

## Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915): Piano Sonatas Nos. 1, 4 and 8 • Poèmes

Alexander Scriabin was born in Moscow on 6th January 1872 and died there on 27th April 1915. His piano music is at once typically yet paradoxical of a composer who saw himself increasingly as the herald of a new age of human civilisation. A composer who aimed and, in many respects, succeeded in breaking down the basis of tonal harmony as it had been in existence for almost two centuries, yet who adhered to the classical form of the sonata as well as miniatures epitomized by Romantics of the keyboard such as Chopin and Schumann. A composer, too, whose vision became ever more ambitious (hence the *Mysterium* that was envisaged as a seven-day performance – ideally in the Himalayas – and incorporating the gamut of visual and sensual art-forms), yet whose music became increasingly compressed and refracted in line with its tendency to elliptical harmony and oblique tonality. A composer, finally, whose egocentricity often appeared to know no bounds, yet whose compositions seem ever keener to dispense with a sense of “self” – resulting in music whose frequent intangibility is the result of an ego dissolved, as it were, within the realm of sound.

Scriabin’s ten piano sonatas rank among the greatest such cycles, not least because they encompass the extent of his evolution (even more so if one includes the *Sonata-Fantaisie* from 1886 and the *Sonata in E flat minor* abandoned in 1889) from virtuoso to prophet. The *First Piano Sonata* was completed in 1892 at a time of great difficulty: Scriabin having been denied the recognition for his compositions accorded Rachmaninov by the Moscow Conservatoire, and having injured his right arm attempting to emulate the pianism of Joseph Lhevinne. His *cri de cœur* is evident from the outset of the first movement – launched with a passionate theme that finds contrast in a wistful and intricate melody, culminating in a resolute codetta. There follows an

extensive development on both themes which, subdued for much of its length, builds to a powerful climax that leads into an extended reprise, though this time the resolute music heads into a subdued coda that finds only tenuous calm. The second movement is founded on a theme with elements of chorale and hymn, and which opens out eloquently towards the centre before being enfolded in left-hand chords that deny any hint of affirmation. The third movement is a hectic scherzo whose propulsive rhythm is detectable even in the lyrical strains of its trio, before the initial music brings about a climax that is cut off to leave a questioning transition to the fourth movement. Redolent of Chopin, this finale takes the guise of a funeral march whose doleful aura builds to a baleful climax, winding down to a remote central section whose calm provides passing respite from the prevailing gloom. This returns as before, though now intensified by three stabbing final chords.

Completed in 1903, the *Fourth Piano Sonata* confirms how far Scriabin had travelled stylistically in just over a decade. Philosophical speculations had begun to infiltrate his work several years earlier, but here they are integrated into the very fabric of the music – interestingly, his first sonata in a major key. The first movement is essentially prelude in its restrained gestures and unruffled calm, with the underlying melody enmeshed in some of the composer’s most alluring harmonies to date. A sudden breaking of the textural poise provides for a transition into the second movement, almost twice the length of its predecessor and whose combining of elaborate chordal sequences within a rapid, toccata-like motion effectively conceals what is an ingenious take on sonata form, the pithy main motifs being drawn into a process of continual transformation and restatement on the way to an effusive close.

The final five sonatas were written during 1911-13, with the *Eighth Piano Sonata* the last to be finished. While it may lack the defining character of the others, it is the most inclusive in content as well as the most subtle in its breaking down of the boundaries between sonata and variation forms. The piece opens with an elegant rumination on a discreet melodic idea that, as usual in later Scriabin, is inseparable from its gently undulating harmonic accompaniment. Before long, however, the motion has become more animated – repeated chords helping to build a momentum that persists during the course of a more reflective theme, decked out with trills, and which at length provokes an extensive discourse on the motifs heard so far. The sheer range of timbres and textures during this central span can rank among the composer’s most alluring and poetic, but the music finally rises to a forceful climax that once more affords greater animation. A reviewing of earlier ideas – albeit greatly transformed – soon becomes evident as the work moves one last time onto a plateau of intricate activity; the translucent harmonies gradually thinning out on the way to a subdued close.

The variety of miniature Scriabin wrote over his career is considerable. While not the most numerous, the *Poème* is among the most important – not least because it shadows the evolution of his mature idiom and, in doing so, provides a very different take on stylistic means and ends from the sonatas. Taken together, then, these pieces can seem to offer a more intimate and perhaps even more perfect perspective on the composer’s unceasing search for formal and expressive unity.

Of the *Deux Poèmes*, Op. 32 (1903), the first features gentle figuration and delicate arabesques that hover around a tonal centre not confirmed almost until the end. The second projects more forcefully, its theme

embedded within a densely chorded texture that only opens out during the final bars. Of the *Deux Poèmes*, Op. 44 (1904), the first is a sombre rumination whose questioning manner is barely resolved. The second then brings this restlessness up to the surface before finding a relative calm.

*Poème fantasque*, the second of *Trois pièces*, Op. 45 (1904), is a brief study in darting rhythmic gestures and unstable chord formations, while *Poème ailé*, the third of *Quatre morceaux*, Op. 51 (1906), is an equally brief study in fanciful harmonies that resolve quite unexpectedly at the close, and *Poème*, the first of *Deux pièces*, Op. 59 (1910), feels the more stable for its relatively uniform rhythmic motion, though the harmonies can seem even more elusive and resolve even more tardily towards the final cadence.

Of the *Deux Poèmes*, Op. 63 (1912), the first, designated *Masque*, is a delicate chain of harmonies that find resolution through their placing in time rather than cadential means. The second, *Etrangeté*, complements this with its teasing arabesques that touch on unlikely tonal possibilities. Of the *Deux Poèmes*, Op. 69 (1913), the first is among the most fully realised studies in pellucid textures and enticing sonorities that are discreetly brought together at the end. The second is slightly more animated and seems to cover a wider expressive range, not least in its entreating final bars. Of the *Deux Poèmes*, Op. 71 (1914), the first, *Fantastique*, feels expansive despite its brevity, ranging from the despondent to the ecstatic yet without sacrificing any of its underlying poise. The second, *En rêvant*, adopts a more flowing manner, with trills dominating a frequently weightless texture.

Richard Whitehouse



### Alexander Ghindin

The youngest ever laureate of the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1994, Alexander Ghindin has established himself as a pianist of distinction. In 1999 he gained Second Prize in the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels and in 2007 First Prize in the Cleveland International Piano Competition in the United States, with, in consequence, more than fifty concerts. In July 2010 he won the First Prize at the International Piano Competition of Santa Catarina, Brazil. In 1999 Alexander Ghindin joined the Moscow State Philharmonic as soloist, and has performed in numerous countries. In 2006 he was named an Honored Artist of Russia and in the 2010/2011 season was engaged as the Artistic Director of four festivals: in Moscow, in Perm (Russia), in Minsk (Belorussia) and as International Artistic Director of the Swedish Royal Festival in Stockholm. His international career has brought collaboration with leading conductors and orchestras. His fifteen recordings include Rachmaninov's *Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 4* in their original versions with the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra under Vladimir Ashkenazy. He has also appeared on television and in broadcasts in Russia, Germany, Belgium, Japan, France, Luxembourg, Poland, and elsewhere.

[www.alexanderghindin.com](http://www.alexanderghindin.com)



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### Alexander Ghindin

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