

## ABSTRACT

**Title of Dissertation:** THE COMPLETE PRELUDES OF ALEXANDER  
SCRIABIN: THE EVOLUTION OF HIS  
REVOLUTIONARY COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

Daniel Pereira, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2013

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During the second half of the nineteenth century, a series of remarkable advances in musical composition emerged in the works of such innovative spirits as Franz Liszt, Hector Berlioz and Richard Wagner. Their pioneering works exerted an extraordinary impact on the music of the subsequent generation of composers—of disparate nationalities—who were active at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Including most notably Claude-Achille Debussy, Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, and Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin. These important musical figures, each one leaving an indelible and formative imprint on late-nineteenth century Romantic style, together launched the modern era in music.

Scriabin stands alone as a transcendental visionary: His music, initiated in the fashion of Chopin and Liszt, wanders through the realms of Debussy and Wagner, and, ultimately abandoning late Romantic tradition, unlocks the heretofore unforeseen power of atonality, bitonality, polyrhythms and key-signature free compositions. Arguably,

Scriabin's compositions count among the most innovative, idiosyncratic and bewitching of all time.

The development of Scriabin's groundbreaking compositional style is best understood by means of his piano works, which comprise the majority of his *oeuvre*. Beyond the larger works—his twelve sonatas, a concerto and a fantasy—Scriabin's piano explorations are also represented by miniature gems: The mazurkas, impromptus, waltzes, poems, a polonaise, études, nocturnes, *morceaux* and, in particular, the preludes. Scriabin's 90 preludes for piano, arranged in several opus numbers, richly exemplify the striking evolution of his ingenious music, his idiosyncratic philosophy and his provocative personality.

**THE COMPLETE PRELUDES OF ALEXANDER SCRIBIN:  
THE EVOLUTION OF HIS REVOLUTIONARY COMPOSITIONAL STYLE**

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts  
2013

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My teacher, Dr. Mikhail Volchok, for his continuous guidance and support,

Dr. Jan E. Holly, for her wise editing and for her friendship,

Donald Manildi, for sharing his incredible knowledge,

Max Brown, for his friendship and many wonderful moments at IPAM

Humbert Lucarelli, for his unique friendship,

Fr. Thomas R. Mitchell, for his spiritual guidance and constant friendship,

Jeannette Oliver, for her friendship,

Dr. Carlos Cesar Rodriguez, for his friendship and insights,

The members of the Resurrection of Our Lord Church Choir, for being my family and friends,

Zeny, Erlinda and Rosemary, for feeding me countless times,

Bill Sturgis, for opening his house at very special moments and for his musical expertise,

Julia Peczkowski, for being my “assistant”,

Daniel and Ann Battle, for their wonderful friendship,

Nuria Valles, for her constant support from the other side of the world,

My mother Carmen Rosa and my brothers Eduardo, Rosendo, David and Javier, forever present.

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## THE COMPLETE PRELUDES

The concept of writing preludes for keyboard is a longstanding tradition in music. Long before Scriabin's time, such composers as Johann Sebastian Bach, Stephen Heller, Henri Herz, and Frederic Chopin had already left to posterity a vast repertory of music for this singular genre.

The 90 preludes that Scriabin wrote for piano solo comprise a remarkable 42% of his entire piano repertory: eighty-three appear as fifteen pairs or in sets of preludes, and the remaining seven exist within other sets of pieces, which include, for instance, an etude or a nocturne. Each prelude contains a single idea, which is transformed and varied; second themes are typically omitted. The great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy described them as "short as a sparrow's beak." Within just a few bars or pages, Scriabin's preludes capturing a vast array of moods, displayed a rich variety of novelties in piano technique, as well as in harmony and sound conception.

Scriabin often conceived these microscopic jewels in a brief moment of inspiration, during his numerous travels throughout Europe. The influential Russian music publisher and impresario Mitrofan Petrovich Belaiev (1863-1902), who was Scriabin's lifelong friend, regularly demanded of Scriabin new compositions. Perhaps in response to this pressure to produce, Scriabin neglected, in otherwise impeccably written manuscripts, numerous musical details: Occasionally, accidentals are inconsistent; pedal indications are sparse and illegible; metronome markings are sometimes misleading or inaccurate, in which cases the value and the tempo indication do not match, as in Prelude Op. 31, no. 3. In this case, the tempo marking is Presto; however, Scriabin gave the

quarter note a 112-metronome value, which would be quite slow. In my opinion, it is quite obvious that Scriabin intended the half note = 112.

### **Prelude Op. 2, No. 2 (1889)<sup>1</sup>**

The early *Trois Morceaux*, Op. 2—*Étude*, *Prelude* and *Impromptu à la Mazur*—evoke Scriabin's admiration for Chopin. Composed during his first year at the Moscow Conservatory—which Scriabin entered in 1888, along with Rachmaninov, the B major prelude in this set is the only prelude with no tempo marking.

### **Prelude, Op. 9, No. 1, for the left hand alone (1894)**

The stunning pianism of the renowned virtuoso Josef Lhevinne, vis-à-vis a performance in 1891 of Liszt's *Don Juan Fantasy*, made an indelible impression on Scriabin. In an attempt to imitate Lhevinne's technique—and practicing intensely throughout the following summer—Scriabin severely strained his right hand. Forced thus by circumstance to disengage his right hand from the keyboard, he developed in consequence a peerless left-hand technique that would inform his compositional style for the duration of his career. The Op. 9 pieces, *Prelude* and *Nocturne*, are the first of his works to incorporate his signature—Scriabinesque—pyrotechnics for the left hand.

### **Twenty-Four Preludes, Op. 11 (1888-1896)**

The music of Chopin captured the admiration of Russian audiences, including, of course, Scriabin. In his early explorations with the Polish composer's music, Scriabin, co-opting Chopin's signature genres, likewise wrote nocturnes, impromptus, preludes, waltzes and mazurkas. Later in life, he denied that his music took any inspiration from

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<sup>1</sup> The dates in parentheses after the titles correspond to year of composition.



Chopin. Scriabin's acknowledged habit of sleeping with the score of Chopin's Preludes, Op. 28, under his pillow belies this preposterous claim.

Belaiev, who was one of Scriabin's most important benefactors and a steadfast promoter of his music, asked Scriabin to compose two sets of 24 preludes each, likely inspired by the forty-eight preludes and fugues of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Eventually, Scriabin set about this task, but completed only 47 preludes. Belaiev published the first twenty-four together, as Op. 11; the remaining twenty-three were collected into four discrete publications: Six as Op. 13, five as Op. 15, five as Op. 16 and seven as Op. 17.

Annotations on Scriabin's autograph manuscript show that the Preludes, Op. 11, were written sporadically during several years and in various locales. The arrangement presented in this recital (Preludes 1 through 24) corresponds, not to the chronological order of composition, but rather to a tonal layout of major keys, following the ascending circle of fifths and the corresponding relative minor keys—similar to Chopin's twenty-four Preludes, Op. 28. Prelude No. 4 in e minor, the earliest piece in the set, was written in 1888 in Moscow, when the composer was only sixteen. Scriabin thereafter followed no specific compositional pattern in the composition of the remaining twenty-three. These preludes came to life spontaneously, either at home in Moscow or during one of his several concert tours in Europe. Between 1889 and 1896, he penned them, variously, in Kiev, Dresden, Heidelberg, Witznau, Amsterdam and Paris. Scriabin said of these pieces: "Each prelude is a small composition capable of standing on its own, independently of the others."

**Six Preludes, Op. 13 (1895), Five Preludes, Op. 15 (1895-6), Five Preludes, Op. 16 (1894-5), Seven Preludes, Op. 17 (1895-6)**

In the first three of these prelude collections, Scriabin continued the tonal scheme of Op. 11. The fourth collection, Op. 17, abandons the pattern. Were the scheme to continue, the last prelude of Op. 16, in C sharp, should be followed by a prelude in b flat minor. The first prelude in Op. 17 is instead written in d minor. The dates and places of composition of these preludes are similar to those of Op. 11, rendering stylistic distinctions unnecessary. These pieces share similar musical and pianistic characteristics.

**Four Preludes, Op. 22 (1897)**

In 1897, Scriabin married Vera Ivanovna Isakovich, an accomplished pianist, and began a teaching tenure at Moscow Conservatory that would last for six years. This period in Scriabin's life proved to be unhappy personally and compositionally unproductive. He did not enjoy teaching and had no time to compose; nonetheless, Scriabin managed to compose his first two symphonies, but finished only few works for piano, including the Third Sonata Op. 23 and the 9 Mazurkas Op. 25. Scriabin resigned his position at the Conservatory in 1903.

The Four Preludes, Op. 22, corresponding to the beginning of his Conservatory years, continue superficially to mirror Chopin's manner; nonetheless, certain melodic and harmonic gestures already present in Op. 22 will lead Scriabin into a new style. Such is the case of Prelude no. 1, which ends inconclusively, on the dominant chord.

**Two Preludes, Op. 27 (1900)**

These two preludes, composed during his period of heroic affirmation—which also yielded his first two symphonies—already reveal an advanced harmonic vocabulary. Prelude No.1 in particular, exploits the interval of the fourth, both in melodic lines and

within chords. This first prelude is titled *Patetico*, a term that had already appeared in his Étude, Op. 8, No. 12, and it is the only time he employs it in the Preludes, after having already written 53 of them up to the date. It is indeed filled with anguish and desperation, with massive chords, and a powerful climax.

**Four Preludes, Op. 31 (1903), Four Preludes, Op. 33 (1903), Four Preludes, Op. 35 (1903), Four Preludes, Op. 37 (1903), Four Preludes, Op. 39 (1903)**

After resigning from the Moscow Conservatory in 1903, Scriabin undertook one of the most fruitful and forward-looking compositional periods of his life. In a mere nine months, he penned such works as the Fourth Sonata, Op. 30, The Divine Poem, Op. 43 and numerous études, waltzes and poems. In these sets of preludes, Scriabin exploits the harmonic possibilities presented by the French Sixth chord, which will open for him a new and radical harmonic trajectory. The rhythms gain sharpness; the modulations become increasingly unpredictable, and surprising twists and turns multiply. Such unconventional expressive titles as *Con stravaganza* (with extravagance), *Vagamente* (vague), *Ardito* (daring), *Bellicoso* (war-like), from this time forward, become typical for Scriabin. Only rarely does he hereafter resort to traditional tempo indications.

Prelude, Op. 37, No. 2, represents a pivotal moment in Scriabin's style: The tertian harmonic conception now begins to transmute into chords built of superimposed fourths, and sonorities filled with added tones become commonplace. Many of the remaining preludes will take such harmonic devices to the extreme.

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Scriabin's personal life became increasingly disordered. At this time, he was reeling from the untimely death in 1902 of his dear friend Belaiev, and he was plagued by financial complications. In 1903, he began a clandestine love affair with Tatiana de Schloezer, who was sister to the music critic Boris

de Schloezer, a close friend of Scriabin. In 1904, Scriabin left Vera and their three children for Tatiana.

### **Prelude, Op. 45, No. 3 (1904)**

During this time of personal and artistic transition, Scriabin searched for new harmonic, coloristic and rhythmic resources. The *Trois Morceaux*, Op. 45—*Albumleaf*, *Poème fantasque* and *Prelude*—continue his transformative process. In the prelude, eleventh and thirteenth chords abound, and harmonic resolutions become even more ambiguous, holding the tension until the end of the piece.

### **Four Preludes, Op. 48 (1905), Prelude, Op. 49, No. 2 (1905), Prelude, Op. 51, No. 2 (1906)**

Philosophy and religion had always been a significant part of Scriabin's intellectual life. He was inspired by pantheism, subjectivism, idealism, Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*, solipsism and mystical individualism. In 1905 and 1906, Scriabin's acquaintance with Madame Helena Blavatsky in Brussels, founder of the Theosophical Society (New York City, 1875) would have a profound impact on Scriabin's inner world. The Preludes, Op. 48, unveil a new Scriabinesque perspective on the world: His music, with its broken rhythms and massive dissonant chords, begins to sound unsettled and troubled. The Prelude in particular, from his *Three Pieces*, Op. 49, contains a profusion of eleventh and thirteenth chords that create a pervasive harmonic tension. These harmonic features generate Scriabin's mature harmonic language. The Prelude Op. 51, No. 2, *Lugubre*, is a composition with dark sonorities, chromaticism and a rhythmic writing that defies the  $\frac{3}{4}$  time signature, obscuring the bar lines.

**Prelude, Op. 56, No. 1 (1908), Prelude, Op. 59, No. 2 (1910)**

In the last years of Scriabin's life, his megalomaniacal sentiments became more pronounced, and his philosophical ideas more personal and intricate. His compositions, which have now departed entirely from tonal convention, evolved into ambiguity and atonalism. The Prelude of Op. 59 is the first to omit a key signature and abjure any semblance of tonal conclusion, which had been the pattern up to this point. Chords built in fourths and their transpositions represent the new tonal centers, and rhythms become more irregular and spontaneous.

**Two Preludes, Op. 67 (1912-3), Five Preludes, Op. 74 (1914)**

In these two contrasting preludes, Scriabin's famous Mystic Chord serves as the compositional point of departure. This new Scriabinesque harmonic entity is an aggregate of notes derived from the harmonic overtones series, arranged thus: C, F#, B $\flat$ , E, A and D. The Mystic Chord, already used in the Fifth Sonata and Prometheus: The Poem of Fire, Op. 60, epitomizing Scriabin's late harmonic style, will lay the foundation for most of his late compositions. It forms a connective device between the Preludes, Op. 67 and Op. 74.

Op. 74 is the last set of pieces written by Scriabin, before his premature death in 1915. Continuing with the same new style of composition, their basis is likewise the Mystic Chord, presented in various guises, by means of transposition, inversion, and non-chord tones added to the fundamental chord structure.

## **A Personal Pilgrimage**

My first encounter with the music of Scriabin occurred during my conservatory years in Spain, in 2000, when I studied the Etude in D sharp minor Op. 8, No. 12. Years later, I became immersed in the magnitude of Scriabin's revolutionary efforts, via the recordings of the Russian pianist Vladimir Sofronitzky (1901-1961). The objective of this double compact disc recording is to present a substantial body of his works that illustrate the exceptional metamorphosis of Scriabin's style over the course of approximately twenty-six years.

The impulse to record a compact disc in a live setting originated in my intent to capture the spontaneity of a recital, with its tacit interaction between audience and performer. Scriabin's music requires such special treatment—possible only when rendered live—in order to communicate its message at its most profound and expressive.

This journey has enriched me as a pianist, as a pedagogue and even as a human being. Exploring Scriabin's inner world has forced me to deepen my understanding of the sonorous possibilities of the piano. This repertoire has propelled my pianism beyond anything I believed possible. Scriabin's quest for the unimaginable, the esoteric, and the mysterious is reflected in his music, especially from 1903 forward. The pianistic utterances resulting from those characteristics are unusual and challenging, leading the interpreter to seek equally unconventional solutions.

During the preparation of this project, working on the technical and musical aspects of the preludes, I often found myself wondering: "Is this really possible?" Countless are the instances that led me to ask that question: particularly demanding were the dislocated basses, which require skillful use of pedal and finger legato, mixing

harmonies, therefore creating new sonorities. Pedaling, in fact, was from the beginning a major concern. Scriabin's music calls for a persistent and subtle use of the pedals, particularly the damper. Learning to release the pedal slowly, to exploit the half-pedal or even superficial pedaling, are paramount skills required for conveying the opulence of Scriabin's music. I was repeatedly awestruck by the wonderful sounds created by several harmonies blending together. Long-sustained pedaling affected directly the coordination of the hands, since too many changes of pedal risked disturbing hand coordination on the keyboard.

In the preparation of this project, I consulted the following editions: G. Henle Verlag (Preludes, Op. 11), C.F. Peters (Preludes, Opp. 11, 27, 56 and 74, edited by Günter Philipp), Kalmus (a complete edition of sets of preludes, excluding those preludes that are contained in other sets of pieces) and Dover (Complete Preludes and Etudes, 1973 edition, a reprint of the Complete Preludes and Etudes, published by the State Music Publishers of Moscow, 1946-1953, and edited by Konstantin Igumnov and Yakov Milstein). Because Scriabin was frequently negligent with notation and a poor proofreader of his own work, especially in his younger years, such variety of musical sources was crucial to the verification of accidentals, registration, dynamics, pedaling, tempo markings, phrasing and metronome indications. As his correspondence with Belaiev shows, Scriabin was aware of his incautious mind.

Throughout my journey, I have inched closer to Scriabin—as a composer and as a perhaps flawed human being, but also as an incomparable pianist. Beyond the well-known and credible stereotypes that regard him as eccentric and megalomaniacal, Scriabin revealed himself, through his music, to be profound, subtle, and penetrating. The

pianist Garrick Ohlsson has described the feelings he experiences while performing the music of Scriabin as *intoxicating*. I wholly embrace this sentiment.



## COMPACT DISC TRACKS

### ***Compact Disc number 1***

*Recorded live on March 13, 2013*

*Gildenhorn Recital Hall at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center*

*Recording Engineer: Antonino D'Urzo*

#### **6 Preludes op. 13**

1. Maestoso
2. Allegro
3. Andante
4. Allegro
5. Allegro
6. Presto

#### **5 Preludes op. 15**

1. Andante
2. Vivo
3. Allegro assai
4. Andantino
5. Andante

#### **5 Preludes op. 16**

1. Andante
2. Allegro
3. Andante cantabile
4. Lento
5. Allegretto

#### **7 Preludes op. 17**

1. Allegretto
2. Presto
3. Andante
4. Lento
5. Presto
6. Andante doloroso
7. Allegro assai

#### **4 Preludes op. 22**

1. Andante
2. Andante
3. Allegretto
4. Andantino

#### **2 Preludes op. 27**

1. Patetico
2. Andante

**4 Preludes op. 31**

1. Andante
2. Con stravaganza
3. Presto
4. Lento

**4 Preludes op. 33**

1. [quarter note] = 96
2. Vagamente
3. [quarter note] = 88
4. Ardito, bellicoso

**3 Preludes op. 35**

1. Allegro
2. Elevato
3. Scherzando

**4 Preludes op. 37**

1. Mesto
2. Maestoso, fiero
3. Andante
4. Irato impetuoso

***Compact Disc number 2***

*Recorded live on April 9, 2013*

*Gildenhorn Recital Hall at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center*

*Recording Engineer: Antonino D'Urzo*

**Prelude no. 2, no. 2**

**Prelude op. 9, no. 1: Andante**

**4 Preludes op. 39**

1. Allegro
2. Elevato
3. Languido
4. [quarter note] = 63-66

**Prelude op. 45, no. 3: Andante**

**4 Preludes op. 48**

1. Impetuoso fiero
2. Poetico con delizia
3. Capricciosamente affanato
4. Festivamente

**Prelude op. 49, no. 2: Bruscamente irato**

**Prelude op. 51, no. 2: Lugubre**

**Prelude op. 56, no. 1: Violent, très accentué**

**Prelude op. 59, no. 2: Sauvage, belliqueux**

**2 Preludes op. 67**

1. Andante
2. Presto

**5 Preludes op. 74**

1. Dououreux, déchirant
2. Très lent, contemplative
3. Allegro drammatico
4. Lent, vague, indécis
5. Fier, belliqueux

**24 Preludes op. 11**

1. in C Major (Vivace)
2. in A Minor (Allegretto)
3. in G Major (Vivo)
4. in E Minor (Lento)
5. in D Major (Andante Cantabile)
6. in B Minor (Allegro)
7. in A Major (Allegro Assai)
8. in F-Sharp Minor (Allegro agitato)
9. in E Major (Andantino)
10. in C-Sharp Minor (Andante)
11. in B Major (Allegro assai)
12. in G-Sharp Minor (Andante)
13. in G-Flat Major (Lento)
14. in E-Flat Minor (Presto)
15. in D-Flat Major (Lento)
16. in B-Flat Minor (Misterioso)
17. in A-Flat Minor (Allegretto)
18. in F Minor (Allegro agitato)
19. in E-Flat Major (Affettuoso)
20. in C Minor (Appassionato)
21. in B-Flat Major (Andante)
22. in G Minor (Lento)
23. in F Major (Vivo)
24. in D Minor (Presto)

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