

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### Alexander Scriabin

Born December 25, 1871, Moscow, Russia.

Died April 27, 1915, Moscow, Russia.

### *The Poem of Ecstasy, Op. 54*

Scriabin began *The Poem of Ecstasy* in 1905 and completed the score in 1908. The first performance was given on December 10, 1908, in New York City. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and english horn, three clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, eight horns, five trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, tam-tam, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, bells, glockenspiel, two harps, celesta, organ, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Scriabin's *The Poem of Ecstasy* were given at Orchestra Hall on April 1 and 2, 1921, with Frederick Stock conducting.

Scriabin died before he was able to produce the single great work he thought he was destined to write—a vast multimedia score combining theater, dance, painting, poetry, perfume, and music, designed to foster “the celebration of a collective joy,” and intended for performance in the high, clear air of the Himalayas. From his youth, when he interpreted the significance of his birth on Christmas Day as a sign that he should do great things, Scriabin believed he would play a decisive role in the history of music. (In his diaries he also frequently mentions changing the world.) “Mankind must be preached to,” he later wrote. “It must be led along new paths. And I do preach. Once I even preached from a boat, like Christ. I have a little circle of people who understand me perfectly and follow me. Particularly one—a fisherman. He is simple, but a splendid fellow.”

Scriabin did indeed preach, and in the last years of his life he began to forge a unique musical path. His output—from his first Chopinesque piano pieces to Prometheus, a big orchestral work that calls for colors to be projected throughout the hall during performance—seemed to be leading up to the grand final statement of his vision. But after his death, no one truly followed his path (Prokofiev and Szymanowski briefly came under his spell), and, in the end, despite the urgency and fierce passion of his ideas, he did not—to use current parlance—make a difference. At his death, his magnum opus, *Mysterium*, was left in a virtually incomprehensible pile of sketches. He never even visited India. (He planned a trip, but decided it was impractical to travel there after the outbreak of war in 1914.)

Scriabin died in 1915, as he was coming into his own as a composer. In 1907 or 1908, around the time he completed *The Poem of Ecstasy*, Scriabin broke with traditional tonality and began to develop a new approach to harmony. The last five of his ten piano sonatas, as well as Prometheus, all use a single dissonant “mystical chord” (based on a series of rising fourths) as raw material. Scriabin's original language, though severely limited, was in its own way as revolutionary as that of Mahler, Strauss, or Debussy (all of whom were writing at the same time). It is difficult to know where Scriabin was headed, and how he might ultimately have changed the course of music. Even Stravinsky, who disliked Scriabin personally and said many nasty things about his compositions, once commented, “Although his death was tragic and premature, I have sometimes wondered at the kind of music such a man would have written had he survived into the 1920s.”

In *The Poem of Ecstasy*, it is still possible to hear the potent influence of Wagner and to sense that Scriabin had cut his teeth on Chopin and Liszt. (He began his career as a virtuoso pianist, despite the fact that his diminutive hands could scarcely span an octave.) But the music's faint, irregular pulse and harmonic ambiguity suggest that Scriabin was already moving in the direction of a modern and highly individual personal style. Scriabin began this work in 1904, by drafting a poem (he had written poetry since childhood) titled *Poème orgiaque*, which was to serve as the basis for a fourth symphony. But by this time, his musical ideas had outgrown the traditional bounds of symphonic form, and *The Poem of*

*Ecstasy*, as it was soon called, simply became a work for large orchestra in one movement. (Nearly all his works from this point on, including the last piano sonatas, are composed in a single movement.) Scriabin began the music in 1905, but often put the score aside. At the end of May 1907, he told his friends that his “finest composition” was finished, but he continued to make further adjustments in the months before the premiere in 1908.

Although *The Poem of Ecstasy* is a single movement of music, the diversity and fluidity of its moods are great. Sonata form accounts for the basic shape of the piece. (For all his originality, Scriabin remained indebted to nineteenth-century musical forms.) Scriabin calls for a very large orchestra—though not as extravagant as that in *Prometheus*—and enjoys its lavishness; the final peroration even includes organ. (Stravinsky said the *Poem* suffered from a severe case of musical emphysema.) Scriabin’s ear for instrumental color is very acute, even though he had relatively little experience writing for orchestra—all but seven of seventy-four published works are for solo piano.

At the time of the first performance of *The Poem of Ecstasy* in Russia in 1909, Scriabin approved the following note for the program book:

*The Poem of Ecstasy* is the Joy of Liberated Action. The Cosmos, i.e., Spirit, is Eternal Creation without External Motivation, a Divine Play of Worlds. The Creative Spirit, i.e., the Universe at Play, is not conscious of the Absoluteness of its creativeness, having subordinated itself to a Finality and made creativity a means toward an end. The stronger the pulse beat of life and the more rapid the precipitation of rhythms, the more clearly the awareness comes to the Spirit that it is consubstantial with creativity itself. When the Spirit has attained the supreme culmination of its activity and has been torn away from the embraces of teleology and relativity, when it has exhausted completely its substance and its liberated active energy, the Time of Ecstasy shall arrive.

#### **For the record**

The Orchestra recorded Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony in 1952 under Rafael Kubelík for Mercury, in 1957 under Fritz Reiner for RCA, in 1976 under Sir Georg Solti for London, in 1984 under James Levine for RCA, in 1986 under Claudio Abbado for CBS, and in 1998 under Daniel Barenboim for Teldec. The Orchestra recorded *The Poem of Ecstasy* in 1989 under Neeme Järvi for Chandos and in 1995 under Pierre Boulez for Deutsche Grammophon. A 1984 Chicago Symphony performance under Daniel Barenboim is included in *The First 100 Years*, a twelve-disc set issued to commemorate the Orchestra’s centennial.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

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