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Alexander Scriabin's Structural and Harmonic Conception Revealed in Piano Sonatas No. 3 and 7

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ASPECTS OF THE SONATA GENRE IN SCRIBIN'S PERSPECTIVE

Set between tradition and innovation, Alexander Scriabin brought the most daring novelties of musical language among his contemporaries, in the context of Russian composers' generation from the first half of the 20th century. In the piano field, he approached genres considered to be typically to Chopin's works (etudes, preludes, waltzes, mazurkas, nocturnes), but he has also composed ten sonatas, that reflect all stages of his artistic formation. Since 1892, when he composed his first sonata, until 1913, when he finished his eighth, ninth, and tenth sonatas, Scriabin has been keeping a consistent interest for this genre, bringing new ideas on the structural, harmonic, piano level and inserting pitch structures at the limit between tonal, atonal and modal. In this paper, I have approached two contrasting works (especially from the stylistic point of view), in order to emphasize Scriabin's position at the boundary between tradition and innovation.

The first four sonatas were written in a traditional style, because of the tonal harmony, which is sometimes chromatic or has some insertions of diatonic modalism. A frequently used element is the principle of dominant chords, which establishes a certain order in the harmonic chain, towards a final authentic cadence.

Beginning with Sonata No. 5, the melodic fluency is diluted, up to its dissolution in harmony and instrumental effects. Based on an intensely

chromatic musical language, Scriabin's style had a particular direction, whose main consequence was the harmonic instability. However, it had a different way than Schoenberg and Debussy. Although he had also some tendencies towards atonalism, Scriabin was not interested in organizing his musical system after serial principles and, unlike French composers, he was not concerned with emphasizing melody and linearity (essential in the modal writing), but more with harmonic innovation. Therefore, the horizontal level is often generated by vertical structures.

The following table provides an overview of the general features and elements of musical language found in Scriabin's piano sonatas:

General structure	Two, three, or four movements (No. 1-4) One movement (No. 5-10)
Form	Traditional (three or four movements) Innovative (one or two movements)
Musical system	Tonal-modal (No. 1-4), enclosed harmony, with tendencies towards atonal (No. 5-10)
Dramaturgy	Classical, balanced (No. 1-4) With frequent climaxes, "explosive" (No. 5-10)
Traits	Deeply personal, original, innovative in form, harmony, writing manner, aesthetical concepts

Table 1. General features in Scriabin's piano sonatas.

SONATA NO. 3 IN F# MINOR, OP. 23

Structure of the piece	Four contrasting movements: - <i>Drammatico</i> (F# minor) - <i>Allegretto</i> (Eb major) - <i>Andante</i> (B major) - <i>Presto con fuoco</i> (F# minor)
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Form	Relatively concise and clear: - first movement – sonata form - second movement – simple three-part form - third movement – simple three-part form - fourth movement – sonata form (with reversed recapitulation)
Texture	Harmonic-polyphonic density, in a kindred romantic style with Schumann-Brahms' manner of writing
Harmony	Mostly diatonic, pursuing a clear tonal plane, with dense chromatic expansions
Musical dramaturgy	Of romantic type, built in “waves”, with dynamic contrasts and expressive agogic changes

Table 2. General aspects in Scriabin's piano Sonata No. 3.

First movement – Drammatico

Scriabin proposes in the first movement a typical sonata structure, designed according to the principles of classical tradition (see Table 3).

1) Exposition

First theme	Bridge	Secondary themes		Conclusion
A	(A ₁ , A ₂)	B ₁	B ₂	A
8 mm.	8 + 8	6	8 + 4	8 + 4
F# minor	C# minor	A major	A major	A major, C# minor
<i>Drammatico</i>		<i>Cantabile</i>	<i>A tempo</i>	<i>Tempo I</i>

Table 3. Structure of the first movement in Scriabin's piano Sonata No. 3

2) Development

First stage			Second stage	Third stage	Fourth stage
$\alpha_{v1} + \beta_{v1}$	$\alpha_{v2} + \beta_{v2}$	$\alpha_{v3} + \alpha_{v3'}$	α and β intertwined	$\alpha + \alpha1_{v1}$ $\alpha + \alpha1_{v2}$	β (r.h.) + α (l.h.)
4	4			4 + 4	4 + 4 + 4
C# minor, E major	Eb minor, Gb major	F minor, Db major		Bb minor, A major, G# minor, G major	

3) Recapitulation

A	B	A ₃	Av	Conclusion
8	6	8 + 8	8	8 (+4)
F# minor	F# major	F# major	C# major	F# major

Table 3 (continued). Structure of the first movement in Scriabin's piano Sonata No. 3 (where r.h. means right hand, and l.h. left hand).

On the micro-structural level, this work has a uniform general outlook, based on the circulation of motive segments throughout the work, in different rhythmic and melodic states (variation by reversal, sequencing, dynamic development, harmonic densification).

I have indicated the main motives using Greek letters α and β , each counting 2 mm.

The image contains two musical staves. The left staff shows a piano (p) passage with a melodic line in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand. The right staff is marked 'Drammatico M.M. = 69' and shows a more intense passage with a melodic line in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand, including dynamic markings like 'f' and 'm.s.'.

Ex. 1. Sonata No. 3, first movement, mm. 1-2 (motive α) and mm. 25-6 (β).

The two motives are characterized by distinctive features, differentiating from each other through: rhythm (α – dotted, alternating binary and ternary divisions; β – more fluid, based on rhythmic values such as eighth, quarter, dotted quarter); structure (α is divisible into two cells, while β is unitary, indivisible); character (α – martial, dramatic, unstable, restless, unbalanced due to the oscillation of rhythmic structures; β – meditative, peaceful, unitary, balanced); tempo and expression (α – *drammatico*; β – *cantabile*).

Second movement – *Allegretto*

During the second movement, Scriabin used a complex three-part form, clearly structured with equal phrases, leading to a balanced classical form.

A				B			Av	
A	A ₁	A	Cadential phrase	B	B ₁	B	A	Cadential phrase
8 + 8 mm.	14	8 (+4)	8	8	8 + 8	8 (+2)	8 (+4)	6
E \flat major, B \flat major		E \flat major		A \flat major			E \flat major	

Table 4. Structure of the second movement.

Among the techniques used in this movement, modal oscillation generates the unstable third and sixth, which generates a potential conflict between the bivalent aspects of the two degrees in the scale (III: G – G \flat ; VI: C – C \flat). There are also harmonic sequences, used in different aspects and on different sizes of musical units.

Third movement – *Andante*

Third movement of this sonata is a section of calm and stillness, the moment of balance between the high tension expressed in the previous movements and the poetic meditation of this section. One can observe the emergence of familiar elements, which can be recognized by melodic profiles similar to the musical themes used in the first movement, by the similar rhythmic progression (combining binary pulsation, dotted rhythmic values with ternary elements, such as the triplet rhythm).

Ex. 2. Motive α in the first movement compared to the main motive in the beginning of the third movement.

A	B	A _{v1} A _{v2}	Transition towards the fourth movement
8 + 8 mm.	8 + 8	8 (+3) + 10	8
B major	G# minor	B major	B major, F# minor

Table 5. Structure of the third movement: three-part form plus transition towards the fourth movement.

In this movement, the texture proves a denser texture on the vertical aspect. The syntax is also more complex, because the musical discourse is organized on four levels, giving the impression of a dense symphonism, conceived in a piano version. The prevalent type is the accompanied melody (in which the melodic line is played by the superior voice, the bass has a supportive role and the middle voices are accompanying), with moments of complementary or parallel directions of voices.

From the harmonic point of view, the third movement has a clear construction, with strong leading points during the entire section, despite the many chromatic elements which appear especially in the B and Av areas. In these two sections, one can see the accompaniment realised by the second voice, based on a musical cell composed of four notes, repeated and processed like a *perpetuum mobile* element. The tonal plane is simple, based on relation between B major and its relative scale, G# minor. The transition realises the link between the third and the fourth movements, by indicating *attacca*. One can see the return of the motive from the first movement (as a recall of the main musical idea), but in a different tonal context, in B major.

Fourth movement – *Presto con fuoco*

The fourth movement is conceived as a thematic and stylistic synthesis of the entire sonata. In terms of musical material, the themes of the fourth movement are related to those from the first one, having similar features when analyzing their rhythmic and melodic profile and comparing their character (see Ex. 1 and 3). Obviously, there is a derivation of musical themes based on those exposed in the first movement. Motive α has a strong, martial, incisive character, is written in 3/4 time signature, with dotted rhythm, having ternary insertions (in the first movement, the triplets appear in the melodic line, while in the fourth movement, inside the accompaniment). Motive β has a lyrical, meditative, narrative character, with diatonic intonation, generating a slight ambiguity of the central sound by avoiding a clear stop on the A major tonic, both in the first and fourth movement. Moreover, both themes are in 3/4 time signature, having similar structure at the rhythmic level (in the first measure of both motives, they contain dotted formulas, followed by eighths in the second measure).

Ex. 3. Fourth movement, mm. 1-2 (motive α from theme A) and mm. 37-40 (motive β from theme B).

The stylistic synthesis is created according to the connections with other musical styles, concerning melodic, rhythmic, accompaniment details that are specific to certain composers. The main theme A can be compared to a musical idea similar to Beethoven's style, because of the impetuous expression and the gradual construction of the phrase towards a strong climax and to Chopin's style, because of the typical formulas in large arpeggios used in the accompaniment, the variability of the rhythmic formulas on the left hand, the complementarity between planes and because of the chromatic aspect of the melodic line, that gives a perpetual inner cohesion, a smooth fluid flow.

The structure of the fourth movement combines the principles of two classical forms: sonata and rondo, which could easily lead to the conclusion of a rondo-sonata form, where the middle section C appears as a fragment of great development. Nevertheless, thematic ideas, clearly structured and

conceived in contrast, adding a complex development based on elements of the A theme (varied and transformed through various processing techniques), would rather indicate a sonata form with reversed recapitulation.

1) Exposition

A	Bridge	B	A + conclusion
8 + 8 mm.	8 + 12	8 + 8 + 6	8 + 4
F# minor	F# minor, A major	A major, F# minor	F# minor
<i>Presto con fuoco</i>		<i>Meno mosso</i>	<i>Tempo I</i>

2) Development

1st stage	2nd stage	3rd stage
8 + 8 + 4 + 12	22	12
A major, E major, B major, Gb major		F# major
Chromatic modulation	Imitation in <i>stretto</i>	Harmonical sequences

3) Recapitulation (reversed, amplified)

B	A	Av	Coda	
8 + 8 + 6	8 + 4 + 12	8 + 14	20	14
F# major, D# minor	D# minor, B major, G major, F major	C# major, D major	F# major, G# major, C# major, F# major	F# major, F# minor

Table 6. Structure of the fourth movement.

The harmony in the fourth movement, similar to the first movement, is mostly diatonic, with a clear tonal plane, based on close relations, without unexpected chords, having modulations at four or five fifths. There are also some expansions in the chromatic area, generating dissonances with colourful function. During the development, one can sense and observe moments of higher tension by denser chromatic processes, where one can find some clear tonal issues because of the dominant principle (which requires the resolution

of major chords with minor seventh into new tonics). We might assume that these examples of development and labour inside the musical discourse reveal the true artistic side of Scriabin because, in his later works, harmonic language is based on this type of elements (chromatic processes, surprising harmonic overlaps, major-minor chords, mystic chords, etc.).

In her article about Scriabin's sonatas, Alina Muşat-Popovici states that, in this sonata, Scriabin proves himself to be "a neo-romantic, follower of Chopin and Wagner – exponent of chromatic harmony which leads to the exit from tonal space" (1967: 31).

SONATA NO. 7, OP. 64, WHITE MASS

Composed in 1911, in the same period with Sonata No. 6, Sonata No. 7 has similar structural and stylistic features, more than any other pair of works created in close time intervals. The suggestive subtitle of the work is due to its connection with Sonata No. 6, which Scriabin himself considered a result of the intervention of demonic forces. This is why Scriabin has never played it in any public recital. Then, he began working to another sonata in order to release himself from those dark visions, considering it as a form of exorcism, a spiritual purifying composition. The subtitle *White Mass* suggests the celestial nature of the work, the intention of expressing ecstatic feelings, such as the uplifting sensation of flight. In relation to Sonata No. 9, also named *Black Mass* (composed between 1912 and 1913), there are structural and expressive similarities, given by the general principles of sonata form and by dissonant harmonies built by using minor ninth (which was preferred due to its instability); (see Powell 2001).

Structure of the piece	One movement
Form	Sonata (conceived as a massive form, extended to the level of the entire piece)
Texture	Harmonic- polyphonic, dense, with many overlapping themes and combining motives
Harmony	Hyperchromatic, closed, directed towards atonality, including chords of fourths and fifths, mystic chords composed of six notes, mixed major-minor chords
Musical dramaturgy	Tensed, with breaches inside the musical discourse, violent contrasts on the dynamic and agogic levels, explosive climaxes

Table 7. General aspects in Scriabin's piano Sonata No. 7.

The structure is close to the *sonata-poem*, imposed in the romantic tradition when Franz Liszt composed his Sonata in B minor, but different in terms of interior construction, as the following analysis will show. The form of this sonata is considered by the composer very close to perfection, conceived in a single movement – *Allegro* (which is an agogic indication used by the publisher of the score, as the original indication left by Scriabin in his manuscript was *Prophétique*). It contains the principles of the sonata form, with its three traditional sections (exposition, development and recapitulation).

The main theme of the exposition (mm. 1-16) is configured as a fragmentary musical idea, conspicuous on the harmonic level, having an aggressive and violent sonority, due to the powerful dissonances. It consists of three uneven phrases, which outline a certain inner dramaturgy.

a	Expositive function for musical motives and cells	3 mm.
a ₁	Developing phrase of the initial motives	6 mm.
a ₂	Concluding phrase	7 mm.

Table 8. Structure of the main theme in Scriabin's piano Sonata No. 7.

In the exposure of the first motive (α), one can see the texture organized in three melodic lines and a complex polyrhythmic evolution, which overlaps binary and ternary rhythmic formulas in combinations of high difficulty for pianists. These aspects generate an overview that seems unstable and chaotic, but the unifying element in this segment is the *mystic chord*, rigorously structured, appearing as a succession of notes, where the root is included in measure 2: C – F# – Bb – E – A – Db.

The image shows a musical score for Scriabin's Sonata No. 7, measures 1-2. The score is in 4/4 time and features complex polyrhythmic patterns. Motive alpha is highlighted in green, and its development is shown in red. The score includes dynamic markings like *mp*, *cresc.*, and *f*, and a 'Mystic chord' in measure 2.

Ex. 4. Sonata No. 7, mm. 1-2, motive α .
Mystic chord: C – F# – Bb – E – A – Db.

Motive β , exposed in measure 3, is based on the original chord consisting of $G_b - B_{bb} - D - F$ (generating the following vertical structure of intervals: minor third – augmented third – minor third, from the bottom to the top of the chord). Thus, the so-called mixed major-minor chord results, conceived by Scriabin as a structure of three overlapped thirds. Another principle of Scriabin's writing is the *horizontal process of the vertical*, applied by unfolding in arpeggios the elements of the chord, as Adrian Rațiu has observed: "His modalism is purely harmonic, a consequence on the horizontal level of rigorous vertical organization." (1972: 19).

3m
3+
3m

Motive β
(the previous chord is unfolded in arpeggios)

Ex. 5. Sonata No. 7, mm. 3-4, motive β .

Motives α and β are different on many levels: in the texture (α is exposed on three distinct melodic lines, while β on two crossed lines), according to the analysis of the harmonic structure (α is based on mystic chord, while β is based on the mixed major-minor chord), and considering the inner form structure (α is formed by chaining two similar joints, while β is conceived as a single structural unit). The link between the two harmonic structures offers the possibility of understanding the diminished fifth interval resulted from relating the two roots (C and G_b) as a distorted dominant relationship (between the first and the fifth degrees), as Bartók would conceive the tonal axis system, based on the augmented fourth).

The development section (mm. 77-168) brings again the main theme, yet on other fundamentals, by using the phenomenon of transposition, followed by themes B_1, B_2, B_3 , also transposed, bringing inside the middle lines cell fragments from the previous themes. The limits of the stages inside the development were established on the basis of the manner of writing and thematic organizing criteria, depending on the return of themes or motives.

The recapitulation (mm. 169-236) proposes all the elements of the exposition, but in an amplified manner through a high density, a fragmentary way

of processing the musical motives and cells, and through the transposition phenomenon of certain structures on other degrees, generating a highly chromatic discourse.

The coda (mm. 237-343) could be considered, as in Beethoven's piano sonatas or in Liszt's Sonata in B minor, a second developing section. As for the evolution of the sonorous material, the coda is conceived as a synthesis section, concentrating thematic elements of the entire work, exposed successively or by overlapping, which is the reason why Scriabin used in the second stage of this section three, even four staves.

Ex. 6. Sonata No. 7, mm. 300-2, second stage from coda.

Having fast tempos and a permanent tendency towards acceleration, which generates a strongly agitated mood, *White Mass Sonata* suggests Dionysus' cult, until the fall of exhausted dancers implied in the ritual. This kind of evolution leads to straining of tension until paroxysm (measure 331, the cluster chord). The vertical structure of the climax is realised by overlapping the same chord of five notes in four successive eighths, generating a conglomerate of twenty notes.

The anticipating chords have a special effect, to impel the musical imagination towards a possible choreography of spiritual euphoria, exaltation and glorification. The culminating chord, composed of five notes (Db – Fb – G – A – C) represents, in fact, the mixed major-minor chord, if we consider G as an added augmented fourth (*ajoutée*), and the rest of the notes as enharmonic sounds (C# – E – A – C or Db – Fb – Bbb – Dbb). The apotheotic moment of this sonata may be judged in symbolic key as an explosion of the energy accumulated during the frantic, wild dance. Thus, the coda section reconstitutes the construction and the dramaturgy of the entire work, in a shorter version.

Ex. 7. *Sonata No. 7, mm. 326-34, preparing and reaching climax.*

Scriabin shows multiple stylistic tendencies, but a very important reference point in his approach can be found in the personality of Franz Liszt, in terms of orientation towards the expressive potential of piano, harmonic and structural innovations in the sonata form, which is used at the level of the whole piece and in terms of philosophical concerns and affinity for music, considered in the context of multidisciplinary approach. If Liszt can be considered a “father” of modern harmony in a broader sense, anticipating a series of changes in the music of the twentieth century, Scriabin starts from a conventional conception, rooted in tradition, reaching novatory chords, unrelated to any previous musical system. He used these elements similarly to Liszt’s manner, as harmonic leitmotifs, submitted to transpositions and chainings, with other non-functional structures. I found in Scriabin’s seventh sonata a less conventional form, in which the concepts of genre and form are overlapped. The criteria used for structural separation and semantic interpretation, which were identified in this sonata, are the emergence and return of the themes, harmonic transpositions, melodic and rhythmic variations, indications of expression attached to each musical idea. I cannot consider this work a cyclical sonata, because it has many musical themes, clearly configured, a monolithic structure (musical ideas are not circulating from a movement to another, since there is one single movement); I cannot consider it a sonata-poem either, even if the shape is freely conceived, because the themes do not have a developing potential, in order to generate a gradual, narrative

1) Exposition (mm. 1-76)

A	Bridge	B ₁	B ₂	Bridge	B ₃
a a1 a2			(+ B _{1v} , B _{2v})		
3 + 6 + 7 mm.	8 + 4	7 + 3	9 + 12(+1) + 9	4	4
<i>Allegro</i>	<i>avec une sombre majesté</i>	<i>avec une céleste volupté</i>	<i>la mélodie bien marquée</i>	<i>très animé, ailé</i>	<i>étincelant</i>

2) Development (mm. 77-168)

1st stage	2nd stage	3rd stage
41	39	12
Material from A, B ₁ , B ₂	Material from B ₃ , B ₁ , B ₂	Material from transition
	<i>très doux, joyeux, étincelant</i>	<i>de plus en plus sonore et animé</i>

3) Recapitulation (mm. 169-236)

A	Bridge	B ₁	B ₂ (+B _{1v})
4 + 4 + 6	8 + 6	7 + 3	9 + 12(+1) + 9
<i>foudroyant</i>	<i>avec une sombre majesté</i>	<i>avec une céleste volupté</i>	<i>ondoyant, ailé</i>

4) Coda (mm. 237-343)

1st stage	2nd stage	3rd stage	Final stage
60	16	19	12
<i>avec éclat</i>		<i>avec une joie débordante</i>	

Table 9. Structure of Scriabin's piano Sonata No. 7.

evolution (and their evolution and variation is mainly based on transpositional means, changes of the chord structures, rhythmic or writing variations, on agglomeration or rarefaction). Therefore, I would rather say that this work

has a general tendency towards the customization of harmonic techniques and a unifying thematic conception at the level of genre, except that in Liszt's Sonata in B minor, the general principle is cyclical, while Sonata No. 7 could be perceived as a "cyclical diffused construction" (Vasiliu 2002: 201). Even Adrian Rațiu wrote about the application of "the variational principle in new musical realities as a general perspective." (1972: 17).

SYMBOLIC SUBTEXT IN SONATA NO. 7

Scriabin's last five sonatas represent a particular case in the history of music, on the one hand due to the technical means of harmonic construction, on the other hand through the abstract undermeaning of the musical discourse, which has a philosophical origin and mystical references. In her dissertation entitled *Alexander Scriabin's Style and Musical Gestures in the Late Piano Sonatas*, Stefanie Huei-Ling Seah mentions some aesthetic tropes: *fearlessness, courage, mystical unity, light, flight, occult, resonance, sensuality, ecstasy (ecstatic dance), dissipation, transformation/transcendence* (Seah 2011). Other analytical perspectives related to this subject can be found in a paper written by Susanna Garcia (2000), and also in the dissertation of Emily Chialin Chiang (2013).

I will give examples of associations between the aforementioned semantic categories and some musical ideas, motive fragments, harmonic structures from Sonata No. 7, associations based on several connections with other analysis focused on Scriabin's late piano sonatas.

Courage may be associated with the first theme of this sonata, whose harsh, stormy sonority, given by the throbbing rhythm and aggressive accents in the upper melodic line, gives a tumultuous, eruptive beginning to this work. In the first two measures of the sonata, one can find the *fanfare-motive*, due to its imperative, announcing sonority, usually presented as a musical profile consisting of three-four notes, which have short duration and anacrusic rhythmic structure (Garcia 2000: 278-9). This motive can also be associated with a military "summons", preparing a highly stressed culmination. It has an intrinsic value, given by contents which vary from case to case, as its musical intervals and all its other features are tributary to the effect produced in a context. In Sonata No. 7, the fanfare-motive is located in the key-moments, marking the beginning of each major section (exposition – mm. 1-3, development – mm. 77-9, recapitulation – mm. 169-72, coda – mm. 237-40). Therefore, I refer to a musical "gesture" with a strong dramaturgic impact.

Allegro

"Courage" as a musical gesture
Fanfare motive

mp cresc. f

poco più vivo
avec trouble

Impetueux

Ex. 8. Sonata No. 7, mm. 1-2 and 103-9, fanfare motives.

Light is suggested by trills, tremolos and other musical ornaments, which induce the sensation of illumination. These elements create intense feelings such as throb, tremble, shiver, pulsation, generating a strong vibration in the sound field with suggestive effects.

avec une volupté radieuse, extatique

pp p ppp

Ex. 9. Sonata No. 7, mm. 253-6, light motive.

The *flight* motive appears in many piano works composed by Scriabin and it can be related to the well-known meaning of exaltation, of floating between two worlds, two existential levels: the terrestrial and celestial, material and spiritual levels. Faubion Bowers states that the flight ranges “from the greatest delicacy (refinement) via active efficacy (flight) to the greatest grandiosity” (quoted in Garcia 2000: 284). In Sonata No. 7, the fragments of arpeggios in short notes, with the indication *ailé*, are really suggestive. In the following example, the sixteenth and thirty-second notes grouped in quintuplets are integrated in the range of action determined by indication *animé*, *ailé*

(animated, winged), but what draws attention is the descending melodic line which suggests, rather, a flight doomed to fall. It looks more like a perpetual aspiration for rising to the sky, followed by the inherent return to the terrestrial space.

Ex. 10. Sonata No. 7, mm. 60-2, flight motive.

Another example is in the final section, which reminds the idea of a falling flight towards the telluric space, yet mobilized by the aspiration and a strong will to continue its way to the end. Indications such as *vol joyeux* (joyful flight) and *impérieux* (absolutely necessary, with a hint of volitional) suggest exactly this artistic endeavor of an innocent game between flight and fall, both “fuelled” by the joy of ascension, approaching the celestial space, the supreme symbol of spirituality and purity. The emergence of B_1 theme indicates the thematic stability given by a recognizable musical idea (referring to telluric space).

Ex. 11. Sonata No. 7, mm. 145-6 and 149-51, other aspects of flight and fanfare motives.

The *resonance* is used by Scriabin as an expressive instrument and a sonorous gesture, having a strong and decisive influence on the themes and their character. For example, the process of bringing a theme from exposition to development and recapitulation is commonly practiced in Western classical tradition, but in Scriabin's music the return of a theme involves many other aspects, in addition to harmonic, dynamic transformations, writing or piano register changes. At this point, I refer to the substantial change in the original semantic intention, and the resonance has a major impact on the different meanings implied by the new context. The frequent transpositions in the high register give a new profile to the original theme, something ethereal, transcendental, as a rebound in a superior position of artistic understanding. The resonance is not just a sound effect, it has an active principle, with musical potential in creating and developing a theme, a new parameter in addition to the commonly analyzed dimensions. Resonance outlines and amplifies the direction of an artistic signification that other elements of musical language cannot complete as needed, according to the composer's expressive intentions.

As a means used for materializing the principle of resonance, there is another symbol related to *bells*, present in many of Scriabin's works, having spiritual meanings or simply a temporary effect, with auditive impact. "The combinations of fourths are used by Scriabin in order to imitate sounds of bells (in *Prometheus* and Sonata No. 7)." (Cocearova and Melnic 2003: 192).

In the following example, the resonance effect is obtained through a dense evolution of chords with brightful effect, emphasized by accents and pedal. The "overflowing joy" indicated by Scriabin in his score creates the image of a strong, vibrating sound mixture, where resonances of many bells are blended, overlapped.

The image shows a musical score for Sonata No. 7, measures 313-6. The score is written for piano and features a dense texture of chords. A red box highlights the instruction "avec une joie débordante" above the first measure. The score includes dynamic markings such as "ff" and "dim.", and a fermata over the final measure. The music is in 3/4 time and features a strong, vibrating sound mixture.

Ex. 12. Sonata No. 7, mm. 313-6, resonance effect (related to the symbol of bells).

There are also references to the existence of an *eternal feminine* in Scriabin's work, subtly manifested as an artistic form of eroticism. The feminine principle can be deduced from the ecstatic manner of certain fragments, musical ideas and developments. His late sonatas contain suggestive references for the presence of feminine elements, containing metaphoric expression terms.

In the fragment below, the second theme is distinguished by lyricism, instability, suggested by legato, by an intense chromatic process and unstable degrees. The emergence of F# creates the impression of unexpected meditation, suddenly doubtful, followed by an ascending melodic development, comparable to the pursuit of celestial space (suggested in the score by metaphorical indications, with poetic meaning such as: *avec une céleste volupté* – with a celestial, voluptuous delight, *très pur, avec une profonde douceur* – very pure, with a deep delicacy).

Ex. 13. Sonata No. 7, mm. 29-34, second theme, embodiment of the feminine principle.

In relation to the eternal feminine principle is the *delirious dance*, which appears as a climax of Dionysian cult, with its thrilling way of feeling, always in search of intense pleasure. The vertigo of dance is dedicated to the god of wine, ecstasy and fertility, being musically suggested by dense melodic and harmonic structures, without stable marks, accompanied by plastic indications of plastic expression: *presto, en un vertige* (very quickly, in vertigo), *avec une joie débordante* (with an overflowing joy), *en délire* (in a delirious manner).



Ex. 14. *Sonata No. 7, mm. 273-8, sonorous suggestion of the ecstatic dance.*

These are some symbolic elements relevant for the Sonata No. 7, whose sonorous discourse was considered by some theorists (including Susanna Garcia) as related to the idea of *narrative archetype*, following a path of a musical development of symbolic entities. The obscurity created by Scriabin's mysticism may be originated in certain mythical typologies, used as an organizing principle. A mythical approach of Scriabin's music could follow ideas recommended by the Finnish semiotician Eero Tarasti:

[T]he musical sign experienced as mythical acquires its mythical quality from its objective musical properties, as well as from its special dual position in the composition as a whole. . . . [M]yth . . . always alludes to something earlier, in the distant past, to which the mythical message must be related. The mythical universe is based on the simple division: before/after. (Tarasti 1979: 67-8, quoted in Garcia 2000: 300).

The conclusion of the analysis of this sonata should include the cosmic dimension of Alexander Scriabin's music, given by exploration of extreme limits of tonality in his desire to leave the terrestrial level and reach the celestial heights.

HARMONIC PRINCIPLES IN SCRIBIN'S PIANO SONATAS NO. 3 AND 7

I list below a few harmony elements used by Scriabin in the two piano sonatas discussed above.

- *Specific chords in Sonata No. 3, such as chords with dissonant appoggiatura (augmented fourths, sixths ajoutées and variable ninths in chromatic structures).*

These elements are resolved in tonal context, according to traditional harmonic rules, but in his late sonatas Scriabin inserts new types of chords,

which are used as independent structures, where appoggiaturas appear as real notes, without being resolved. Thus, it may be considered as a process of integration of the dissonances.

- *Chords which are reduced to a single structure – dominant chords with augmented or diminished fifth, which are used to generate modulating tendencies.*

For example, in Sonata No. 7, between measures 1 and 3, one may see two harmonic structures, first built on the root C and the other one, in measure 3, built on G \flat , which emphasizes the intervallic relation of diminished fifth between the two fundamentals. Similarly, the two chordic structures are transposed on fundamentals D (m. 5, Ex. 16) and A \flat (m. 7, Ex. 20). In each case, the second chord can be judged as distorted dominant, which compensates for the absence of a real dominant.

- *Synthetic scales obtained after extracting elements of traditional scales (diatonic scales, containing up to seven notes) and then altering one element with one semitone (ascending or descending).*

The order in tones and semitones will be 2, 2, 2, 3, 1, 2. The addition of G (the elliptical element) will get the diatonic modal scale *acoustic No. 1* (also known as *lidyan-mixolydian*, due to their specific intervals: augmented fourth and minor seventh in relation to the first degree of the scale). A good example is the scale named *Prometheus*, after the title of the work composed by Scriabin, the symphonic poem *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, where he used it as a specific, independent structure. By arranging all its components in the proper order so as to obtain overlapping fourths, the result will be the synthetic chord, composed of six notes.

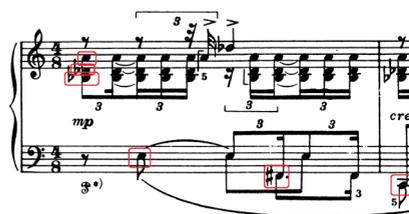


Fig. 1. Synthetic scale and synthetic (mystic) chord.

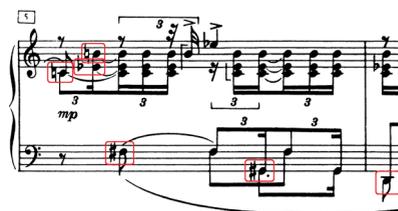
- *Synthetic (mystic) chord of six notes, as the result of arranging the elements which compose the synthetic scale in the right order, to form a vertical succession of fourths (see Fig. 1).*

The mystic chord was regarded as the starting point of all experiments in Scriabin's later works, contributing to the mysticism which left its mark on his artistic formation and evolution, along with his other interests in theosophy, color semantics and aesthetic direction towards effeminacy.

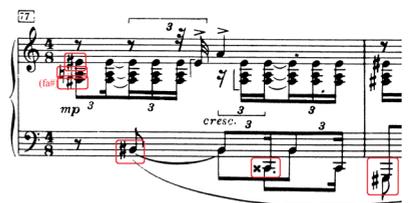
The mystic chord is in fact one of many based on dominant and French 6th chords which Skryabin employed after 1908. This chord, rather than the most of others he used, has been particularly associated with Skryabin because, when presented horizontally, while being neither whole-tone nor octatonic (scales which figured prominently in the works of Debussy and Stravinsky of the same period and which are both mathematically consistent) it contains elements of both. (Powell 2001: 491)



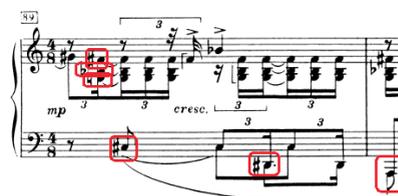
Ex. 15. *Sonata No. 7, m. 1, motive α , mystic chord exposed on the fundamental C.*



Ex. 16. *Sonata No. 7, m. 5, motive α_v , mystic chord transposed on D.*



Ex. 17. *Sonata No. 7, m. 77, motive α in the first stage of the development, transposed on G \sharp .*



Ex. 18. *Sonata No. 7, m. 89, motive α inside the development, transposed on A.*

- *The process of combining elements between successive chords by transferring one note in the structure of the next chord.*

Thus, there is a combination between the idea of complementarity with the transposition of the chords. In this case, I will return to the previous examples in order to distinguish common elements for all four chord structures (Fig. 2).

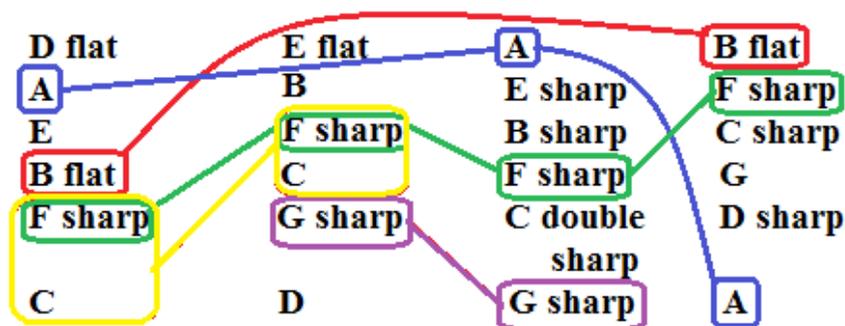


Fig. 2. Vertical structures of the four mystic chords, extracted from the emergence and return of motive α (Sonata No. 7, mm. 1, 5, 77, 89).

- The transposition of chords emphasizing the atonal musical language.

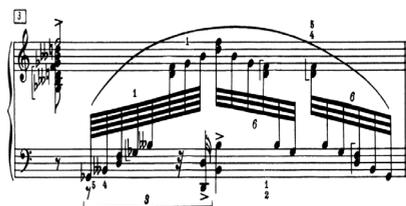
It generates the substitution of the “modulation” concept (specific to the tonal language) with the “transposition” phenomenon, because, instead of the unique tonal center, Scriabin used the axis system, which will be used later by Belá Bartók. In the previous examples from Sonata No. 7, one can see the construction of the same structure on C and D (mm. 1 and 5), G \sharp and A (mm. 77, 89).

- The major-minor mixed chord, which is also not written according to Bartók's perspective, with two types of third (E – G – C – E \flat), or Messiaen's point of view, as a chord with two appoggiaturas (E – G – C – D \sharp), but as the result of three overlapped thirds: E – G – B \sharp – D \sharp .



Fig. 3. Major-minor chords with Bartók, Messiaen, and Scriabin, respectively.

This chord is actually a fragment of the mystic chord, which lacks two elements (root and third, respectively F \sharp and A \sharp). In this case, I have chosen as examples those chords which appear immediately after the mystic chord, in each of the four following cases (Ex. 19-22).



Ex. 19. *Sonata No. 7, m. 3, motive β exposed on the fundamental Gb.*



Ex. 20. *Sonata No. 7, m. 7, motive β transposed on Ab.*



Ex. 21. *Sonata No. 7, m. 79, motive β transposed on Eb.*



Ex. 22. *Sonata No. 7, m. 91, motive β transposed on D.*

Adrian Rațiu comments upon the importance of harmony in Alexander Scriabin's evolution, considering it as an essential, decisive element, in close contact with all the other elements and a generating source of them:

In Scriabin's perspective, who had little affinity with folklore and the modal world of national schools, modal scales often appear as emanations of the vertical concept. . . . Closely related to harmony, often as a direct result of it, lie the other elements of Scriabin's music: functional modes with their new functional relations, musical themes and all episodic melodic ideas, instrumental aspect of the writing manner, rhythm and, ultimately, the architectural form itself. (Rațiu 1972: 20)

Referring to the latter, the connection between harmony and architectural structure is achieved through certain successions of chords and through certain writing aspects, which have a decisive importance in the articulation of form. Moreover, every moment is defined by a certain harmonic type of processing the musical discourse, particular dramaturgical development and

aesthetical conception. As Wilhelm Georg Berger wrote about the musical way of thinking in the first half of the twentieth century, "harmony provides new expressive coordinates: a specific spatiality, colour, oppositions and tensions." (1964: 29).

In this context, I have found an interesting point of view in the conception of a modern semiotician, Eero Tarasti, who believes that

the Prometheus chord is reduced to secondary articulation units which have the delicacy of a diminished fourth (namely a major third), the roughness of a perfect fourth and conflicting, demonic features of the augmented fourth (which is known in the history of music as the evolution of the tritone). Using semiotic vocabulary, it can be said that Prometheus chord, developed on the basis of *phèmes* and *sèmes* elements, consists of minimal music units, which are expression and content elements. (Tarasti 2006: 59)

Beyond all these mentioned aspects, however far Scriabin went regarding the harmonic innovation, he kept certain principles of tonal system, but in a different musical world and time. The strict organization, combined with the freedom of expression and the construction of new musical modes, give distinct features to his works, as a first attempt of synthesis in modern music style. Therefore, Scriabin expressed his main innovating concerns in the field of harmony by following the post-romantic stylistic line, as a predecessor of neo-modalism, but without folk impregnation. He started from a modulating harmonic language, becoming intensely chromatic, at the limit between tonal and atonal, but he didn't let himself drawn into the "mirage" of dodecaphonic serialism. He continued innovating in his own way, which was a modal direction and was not possible to be followed by any other composer. Scriabin was not the type of creator to leave epigones behind.

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