. I am god.”*

He conceived of a final, cataclysmic work that he called his “Mysterium”, which was supposed to usher the human race into a new world. In the same year, he was overheard preaching socialism to Swiss fishermen while residing on the shores of Lake Geneva.

### **SONATA No. 5 (1907) (one movement)**

The Fifth Sonata posed a new challenge to the public, especially in the framing gesture, an atonal passages scrambling across the entire keyboard from low to high.

*“The Fifth Sonata, with its fantastical and non-tonal ending, was far above the understanding of the public then, and left them merely bemused. The public didn’t even understand whether it was supposed to be finished, or whether the composer has just “fled the stage” for some reason or other. As one well-known singer asked me, “What happened to him? – Did he get stomach cramp?”...”*

– Sabaneev’s memoir

One clue to the extraordinary images of the Sonata can be found in Scriabin’s pioneering symphonic work, *The Poem of Ecstasy*, written at the same time. Attached to the score was a poetic programme which Scriabin had written himself. This is a thoroughly Symbolist tract, in which Scriabin imagines himself as the Creative Spirit (male) who makes love to the World (female). The Fifth Sonata is prefaced by four lines from the verbal part of the Poem of Ecstasy, proving their kinship:

*“I summon you to life, hidden longings!  
You, sunken in the sombre depths  
Of creative spirit, you timid embryos of life,  
To you I bring my daring!”*

(transl. Faubion Bowers)

The full English text of the poem can be found here:

<http://flameinthesnow.blogspot.com/2014/08/le-poeme-de-lextase-op-54-alexander.html>

It is unmissable!

*“I have just committed to paper a monologue of fantastic beauty. Once again, an immense wave of creativity raises me up to such heights! I am breathless. It is bliss, and I am composing fabulously.”*

– Scriabin, letter to Schloezer

At this point, Scriabin was encouraged by the complete devotion of his new muse, Tatiana Schloezer, to think of himself as humanity’s supreme genius. The high inspiration of this Sonata, coinciding with his love affair, led Scriabin to see erotic love and artistic creation as two facets of the same thing. Life poured into art and art into life, as many Symbolist artists agreed.

As Scriabin became surrounded by admirers and followers, some of his colleagues began to have doubts and misgivings:

*“We spent a very interesting evening at Scriabin’s. He showed us his “Ecstasy”, which contains some wonderful music, and he laid out the plan of his next work, conceived on a grandiose, extraordinary and even unrealisable scale. Generally, he is now into philosophy, upon which he builds his works, and as he suffers from megalomania, he has walked into such dense forest that some consider him simply mad...”*

– Rimsky-Korsakov in 1907

*“Could it be that he is going mad from some kind of religious-erotic fixation? I heard his Poem of Ecstasy (albeit on the piano), and it is indeed powerful, but still, it is some kind of square root of minus one.”*

– Rimsky-Korsakov

While not all listeners followed Scriabin onto this higher plane, Rachmaninoff saw the Fifth Sonata as opening “a new era in music”. This was another piece he performed in Scriabin memorial concerts after the composer’s death, although it was widely noted that he played it very differently from Scriabin.

### **SONATA No. 7 (1912) (one movement; completed slightly earlier than No. 6)**

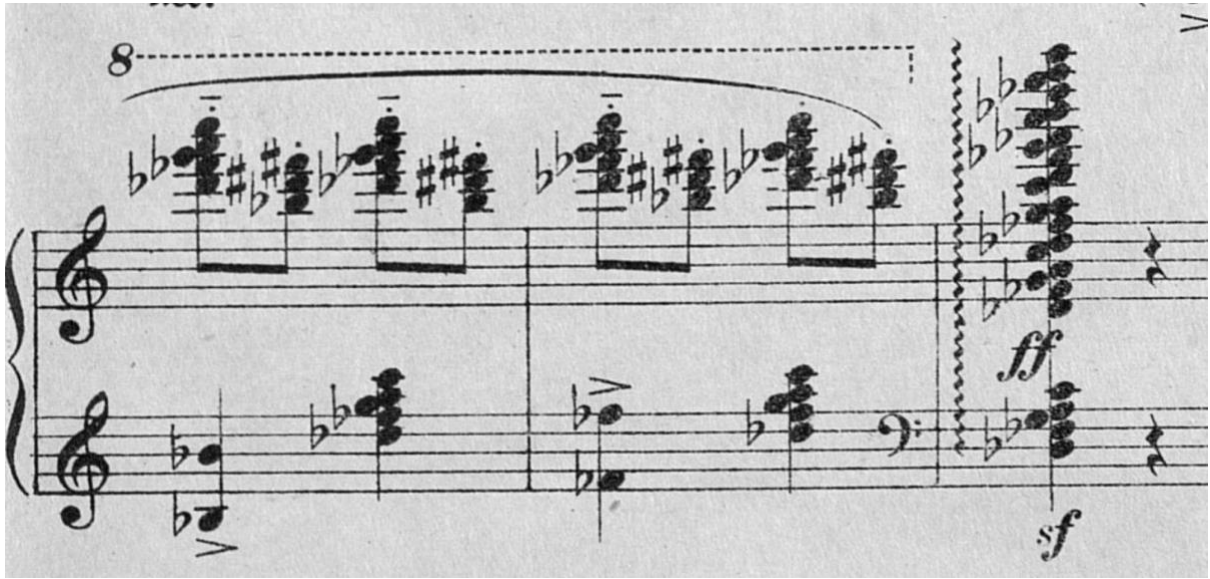
During the five years separating the Seventh Sonata from the Fifth, Scriabin believed that he had taken great strides towards his unrealisable utopian work, the Mysterium. One of the major landmarks along the way was his symphonic work *Prometheus*, in which the orchestra is joined by a piano soloist (first performed by the composer), an organ, a wordless chorus, and plans for a coloured light-show that turned out to exceed the technological capabilities of the time. As Scriabin’s thoughts on the Mysterium came into focus, he conceived of a synthesis that would embrace all the arts and captivate all the senses. He would write a poetic text, and there would be ballet, mystical rituals of his own devising, “columns of perfume” and so on. The architectural aspect would be ready-made: Scriabin wanted the Mysterium to be performed in a grand temple in India. There was to be no division between performers and audience, since all would participate in the rite, which would lead to a transformation of the world. In some of his darker descriptions, the Mysterium would actually bring about the annihilation of the world.

Such ideas further elevated Scriabin’s cult status among some, and inevitably led to mockery from other quarters. Even the writer Andrei Bely, who was considered the last word in literary Symbolism, found Scriabin too much to take. He left the following bemused recollection of an evening hosted by Scriabin:

*“... with such exaggerated politeness ... Scriabin turned towards me, his pallid little figure with his combed and fluffy hussar’s moustache... as the little white fingers of his little pale hand played chords X, Y and Z in the air to accompany the conversation: the little finger touched the “Kant” note, the middle finger latched onto the theme of “Culture”, and then suddenly – allez-hop – the index finger leapt over several keys to land on the Blavatsky note... At the end Scriabin was asked to play, giving the impression of a most graceful lightness rather than any depth; I have to admit I always liked Scriabin more when performed by Vera Ivanovna, his first wife...”*

– Andrei Bely

Scriabin talked of his Seventh Sonata as a direct precursor to The Mysterium and described it as a “white mass” (as opposed to a “black mass” which came in a later sonata). Here we have the presence of Scriabin’s “Will” music from the very beginning, and the final section contains a bell-like passage, in which he imagined bells “suspended from the sky” that called the peoples of the world to come and unite in the Mysterium. The climactic chord, associated with the climax of the artistic/erotic act, is even visually extraordinary, after which the music quickly dissipates.



Scriabin was very fond of this Sonata, but it left audiences nonplussed. The critic Yuli Engel wrote that it was only “a sketch of future Scriabin”, although he did not seem to be looking forward to any of this future Scriabin:

*“One is repelled by the very spirit of this music, that is often so hysterical and narcotic, with sweet languors and stormy vertiges that revolve far too much around the same “volupté”.”*  
 – Engel in 1913

### **SONATA No. 6 (1912) (one movement)**

The Sixth is in many ways the opposite of the Seventh: rather than being positive and transformative, it plays with the idea of evil. The complex, unprecedented opening chord, inspires a sense of dread. Scriabin seemed to be afraid of the piece: he did not perform it, never even learnt it properly, and would only play fragments of it at home. The late sonatas tend to move towards an ecstatic dance at the end, and here, the dance carries one of Scriabin’s most extraordinary directions to the performer: *l’épouvante surgit, elle se mêle à la danse délirante* (horror surges up, mingling with a delirious dance).

### **SONATA No. 9 (1913) (one movement)**

The Ninth Sonata attempted to plumb the depths of evil still further, to the point that Scriabin referred to the piece as a “black mass”. It was born, he said, of an irresistible artistic impulse, although he admitted that it was a deviation from the path to *The Mysterium*. A decade earlier, Scriabin had already flirted with a Blavatsky-inspired “satanism”, even writing a *Poème satanique* for piano in 1903. Later, he said that Satan was “polite” and on his best behaviour in the earlier work, while in the 9<sup>th</sup> Sonata, Satan was entirely “at home”. The sonata seems to be associated with some “gothic” horrors, and is driven by a clear narrative direction towards a terrifying climax, with bell sounds (very different from those of the Seventh), that may have been influenced by Musorgsky’s tolling bells in the famous scene of Boris Godunov’s delirium.

The Ninth was one of Scriabin’s personal favourites (he loved playing it), and it elicited admiration from pianist-composers such as Ferruccio Busoni and Sergei Prokofiev (who even quoted from it in his own Sixth Sonata).

### **SONATA No. 8 (1913) (one movement)**

The Eighth and Tenth Sonatas were written simultaneously. The Eighth is considered the most complex of all, composed in a highly “sophisticated contrapuntal style” (Sabaneyev). Scriabin wrote very little about the piece, but after its “black mass” predecessor, it ascends back into a brightly-lit world, and it seems that Scriabin was back on course for the Mysterium.

### **SONATA No. 10 (1913) (one movement)**

Scriabin thought that this Sonata was a new stylistic departure, and although it is certainly not another exploration of evil, it branches off in another direction from the path to the Mysterium. He imagined his Tenth to be bright and joyful, but also *earth-bound*, suffused with images of the forest and a kind of pantheistic ecstasy, a feeling of union with the material world rather than transcendence. The opening bars contain a memorable “call” motif which Scriabin associated with the East of his dreams – he was already considering buying a plot of land in India for the enactment of his Mysterium. The sonata, he said, contained an image of insects teeming in the light of sun, or flying towards the sun.

*“Insects, butterflies, moths – these are all flowers that have come to life. They are the subtlest of caresses, barely touching... They were all born of the sun, and the sun nourishes them... They are the sun's caress ... as in the Tenth Sonata – a whole sonata of insects...”*

*“The music keeps thinning out, until it is almost gone and only a disembodied rhythm remains...”*

*“On that last day, in that last dance – I will shatter into a million moths, and so will everyone else... perhaps at the end of the Mysterium, we will no longer be people, but we'll become caresses – animals, birds, moths...”*

Scriabin, as reported by Sabaneyev

Scriabin loved the Tenth as much as the Seventh, and was proud that he had found a convincing way to simplify his harmony. He gave a public performance of the Tenth in 1915, shortly before his untimely death. The critics appreciated the fresher, “healthier” spirit of this Sonata, in which Sabaneyev also detected a “pantheistic” vision, while Gunst called it “monolithic and logical”.

### Vers La Flamme

Sabaneyev tells us that *Vers la flamme* was conceived as a further sonata, but was later demoted. Scriabin often played it at home, particularly the opening: “Look how everything gradually begins to flourish ... out of the mists and into the blinding light”.

*“The blinding light appears at the moment when the tremolandos begin. Scriabin never played this piece to me (or to anyone else for that matter) with full force, and since he never committed his dynamic markings to paper, it remains unknown whether he wanted to hear the ending of the piece fortissimo or pianissimo. “Strictly speaking, it's a piece for orchestra”, he used to say, and indeed, in these tremolandos, which had never been used by him in this manner before, one can sense a sketchiness, as if something has not quite crystallized into its finished form.”*

- Scriabin, as reported by Sabaneyev

### Performing Scriabin

Scriabin was an idiosyncratic performer who lacked the requisite power to fill a large hall with sound, but he prided himself on the “dematerialised” quality of his tone, enhanced with subtle pedalling.

Rhythmically, he was extremely capricious, going well beyond even the standards of the day (which were generally much more liberal with timing than anything heard in recent generations). His own piano teacher Safonov, who admired and promoted Scriabin's early music, wrote that:

*"[As a performer] he sometimes twists his own music and tugs at it so much that the listener who doesn't already know the pieces can hardly make sense of the rhythms or the melodies, so that his performances will often detract from the music."*

Scriabin's own manner of performing his music (which we can glean, if imperfectly, from the piano rolls he recorded) was imitated by his students and followers, and the "cult" tended to reject any attempts to bring performances into closer compliance with the notation. Rachmaninoff was criticised on precisely these grounds, but he defended his approach:

*"Scriabin was still a true musician... although he himself, unfortunately, tended to forget that, and others would also forget it during his lifetime. Today they are trying to create some kind of esotericism, **an esoteric school of Scriabin performance**, and they want to bury once and for all what he possessed from birth – his natural musicality. But I can hear it, and I've always tried to hear it in him. When oallezne musician is no more, it is simply the duty of the musician who is still alive to tell the public how he hears the music of his deceased colleague – and that is what I am doing, travelling around Russia and telling them that."*

[as recalled by Marietta Shaginian]

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