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Scriabin’s Ecstasy: When Poetry and Music Meet

1. Introduction

The Russian composer and poet Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin (1872–1915) aspired to accomplish many goals, all fueled by his unique philosophical system, which complemented and informed his musical and poetic writing. His beliefs were based partly on German idealist philosophy, partly on the ideas of the Russian Symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, and partly on Theosophy, a fin-de-siècle pseudo-religion created by the Russian occultist Madame Helena Blavatsky. Scriabin’s system revolved around “concepts of universal spiritual transformation through the power of art, with ecstasy as the basis of this art.”¹ This ecstasy could be both sexual and spiritual in nature, sublimating “the physical characteristics of erotic experience” into “metaphysical purposes.”² Much of his life was devoted to the development of what he considered a perfect work of art, the Mysterium, which would use such ecstasy in order to create a “union of all humankind into one indivisible entity.”³ Although this work never approached completion due to Scriabin’s early death at the age of forty-three, his many musical works stand as depictions of parts of this philosophy because “the composer believed that any philosophical idea can be expressed in art through the means of sounds, colors, and poetic words.”⁴ Scriabin’s music is

¹ Garcia, 275.
² Morris, 248.
³ de Schloezer, 60. Scriabin’s Mysterium was planned to be “an impossible, ritualized Gesamtkunstwerk that would trigger apocalypse through the use of a mythic symbolist libretto, multi-sensory stimulation, and new tonal combinations.” Gawboy and Townsend, 13. Gesamtkunstwerk means “total work of art”, or art that encompasses all forms of art.
⁴ Композитор считал, что любую философскую идею можно выразить в творчестве посредством звуков, красок и поэтических слов. Uzikova, 61. Author’s translation here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated.
irrevocably tied to his philosophy, and a full understanding of this complex system is required in order to analyze his works.

Scriabin had close ties to the Russian Symbolist movement, especially the poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, who considered him a friend and colleague.⁵ Ivanov supported and enriched the composer’s ideas about the Mysterium, even aiding him in the preparation of poetic texts related to the piece.⁶ Scriabin’s ties to the Russian Symbolist movement are evident not only in his personal philosophy—he believed that symbols held a mystical power—but also in his music, prompting him to create a system of musical symbols that represent various philosophical concepts in his music. The musicologist Susanna Garcia decod this system of symbols, allowing musicologists to analyze Scriabin’s works. Garcia asserts that:

There is a connecting link between Scriabin’s mystical intent and his compositions. Scriabin left clues to the meaning of his works in the unorthodox terms of expression that appear in his scores. […] Scriabin repeatedly conjoined certain types of expressive language with specific musical gestures, thus creating a body of musical symbols consistent throughout these late works.⁷

Garcia primarily writes on the use of these symbols in Scriabin’s late sonatas (No. 6–10, 1911–1914), but references the “stylistic unity” of all of Scriabin’s works and claims that this symbolic language appears in a nascent form in earlier pieces.⁸

As musical events, these symbols are vague enough for their sound to be varied between pieces but concrete enough to be recognizable. Some constitute specific harmonies while others are merely melodic contours. Examples include the “motive of light,” musically represented

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⁵ Gawboy, 35–98; Matlaw, 4–7.
⁶ Matlaw, 6–7.
⁷ Garcia, 276–277.
⁸ Ibid., 287.
through high trills, the “mystic chord,” which represents the barrier between the material and spiritual realms (a concept from German idealism that he reinterpreted), and the “motive of flight,” represented by a rapid five-note ascending motive that evokes a crossing between these two realms.\(^9\) This system of symbols allows for interpretations of Scriabin’s pieces that would be otherwise impossible, enabling the listener or critic to far better understand his philosophy despite the often ambiguous nature of music.

Despite the fact that few considered him to be a talented poet, Scriabin used these symbols in his poetry as well as his music.\(^10\) This lack of ability did not prevent him from attempting to espouse his philosophy through poetry, which offered a much less abstract means of conveying his ideas than instrumental music. His poetry would often include evocations of the same symbols found in his music; the eroticism of the “Eternal Feminine” is a common trope, as is supernatural flight, such as in the “motive of flight.” Scriabin’s experiments with poetry reached their peak with the dual-work *Ecstasy* (poetry, 1906) and *Le Poème de l’extase* (*The Poem of Ecstasy*, music, 1908), collectively referred to as the “Ecstasy works,” when he used two different forms of art to tell the same story. First, he wrote *Ecstasy*, a 369-line poem heavily influenced by Theosophy that depicts the birth of the universe in a moment of overpowering ecstasy and spiritual unification. Shortly after the completion of the written poem, Scriabin began work on an orchestral tone poem

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\(^9\) Ibid., 281–284. “Trill” refers to “a type of embellishment that consists in a more or less rapid alternation of the main note with the one a tone or semitone above it.” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Trill.” Such an alternation in a high register produces an aurally “bright” effect, hence the association with “divine illumination.” “Motive” is a musicological term for a short melodic phrase that repeats throughout a work, much like a “motif” in a poem or novel.

\(^10\) Matlaw, 16.
that would express the same ideas through music.\textsuperscript{11} When listening to instrumental music that tells a story, one frequently comes across the problem that the musical “events” can be interpreted in many different ways due to the absence of words to make the meaning clear. Although Scriabin accompanied \textit{Le Poème de l’extase} with poetry, the correspondences between the works quickly become muddled when trying to read the poem while listening to the piece. It becomes difficult to tie specific stanzas to passages in the music, and the overall narrative of the piece is easily lost. This apparent lack of correspondence is strangely at odds with the fundamental structures of both works, as Scriabin patterned both \textit{Ecstasy} and \textit{Le Poème de l’extase} in sonata form. It seems likely that this fundamental similarity between the works would aid in linking them together.

Surprisingly, turning to the literature on both this piece and Scriabin’s other poetic-musical fusion (his Piano Sonata No. 4) yields few results to clarify the issue.\textsuperscript{12} Research on Scriabin in general is scarce, and research on the relationships between his poetry and music even more so. In “Scriabin and Russian Symbolism,” Matlaw writes about Scriabin in relation to the symbolist movement but discusses only the poetry. In contrast, Smith analyzes the Piano Sonata No. 4 in “Erotic Discourse in Scriabin’s Fourth Sonata” by focusing instead on erotic symbolism within the music, with only cursory references to the work’s poetic subtext.\textsuperscript{13} Finally, Smith also devotes a large part of his book \textit{Skryabin, Philosophy, and the Music of Desire} to the \textit{Ecstasy} works, citing the poem at length but lamenting “the gaping chasm between poem and music, which has not, to

\textsuperscript{11} The tone poem is a musical genre which differentiated itself from the standard sonata and symphony by narrativizing those previously abstract forms.
\textsuperscript{12} Scriabin’s Piano Sonata No. 4 (1903), his only other musical-poetic fusion besides \textit{Le Poème de l’extase}, marks the transition from his romantic early period to his more modernist and mystical middle period.
\textsuperscript{13} Smith, “Erotic Discourse in Scriabin’s Fourth Sonata.”
date, been bridged as one might hope.” In fact, no scholar has yet succeeded in mapping the corresponding parts of the two works onto each other, or even in proposing a comprehensive method for doing so. In attempting to fill this gap, this paper argues that by exploring the parallel evocations of the “Eternal Feminine,” the “Vertiginous Dance,” and the “Divine Summons,” the most pervasive and narratively significant symbols that recur throughout the piece, as well as the underlying sonata form structure of both works, it becomes possible to determine the links between poem and piece.

2. Scriabin’s Philosophy

Scriabin was a deeply spiritual man who firmly believed in mysticism and the supernatural realm. There were many influences on his beliefs—primarily German idealism, Russian Symbolism, and Theosophy—although as one scholar notes, “it is important to distinguish between a relationship of influence and one of engagement.” She asserts that “Scriabin used his sources to confirm ideas he already held,” and he often misunderstood (or, perhaps more accurately, misconstrued) others’ concepts so that they could better conform to his philosophy. Nonetheless, an understanding of these philosophical and religious systems and their relation to Scriabin’s own beliefs is key to understanding his music. The Ecstasy works in particular depict a major event in Scriabin’s philosophical system—the birth of the universe—which can only be fully understood when one comprehends the worldview that shaped the works.

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14 Smith, Skryabin, Philosophy, and the Music of Desire, 98.
15 For reference, this paper will cite both the measure numbers or rehearsal marks in the score as well as timestamps for the 2001 recording of the Mariinsky Orchestra conducted by Gergiev (Scriabin) in order to accommodate readers who do not read music.
16 Gawboy, 96.
17 Ibid.
According to his close friend Leonid Sabaneev, Scriabin was “a child of his epoch, his century, and his milieu […] particularly characteristic of his milieu, he especially brightly reflected its ideology.” He was profoundly influenced by the German idealist concept of the noumenal realm. The noumenal realm is a conception of true reality, or as the philosophers Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer called it, the “thing-in-itself.” According to Kant, the founder of German idealism:

Space and time are merely formal features of how we perceive objects, not things in themselves that exist independently of us. […] Objects in space and time are said to be “appearances,” and he argues that we know nothing of substance about the things in themselves of which they are appearance.

As Schopenhauer summarizes, this means that what humanity perceives is not true reality, that the senses in some way warp the world into an image that the mind is more capable of understanding. This conclusion leads to the construction of two realms: the phenomenal, which is all that can be perceived by human beings, and the noumenal, which is the true reality that one cannot even imagine. Friedrich Nietzsche later continued this line of thinking and asserted that the one method of interacting with the noumenal realm was through music, specifically in moments when the music is so sublimely overpowering that it overwhelms the listener. The power of the sublime in music to transport the listener to another realm became a central concept for Scriabin, most strongly reflected in his conception of the Mysterium, but relevant to the vast majority of his works, including Le Poème de l’extase.

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18 Скрябин был сыном своей эпохи, своего века и своей среды […] он особенно характерен для среды, особенно ярко отражал ее идеологию. Sabaneev, 6.
19 Gawboy, 51.
20 Goldman, 207.
21 Stang.
22 Schopenhauer, 3.
23 Higgins, 667–668.
Scriabin’s interest in German idealism was quite compatible with his interest in the Russian Symbolist movement, and the symbolist who most strongly appealed to Scriabin was his close friend Vyacheslav Ivanov. Ivanov considered symbols to be “signs of another reality,” a reality which bears a striking resemblance to the noumenal realm. He believed that his brand of symbolism, “its alchemical enigma, its theurgical attempt at religious art, is the affirmation, cognition, and revelation in reality of another, more real reality.” There is a clear relationship between Ivanov’s conception of a reality that is more real than what one can perceive and the German idealist concept of the noumenal realm.

Although Nietzsche and Ivanov approached this issue from varying angles and offered differing methods of crossing over into this realm (music on the one hand, symbols on the other), Scriabin saw the similarities between them and created his own fusion of these ideas. The ability of symbols to pierce through the barrier to the noumenal realm was a major influence on Scriabin infusing his music with symbolism:

There is a connecting link between Scriabin’s mystical intent and his compositions. Scriabin left clues to the meaning of his works in the unorthodox terms of expression that appear in his scores. [...] Scriabin repeatedly conjoined certain types of expressive language with specific musical gestures, thus creating a body of symbols consistent throughout these late works.

Le Poème de l’extase sits on the border between Scriabin’s middle and late periods, but Garcia claims that this body of symbols is recurrent throughout all of Scriabin’s stylistic periods:

It is the constant reiteration that secures a symbolic meaning, for, in this way, a symbol becomes intelligible. It appears that Scriabin intended to imbue his compositions with symbolic material, crafted his musical gestures as such, and led us to their meaning by attaching verbal messages to them.

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24 Ivanov quoted in Gawboy, 60.
25 Ivanov, 28.
26 Garcia, 276–277.
Finally, he attempted to guarantee their comprehension by repeated use within a large body of compositions.\textsuperscript{27}

German idealism provided the backbone of Scriabin’s conception of the dual realms of existence, while the Russian Symbolist movement inspired him to utilize symbolism in his music in order to imbue his works with the sublime, transcendent power that he desired.

The final influence on Scriabin’s philosophy was Theosophy, which took these concepts and worked them into a definite system of human evolution. Theosophy was an esoteric religious movement founded by Madame Helena Blavatsky, who extensively described her ideas in the book \textit{The Secret Doctrine}.\textsuperscript{28} In the two volumes of \textit{The Secret Doctrine}, \textit{Cosmogenesis} and \textit{Anthrogenesis}, Blavatsky asserts that all world religions spring from one original truth.\textsuperscript{29} Scriabin’s brother-in-law Boris de Schloezer claims that in 1906 (shortly before the writing of the poem \textit{Ecstasy}) Scriabin became suddenly fascinated by this religion, “when a friend told him that his vision of Mysterium, of the union of humanity with divinity and the return of the world to oneness, had much in common with theosophy.”\textsuperscript{30} This fascination was due to a major similarity between Blavatsky’s cosmogony and Scriabin’s vision of the \textit{Mysterium}. Blavatsky claims that the destiny of the human race is to progress through seven stages of evolution, beginning as purely ephemeral spirits before becoming actual material beings in stages 3–5.\textsuperscript{31} The ascension from stage five to six will cause humanity to cast aside its mortal, material form and become spirits once again, only now far more enlightened due to its journey, while the final transcendence unifies it

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 287. Italics in original.
\textsuperscript{28} Gawboy, 71.
\textsuperscript{29} Blavatsky, viii.
\textsuperscript{30} de Schloezer, 66–67.
\textsuperscript{31} Gawboy, 82–83. For reference, Blavatsky places the modern human race in stage 5, meaning that human beings have material form and highly developed spiritual consciousness, but still must undergo further evolution.
into one consciousness.\textsuperscript{32} This conception codified Scriabin’s own belief about the eventual transcendence of humanity, giving him a clearly delineated evolutionary model in which his eventual masterwork could operate.

Scriabin fused these three philosophical systems in order to create his own idiosyncratic philosophy that divided the world into material and spiritual realms (German idealism), gave music and symbols the power to cross between these realms (German idealism and Russian Symbolism), and proclaimed that eventually humanity would be reunited with the spiritual realm during a moment of overpowering artistic sublimity (Theosophy). These are the core concepts that he expresses through his music and poetry, with each work forming “a link in a chain, or a brick in a wall” of one overarching plan of human transcendence.\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ecstasy} and \textit{Le Poème de l’extase} depict the very beginning of Scriabin’s cosmogony—the birth of the universe.

\textbf{3. Le Poème de l’extase and Ecstasy Meet}

\textit{Le Poème de l’extase} and the poem \textit{Ecstasy} represent Scriabin’s philosophy through their depiction of a Spirit that exists in “a magical world / of heavenly forms and feelings.”\textsuperscript{34} Through incredible strife that leads to moments of overpowering ecstasy, the Spirit creates a universe of “complex unity” that finally cries out “I AM.”\textsuperscript{35} Both the poem and the piece express this narrative through parallel evocations of symbols from Scriabin’s musical-symbolic system, the most prevalent being the Eternal Feminine, the Vertiginous Dance, and the Divine Summons.

\textit{The Eternal Feminine}

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{33} Garcia, 287.
\textsuperscript{34} Мир волшебный / Дивных образов и чувст. Bowers, 3.
\textsuperscript{35} Сложное единое… Я ЕСМЬ. Ibid., 7.
In tying together Scriabin’s *Ecstasy* works, there is no symbol more central than the Eternal Feminine. In the musical-symbolic system elucidated by Garcia, this symbol refers to “Scriabin’s preoccupation with erotic themes,” and comprises both musically standard expressions of eroticism as well as methods unique to Scriabin. Passages that melodically evoke the Eternal Feminine “are lyrical, with a yearning quality engendered by the initiating semitone, upward reaching melody, and intense chromaticism.” The chromaticism that she mentions is prevalent in several of the melodic themes in *Le Poème de l’extase*, and is a well-established method of evoking seduction, eroticism, and femininity in music. Scriabin’s unique means of expressing desire was an expansion of Wagner’s harmonic language. Musical harmonies are generally categorized as either stable or unstable. Stable harmonies lack dissonance, allowing a listener to hear such a harmony for an extended period comfortably. Unstable harmonies, in contrast, are filled with tension and naturally “want” to resolve into a stable harmony in order to relieve this tension. Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* is famous “for its expression of erotic longing,” achieved through extreme elongation of unstable harmonies, causing the listener to desperately desire a resolution into stability. In *Le Poème de l’extase*, Scriabin’s harmonic language takes this concept even further, as “the piece never seems to come to any temporary point of stability

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36 Scriabin’s use of the term “Eternal Feminine” in order to index eroticism is problematic as it essentializes femininity as inherently sexual. Although Scriabin did not invent this terminology, his use of it reflects antiquated beliefs about gender. Problematic sexism notwithstanding, the “Eternal Feminine” is an extremely important symbol in Scriabin’s works.
37 Garcia, 281.
38 Ibid. “Semitone” refers to the smallest interval between two pitches within the scale used in Western music. “Chromaticism” refers to the borrowing of pitches from outside of the present key, a practice frequently accomplished by moving in semitones.
39 McClary, 16.
40 Garcia, 281.
41 Ibid.
within any clearly defined key areas [...] the individual themes and sections of the piece are never heard as points of rest, but always as part of a continuous drive towards the final cadence.”\textsuperscript{42} This tension continues right to the end of the piece: “not until the final chord does \textit{Le Poème de l’extase} offer a completed and fully resolved motion [...] in any key.”\textsuperscript{43} As the title \textit{Ecstasy} suggests, evocations of eroticism exist throughout both works, and their placement allows for the tying together of many passages of the poem and piece.

The Eternal Feminine is of paramount importance in the \textit{Ecstasy} works from the opening notes and stanzas, as can be observed in a small but significant example. After four lines that introduce the protagonist, the Spirit, the second stanza of the poem follows its flight. There “Emerges a magical world / Of heavenly forms and feelings,” as the Spirit “Surrenders to the bliss of love” and “dwells in languor.”\textsuperscript{44} In the piece, the opening harmonies are highly unstable, indexing the Eternal Feminine, but then move to a semi-stable chord.\textsuperscript{45} The harmonic transportation from high instability to a place of relative calm feels like a movement to a new location, the “magical world,” and the sudden decrease in tension allows the Spirit to “dwell in languor.”\textsuperscript{46} Shortly after this initial expression of the Eternal Feminine, the symbol is repeated in both the poem and the music. This is the first time that the poem becomes explicitly erotic:

Дух играющий,
Дух ласкающий,
Дух, надеждою радость зовущий,
Отдается блаженству любви.

\textsuperscript{42} Morris, 282–283.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 282.
\textsuperscript{44} Возникает мир волшебный / Дивных образов и чувств; Отдается блаженству любви; Он томленьем пребывает. Bowers, 3. Mm. 5–12, 00:12–00:35.
\textsuperscript{45} Resolution is from a chord made up of D-flat, E-flat, F, and G (a variant on the highly unstable French augmented sixth chord) to a C\textsuperscript{6} (a first inversion triad, not necessarily unstable but not stable either).
\textsuperscript{46} Bowers, 3.
At the same time that the poem first becomes openly sexual, the music expresses the Eternal Feminine through tense harmonies and the first occasion of melodic eroticism. The harmonies in this passage are dominant-quality harmonies; “dominant” refers to harmonies based upon the fifth note of a scale, which are the chords within a key that produce the strongest drive back to stability. However, these are not “normal” dominant chords, but instead contain significant chromatic alterations that destabilize them. The melodic eroticism appears in the new theme introduced by the clarinet that is then passed between various instruments, a seductive line that contains four distinct sections that each index separate aspects of the Eternal Feminine. It begins with a yearning upward leap before sliding down in a slippery chromatic descent, then playfully reverses direction in a serpentine chromatic twist back upwards before releasing with a leap up to a sigh on the leading tone. Here Scriabin dramatically embellishes the previous expressions of eroticism in both works, using explicitly erotic words in the poem at the same time that the music conveys desire. These first two occurrences of the Eternal Feminine match not only in terms of their relative placement in the two works, but also in how powerfully they express the symbol. One could not point to this second passage in the poem and claim that it ties to the beginning of the music because it is too overt to belong with the milder eroticism of the introduction. This proves that in tying

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47 Spirit playing, / Spirit caressing, / Spirit calling hope of joy / Surrenders to the bliss of love / Amid the flowers of its creation, / It lingers with a kiss / Over a whole world of titillation / Summons it to ecstasy. Ibid.

48 Mm. 18–38, 00:50–2:00. Harmonies are V\(^9\) and V\(^{#5,9}\), which are highly dissonant extended dominant chords.

49 Mm. 18–21, 00:50–1:05 in clarinets. The “leading tone” is the least stable pitch of a scale, one which provides a strong desire for resolution to the tonic (home note).
together the *Ecstasy* works, it is not only the specific symbol being evoked that matters, but also the strength of its expression.

*Vertiginous Dance*

Scriabin’s symbol of the Vertiginous Dance was inspired by an ancient “Dionysian cult ritual” consisting of “the achievement of ecstasy through intoxicating spinning dances,” precipitating “the dancer’s collapse in exhaustion and an enhanced susceptibility to divine influence.”

The Vertiginous Dance depicts the end result of the overpowering desire of the Eternal Feminine; it is the peak of ecstasy that Scriabin desperately craved and that he believed would cause a transcendent experience. In his poem, Scriabin evokes this symbol through the literal depiction of twirling dances, but also through passages marked by struggle and strife. Musically, it is demarcated by a sudden transition into “square meters of 2/8 or 2/4, [involving] straightforward blocked chords in short phrase units of two and four measures.”

Scriabin also accompanies these passages with performance comments such as “vertiginoso con furia,” “ecstatico,” “imperioso,” and “en delire,” which make their connection to this symbol abundantly clear.

The Vertiginous Dance is highly significant throughout the *Ecstasy* works while also confirming that symbolic ties between the poem and piece are dependent on the strength of the expression of a symbol.

The delirium of the Vertiginous Dance appears in two contrasting forms in the beginning of the piece. The first is extremely brief, bookended by the two expressions of the Eternal Feminine

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51 Ibid, 286. The meters 2/8 and 2/4 are divisions of beats into groups of two that place strong emphasis on beat one and weak emphasis on beat two. This creates a much steadier rhythmic pulse than Scriabin’s usual flowing rhythms.
52 “Vertiginous, with fury,” “ecstatic,” “imperious,” “in delirium.”
discussed earlier. The poem has thus far been relatively calm and peaceful, but suddenly “Trembling presentiments / Of dark rhythm / Break rudely into / This enchanted world.”

However, this moment lasts “only for an instant,” and the poem quickly returns to its languorous mood. The matching musical expression of this symbol appears in the trumpet’s melody marked “imperioso.” Amidst the somewhat sedate pace that has thus far prevailed, this assertive theme is shockingly forceful as it enters on one of the highest and most strident pitches a trumpet can play. As the trumpet threatens to overpower the rest of the orchestra, it suddenly breaks off into a descending and diminishing line, placated for now, disappearing just as quickly as the “dark rhythm” of the poem. This brief intrusion into the “magical world” foreshadows later expressions of the chaos of the Vertiginous Dance.

Scriabin has two methods of evoking the Vertiginous Dance in the Ecstasy works, and the next is the passage marked Allegro volando, which takes a far more literal approach to expressing “the achievement of ecstasy through intoxicating spinning dances” that Garcia describes. The poem expresses a wild dance:

Опьяняясь их дыханьем,
Ослепляясь красотой,
Он несется, он резвится,
Он танцует, он кружится
Целой гаммой ощущений
Он истерзан, истомлен.
Он готов уж впасть в забвенье,

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54 Но лишь на миг. Ibid.
55 Mm. 13–18, 00:35–00:51.
56 Ритмы тревожные. Ibid.
57 Garcia, 285. “Allegro volando” is a musical expression marking that means “fast and flying.”
The corresponding passage in the music evokes the Vertiginous Dance through both Scriabin’s normal means of square meter and blocked chords as well as a creative development of a previous melodic theme. The first violin section also participates in word painting by frequently chiming in with a brief circular motive that sounds like spinning. These evocations of the Vertiginous Dance are rather straightforward in Scriabin’s oeuvre, but it is the melody that brings the most interesting symbolic associations during this Allegro volando passage. It fits into “the short phrase units of two and four measures” that Garcia describes, but as opposed to being a completely new theme, “the clarinet melody established at the beginning of the first Lento, m. 19 […] undergoes a striking metamorphosis in the Allegro volando beginning at m.39.” This tying of eroticism to the Vertiginous Dance adds a new dimension to the symbol that is not expressed in this section of the poem, but reveals itself in a later repetition of the same passage of music that ties to similar but eroticized lines in the poem: “with this increasing rhythm / Beats the pulse of stronger life! / O my world, my life, / My blossoming, my ecstasy!” All of these aspects coalesce to make this passage an essentially perfect incidence of the Vertiginous Dance, as it fits all of Garcia’s musical requirements of square meter, blocked chords, and short phrase units, contains word painting to match the text, and even indexes the eroticism (and by extension, ecstasy) that these dances evoke.

58 Intoxicating [creation] with beauty / It is transported, it tiptoes, / Dances and whirls; / With a whole range of sensations / It is tormented, wearied. / Ready to sink into oblivion / But again… Bowers, 4.
59 “Word painting” refers to music matching the meaning of the words (usually lyrics) that it accompanies, for example, stopping abruptly when a singer exclaims “and now I must stop.”
60 Garcia, 285; Morris, 271. The clarinet melody at the Lento, m. 19 is the melody from the second erotic passage. The Allegro volando at m. 39 is this particular incidence of the Vertiginous Dance.
61 Этим ритмом учащенным / Бейся жизни пульс сильней! / О мой мир, моя жизнь, / Мой расцвет, мой экстаз! Bowers, 5.
Divine Summons

_Le Poème de l’extase_ contains passages with widely varying emotional content, and all of the transitions into the stormier moments are marked by the same musical motive. This motive is represented by Scriabin’s symbol of the Divine Summons, which Garcia describes as “Scriabin’s most prevalent motive, [appearing] as early as the Fourth Sonata (1903).” Musically, the fanfare motive is quite recognizeable, as fanfares are common throughout classical music, normally signifying a call to action or the arrival of a hero. Specifically for Scriabin, the fanfare “suggests a summons of a supernatural, powerful, or otherwise mysterious origin.” In terms of exact musical structure, “the motive is typically a gesture of one to three short notes anacrusic to a sustained tone. Frequently, the fanfare is in reverse dotted rhythm.” Across his œuvre, Scriabin often uses the Divine Summons at “structurally significant points” in order to express a change in direction for the subject. It is a symbol of sudden transition through divine calling.

In _Le Poème de l’extase_, the Divine Summons takes the form of the horn motive that signals every transition from a generally positive mood to a disturbed and stormy affect. This symbol first appears following the second musical evocation of the Vertiginous Dance, heralding the arrival of the _imperioso_ theme in its entirety. After the Spirit is “wearied. / Ready to sink into oblivion” because of its wild dance (the weariness is represented by an extended passage of calm), the Divine Summons forcefully intrudes, suddenly causing the affect to become stormy and disturbed in order

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62 Garcia, 278.
63 Ibid., 279.
64 Ibid. “Anacrusic” means that the notes enter before the beat, leading into a strong sustained pitch on the beat. “Reverse dotted rhythm” refers to a rhythmic subdivision of two notes in which the first note is sustained for a quarter of a beat and the second plays for the remaining three quarters.
65 Ibid.
66 Mm. 95–96, 03:25–03:29
to introduce the chaos of the *imperioso* of the Vertiginous Dance. This sudden and dramatic interruption has a similarly abrupt transition in the poem as it suddenly moves from the joyous and erotic version of the Vertiginous Dance to a moment of nightmarish confusion:

Из недр таинственных
Духа смятенного
Грозной волной
Бурно вздымаются
Ужасов диких
Толпа безобразная;
Все поглотить она угрожает.

Other such instances of the Divine Summons in the music correspond to similarly sudden transitions within the poem. These include the variation on the motive at 07:27, which correlates to the passage “But what darkens / The glorious moment?,” and at 13:39, which corresponds to “The universe resounds: / Something else! / The new!” In the long-winded poetry of Ecstasy it becomes easy to lose track of the relative placement of events in poem and piece, especially because there is no direct correspondence between number of lines of the poem and number of measures in the music. For example, the four lines “trembling presentiments / Of dark rhythm / break rudely into / this enchanted world” correspond to approximately fifteen seconds of music, whereas the eight-line passage beginning with “but again… / from mysterious wombs” is only twice as long in the poem but corresponds to four times as much music. It is for this reason that

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68 From mysterious wombs / The spirit confused / A formless host / Of savage terrors / Rises stormily / In menacing waves; / It threatens / All to submerge. Ibid.
69 Но чем омрачен / Этот радостный миг?; Огласилась вселенная: / Иного! / Нового! Ibid., 4, 6.
70 Предчувствия мрачного / Ритмы тревожные / В мир очарованный / Грубо врываются.; Но снова… / Из недр таинственных. Ibid., 3, 4.
the Divine Summons is such a useful symbol for tying together the works, as its occurrences form landmarks that separate large sections.

4. Sonata Form as an Organizing Principle

*Le Poème de l’extase* and *Ecstasy* correspond to each other not only in many of the surface details, but in their large-scale forms as well. Scriabin structured both of the *Ecstasy* works using a formal principle from music that organizes many of his compositions: the sonata form, which has been “the most important principle of musical form […] from the Classical period well into the 20th century.”

Sonata form is fundamentally ternary, consisting of an exposition, which presents the main melodic material for the piece, a development, which plays with this material in various keys in order to provide contrast and a desire for the piece to return to the original key, and a recapitulation, which returns the themes to the home key in order to provide closure. During the Classical era, sonata form was mostly used for music that did not contain an explicit narrative, though there are a handful of notable exceptions, such as Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 3* (1803).

During the Romantic era, composers such as Franz Liszt began writing pieces that told stories with general plot arcs that followed sonata form. An example would be a narrative describing a journey where the protagonist begins in a safe place, ventures outside and encounters various difficulties, and finally returns home safely. The exposition establishes the home key, and the tumult of the development creates tension that builds to a peak before finally resolving into the recapitulation, which returns the piece to the home key. Sonata form is exceptionally effective at

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72 Ibid.
73 Knapp.
74 Ibid.
creating tension and then releasing it at the ending of a piece, a result that Scriabin uses to powerful effect in both of the *Ecstasy* works.

_*Le Poème de l’extase*_ begins with a clear sonata form exposition that quickly establishes the home key of C, though the unstable harmonies do not give this moment the sense of stability that one would expect from an expository phrase. Scriabin introduces the primary melodic themes in clear succession; they comprise the short motive that opens the piece and the two contrasting forms of the Vertiginous Dance, the chaotic and erotic. As is standard for sonata form, all three of these themes recur in variations throughout the piece. Scriabin shows a preference for the chaotic Vertiginous Dance because one of his goals in this narrative is to express a triumph over chaos.

It might seem natural that _Le Poème de l’extase_ would be organized in sonata form, as Scriabin “used [it] often not only in his keyboard sonatas, but also in large orchestral compositions.” However, Scriabin also used sonata form for the basic structure of _Ecstasy_. As is common in sonata form expositions, the opening lines form a recurrent motif that Scriabin develops throughout the poem:

Дух,
Жаждой жизни окрыленный,
Увлекается в полет
На высоты отрицанья.
Там в лучах его мечты
Возникает мир волшебный
Дивных образов и чувств.
Дух играющий,
Дух желающий,
Дух, мечтою все созидающий.

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75 Blachnio, 11.
76 Spirit, / Winged with the thirst for life, / Is drawn into flight / On the summits of negation. / There, under the rays of its dream, / Emerges a magical world / Of heavenly forms and feelings / Spirit playing, / Spirit desiring. / Spirit creating all with a dream. Bowers, 3.
The many and varied repetitions of this phrase throughout the piece tend to base themselves on two separate parts of the motif. The first and most commonly used by Scriabin is the opening invocation of the “Spirit”; each time it reappears, it signals a return to this motif and the melody of the opening. The other element that Scriabin often repeats with variations is the short passage “Spirit playing, / Spirit desiring, / Spirit creating all with a dream.” For example, later in the exposition, the opening stanza reappears slightly modified as “Spirit playing, / Spirit suffering, / Spirit creating grief by doubt,” reflecting the Spirit’s hopeless mood at this point in the poem.77 This grief-stricken motif corresponds to a passage in the music that is a more sedate and morose variation on the opening material.78 Such variation on a motif is commonplace in sonata form.

The development section of Le Poème de l’extase is not entirely traditional; it begins with the chaotic Vertiginous Dance theme rather than the first theme heard in the piece.79 However, such irregularities do occur within sonata form. The disturbing music in the beginning of the development begins an extended passage depicting stormy conflict; this formerly brief theme has now become a major force within the music. The poem depicts a similarly chaotic mood, though in a twist of irony its sonata form is slightly more traditional than that of the piece as it invokes the initial motif rather than a later one:

Дух, отдается борьбе с опьяненьем
Он весь упоенье,
Весь наслажденье
Этой игрой
Свободной, божественной,
Этой любовью-борьбой.80

77 Дух играющий, / Дух страдающий, / Дух, сомнением скорбь создающий. Ibid., 4.
79 Development begins at measure 181, 6:47.
80 Spirit, / Forgetting the beloved goal, / Drunkenly yields the struggle. / All enraptured, / Fully delighted / With free / Godlike play / The struggle of love. Ibid., 4.
It is the repeated references to “struggle” and “aimlessness” that mark this as the beginning of the development, which is always the section most associated with tumult. Although the two works use different motifs to begin their development, they still find correspondence in the general effect as well as the fact that they both express a departure from home.

The recapitulation in *Le Poème de l’extase* brings a decisive conclusion to the chaotic development and a return to the Eternal Feminine theme from the exposition.\(^8^1\) The trumpet comes to the forefront with an overpowering and joyous cry on two of its most piercing notes before breaking off and sliding downwards. This eases the tension and allows the Eternal Feminine theme to reenter, peaceful and relatively stable. In the poem, this moment appears as an expression of triumph that evokes the “Spirit playing” motif with added erotic connections, matching the series of events in the music:

Снова победа, опять опьянение
[…]
О мой мир, моя жизнь,
Мой расцвет, мой экстаз!;
[…]
Дух играющий,
Дух порхающий
Вечным стремленьем
Экстаз создающий.\(^8^2\)

This joyous exclamation not only matches the expected joyful arrival at the recapitulation, but also presents yet another version the “Spirit playing” motif, confirming its status as a variation on the primary theme of the piece.\(^8^3\)

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\(^8^1\) Transition is at mm. 295–313, 10:10–10:40.

\(^8^2\) Again victory, again intoxication […] O my world, my life, / My blossoming, my ecstasy! […] Spirit playing / Spirit fluttering / By its enduring longing / Creating Ecstasy. Ibid., 5.

\(^8^3\) Дух играющий. Ibid.
The only remaining structural point is the finale, which is also a powerful demonstration of the underlying sonata form of the Ecstasy works. Both Le Poème de l’extase and Ecstasy build towards an explosive finale, a depiction of the creation of the universe. This takes the form of the optional fourth part of sonata form, the coda, which composers frequently employ when they want a sonata to extend beyond the recapitulation, often for the purpose of placing the largest explosion of energy at the finale. There is no specific structure to a coda; it is simply new material, sometimes based upon previous passages in a piece, that serves to draw out the ending. Le Poème de l’extase features a coda that converts the chaotic Vertiginous Dance theme into a thundering celebration.

Throughout the entire piece, Scriabin builds tension through unstable harmonies that never resolve properly, working in tandem with the tension-building properties of sonata form in order to generate an even more powerful drive towards resolution. In the poem, he uses the structure of sonata form in order to craft conflict and eventual joyous unification. After all of the unresolved harmonic tension and the chaos of “Godlike play,” Le Poème de l’extase ends on a most satisfying resolution: all of the tension resolves in the coda into a thundering C Major triad—the natural, expected harmonic resolution anticipated since the beginning of the piece. The result is an overwhelming and powerful moment, made all the stronger by the tension produced by the underlying form. The finale of the poem is similarly overpowering:

Пожаром всеобщим
Объята вселенная.
Дух на вершине бытия.
И чувствует он
Силы божественной,
Воли свободной
Прилив бесконечный.
Он весь дерзновение
[…]

This triumphant end carries with it all of the momentum that the works have built up by this point; both poem and piece follow the same formal principle in order to achieve this goal.

5. Conclusion

Scriabin’s philosophical system led him to believe in a spiritual realm and to dream of reuniting humankind with this “magical world.” He likewise firmly believed in the power of art, especially music, to enact such a transcendent experience. These two beliefs led Scriabin to write music that is inseparable from his ideas and that crafts stories based upon these ideas. Without understanding the core philosophy underpinning his works, their narratives become indecipherable. In order to better evoke his ideals through music, he developed a system of symbols that relate to erotic desire as seen in the Eternal Feminine, ritual acts such as the Vertiginous Dance, and supernatural concepts such as the Divine Summons. Reading Scriabin’s works through the lens of this symbolic language provides a far more detailed and profound understanding of their meaning. Additionally, Scriabin made the choice to structure both *Le Poème de l’extase* and *Ecstasy* according to the principles of sonata form, thus organizing the major events in both works in a similar manner.

A complete account of the ties between *Ecstasy* and *Le Poème de l’extase* is far beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this essay proposes that such a project could be undertaken utilizing Scriabin’s symbolic language, as well as by examining the underlying sonata form in both the

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85 The universe / Is embraced in flames / Spirit at the summit of its being / Feels / Endless tides / Of divine power […] And thus the universe resounds / With joyful cry / I AM! Ibid., 7.
86 Мир волшебный. Ibid., 3.
poem and the piece. This paper focuses on the three predominant symbols from Scriabin’s musical-symbolic language, but the remaining three, the motive of flight, the motive of light, and the mystic chord, could also provide a fruitful means for analyzing the works together. The “gaping chasm” that has thus far separated Le Poème de l’extase and Ecstasy may now be bridged, as this set of symbols has been the missing piece required to understand the relationship between the two works.
Works Cited


